First in the Family: How High-Achieving, First-Generation Vietnamese-American Students Navigate the Elite College Environment, a Study Using Portraiture Methodology

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Loc V. Truong

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Abstract

First in the family: how high-achieving, first-generation Vietnamese-American students navigate the elite college environment, a study using portraiture methodology, is an in-depth study of five Vietnamese-American students at an elite institution, Ivy College (pseudonym). The main purpose of the study was to examine the lived experiences of first-generation Vietnamese-American students at a highly selective college using Portraiture methodology. The study analyzed the data using Bourdieuan’s theory of social and cultural capital. The main research questions were: (1) What does being first-generation mean for Vietnamese-American students at Ivy College? (2) What challenges do first-generation Vietnamese-American students experience at Ivy College? (3) How do Vietnamese-American students navigate the elite college environment? Findings from the study indicated that first-generation Vietnamese-American students are able to navigate the elite college environment; however, they had to overcome daunting obstacles. Consistent with extant research, certain characteristics of first-generation, low-income students were evidenced. Participants in the study reported that their parents were extremely supportive of their children’s education, even though their parents were not able to help them navigate the college application process and eventual matriculation. All participants experienced significant challenges in college due to their lack of social and cultural capital, low-income status, and first-generation status.

Keywords: first-generation, social capital, cultural capital, narrative, low-income.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract......................................................................................................................... 2
Acknowledgements........................................................................................................ 3
Table of Contents........................................................................................................... 5
Chapter I: Introduction................................................................................................. 6
Chapter II: Literature Review ..................................................................................... 37
  Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................ 52
Chapter III: Methodology and Instruments ............................................................... 55
  Site and Participants................................................................................................. 57
  Data Collection and Analysis.................................................................................... 59
  Validity, Limitations, and Protection of Human Subjects.......................................... 62
Chapter IV: Research Findings..................................................................................... 66
Chapter V: Discussion and Implications.................................................................... 132
Appendix A: Interview Protocol .................................................................................. 157
Appendix B: Unsigned Consent Form-Northeastern University................................. 160
References..................................................................................................................... 165
Chapter 1

Introduction

In the last two decades, Asian American students have gone to college at a rate nearly five times the rate of Hispanic, Black, and other minority students, according to the United States Department of Education (2011). Among this increase in Asian-American college goers are many first-generation Vietnamese-American college students, who hope to graduate from college, get a job, and live the “American Dream,” what James Truslow Adams referred to in his book *The Epic of America* as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone” (Adams, 1931). However, studies show that first-generation Vietnamese-American, and more generally first-generation college students, do not succeed at the same rate as their non-first-generation peers. These students experience obstacles that could prevent this dream from being realized. These barriers include social and cultural challenges, academic preparation, family/parental involvement in the college-going process, language difficulties, and economic status (Choi, 2001; Clark, 2003; Farrell, 2005). Furthermore, Vietnamese-American college students struggle with these barriers more acutely if they aspire to attend an elite college or university. An historical perspective on the conditions that gave rise to first-generation college student enrollment might provide some clarity into their current state in higher education and the barriers they need to overcome in order to succeed.

Historical Perspective

In 1947, President Truman appointed a Presidential Commission on Higher Education urging that “we should now reexamine our system of higher education in terms of its objectives, methods, and facilities; and in the light of the social role it has to play” (Truman, 1947). The commission, comprised of 28 educators, was charged with the goal of defining the
responsibilities of American colleges and universities, and of reexamining their objects, methods, and facilities in the context of the social role that higher education institutions play in modern society. The commission released a report the following year with six volumes that included: Establishing the Goals, Equalizing and Expanding Individual Opportunity, Organizing Higher Education, Staffing, Financing, and Resource Data (Truman, 1947). The report emphasized the need to expand higher education as a public good “to prepare youth to live satisfyingly and effectively in contemporary society (Truman, 1947).” While this report does not specifically make reference to first-generation students, it does speak of the need to expand education access to those who cannot afford it. This group includes new immigrants, women, and displaced low-income workers. Furthermore, Levine and Nidiffer (1996) agree that “American colleges and universities can no longer consider themselves merely the instrument for producing intellectual elites; they must become the means by which every citizen, youth, and adult is enabled and encouraged to carry his education, formal and informal, as far as his native capacities permit.”

This was perhaps the first higher education committee to suggest that colleges and universities across the country need first-generation college students. In fact, it is only in the last century that first-generation students have been given an opportunity to go to college. Organizations across the country, such as the College Board, are doing their part to support this endeavor. The College Board, a non-profit organization that focuses on SAT and Advanced Placement exams, has worked on increasing socioeconomic diversity at top colleges and expanding opportunity for all students (College Board, 2016). When the College Board selected David Coleman as their new president in 2012, his number one priority for the College Board was to expand access to college for minority and low-income students who have demonstrated college potential (Leonhardt, 2013). Additionally, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the
largest private foundation in the world founded by Bill and Melinda Gates, is committed to ensuring that all students have the opportunity to receive a high-quality education by offering two programs for first-generation, low-income students. One is called *College-Ready Education*, which aims to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared to succeed in college and in a career; the second is *Postsecondary Success*, whose goal is to dramatically increase the number of young first-generation, low-income students to obtain a postsecondary degree (Gates Foundation, 2016). Additionally, the *Postsecondary Success* strategy seeks to increase low-income students’ college completion rates through innovations that can improve the productivity and performance of U.S. universities and colleges and ensure that all students have access to a high-quality, highly personalized education. Bill and Melinda gates expressed their commitment to students from under-resourced communities stating, “Our investments seek to accelerate efforts already under way in higher education and to support the enormous talent, creativity, and energy being applied to improving student completion rates and lowering costs while raising the quality of the U.S. postsecondary education system” (Gates Foundation, 2016). In order to better understand the scope of this commitment to students from under-resourced communities, and more specifically first-generation college students, let us examine the breadth and meaning of the term itself *First-Generation College Student*.

**Profile of First-Generation Students: A Statement of the Problem**

To appreciate and understand first-generation college students, it is important to recognize that there is not one universally accepted definition of first-generation students. One definition states that these are students whose parents never enrolled in postsecondary education (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Alternatively, Choy (2002) defines first-generation students as those whose families have no college or university experience. For the purposes of this
First-generation college students enroll in college at record numbers, but many of those who enroll drop out before they graduate. According to a 2005 study by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 43 percent of first-generation college students left college without any degree and only 20 percent earned a bachelor's degree. In contrast, among non-first-generation students whose parents were college graduates, 68 percent of them had completed a bachelor's degree and only 20 percent left without a degree (NCES, 2005). The difference in degree attainment between first-generation and non-first-generation students is staggering. Furthermore, according to the National Center for Education Statistics and Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (2004-2009), 59 percent of first-generation college students do not complete a degree or credential in six years, compared to 46% of non-first-generation college students. Researchers and practitioners are still concerned that first-generation college students are being left behind, and more studies are needed to have a clearer picture of the current climate for first-generation college students.

Empirical studies have demonstrated that first-generation students are more likely than non-first-generation students to come from low-income families (Choy, 2001; Hurtado, 2007; Thayer, 2000). Nearly 30 percent of first-generation students are from families with an annual income of less than $25,000 (Pryor et al., 2006). According to Thayer (2000), the experience of first-generation students may vary depending on income and ethnicity. Thayer (2000) suggests that first-generation students from middle-income backgrounds are less likely to have difficulty
adjusting to college than first-generation students from low-income families, or from ethnic minority populations.

**Challenges and Barriers**

According to the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (2012), roughly one-third of undergraduate students in the U.S. are first-generation college students. First-generation college students have several traits that characterize them as an at-risk population in higher education (Ishitani, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996). For example, students from this population are more likely to grow up in low-income families, receive less support from their family as it relates to college enrollment, hold a part-time job during college, and spend less time interacting with faculty. Additionally, first-generation students also take longer to complete the bachelor’s degree and have lower degree aspirations when compared to their peers (Ishitani, 2006; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Research also shows that first-generation college students, most of whom come from low-income and minority backgrounds face additional challenges, such as poor academic primary and secondary education, financial instability, and a lack of support from friends and family members. These factors make it more challenging for them not only to get into college but also to graduate from college. According to Lohfink and Paulsen (2005), first-generation students are disproportionately overrepresented in the most disadvantaged groups relative to participation in higher education. As a result, researchers have shown that first-generation college students face many barriers. They are more likely to delay entry into postsecondary education, begin college at community colleges, commute to school, attend school part-time, work full time, and need remedial coursework (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001). These barriers can result in a myriad of issues: lack of focus on academics, thereby resulting in failing classes and
not graduating in four years, inability to connect with peers, and low involvement in school activities. This can lead to low self-esteem, anxiety, and in some occasions, mental health issues. These characteristics will put first-generation students at risk of dropping out of college without earning a degree, particularly the bachelor’s degree (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001). As such, first-generation status itself is the biggest factor for first-generation students to persist in college, even after controlling for demographic backgrounds, academic preparation, enrollment characteristics, and academic performance (Chen, 2005; Warburtin, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001).

There are many factors that negatively affect the college-going chances of students whose parents did not attend college, including lower levels of academic preparation, lower educational aspirations, less encouragement and support to attend college from friends and parents, less knowledge about how to navigate the college application and financial aid processes, and fewer resources to pay for college (Choy, 2001). These factors limit the types of colleges first-generation students attend, which can ultimately affect their chances of graduating with a college degree. Students whose parents did not attend college are less likely to attend college themselves, and if they did end up attending college, are less likely to be prepared for college than their non-first-generation peers. Of first-generation students who do qualify for admission to college, only 75 percent enroll versus nearly 95 percent of students whose parents attended college. One possible pathway college that researchers have identified includes access to advanced and college-preparatory classes in high school (Choy, 2001).

According to Horn and Nunez (2000) high school curriculum and offerings of advanced math can greatly improve the chances that first-generation students will go to college. First-generation students who take advanced math courses can more than double their chances of going to a four-year college (Horn & Nunez, 2000). The ability for these students to take
advanced courses depends on a number of factors: whether they take algebra in eighth grade, and whether they have parental encouragement and involvement. Horn and Nunez (2000) state that a high level of parental involvement increases the likelihood that students will take a rigorous high school curriculum, thereby improving their chances of going to college and being prepared for college. Unsurprisingly then, studies show that there is a strong correlation between college aspirations and parent education (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Terenzini et al., 2006).

Hossler and his colleagues (1999) found a strong correlation between encouragement and support from parents and students’ aspirations and enrollment in college, regardless of parents’ educational level. Their study indicated that parental encouragement was defined by frequent discussions with parents about attending college and financial aid workshops (Hossler, 1999). First-generation students, in general, receive less direct support about the college application process from their parents. Furthermore, some parents even discourage their children from going to college because of financial problems and lack of knowledge about the college application process due to limited access to the internet and language barriers. In addition, many parents expect their children to work after high school to support the family, therefore making it difficult for their children to go to college. Students express that even if they want to go to college, they feel guilty for not supporting the family (Hossler, 1999). Finally, first-generation students are less likely to have relatives, acquaintances, and members of their community who have attended college and subsequently they are less likely to be familiar with the social values and cultural norms of the college environment (Vargas, 2004). As a result, first-generation students are likely to perceive campus environments and faculty as less supportive or less concerned about them than other students (Pike & Kuh, 2005).
While there has been much research on first-generation college students, there has been relatively little research that focuses specifically on Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students. According to the 2010 U.S. Census data, the AAPI population is projected to reach nearly 40 million people by 2050 (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2011). Data show AAPI students will experience a 35 percent increase in college enrollment over the next decade. AAPI students are undoubtedly a rapidly growing population; and, therefore, supporting them is critical and can only produce greater civic engagement, economic growth, and diverse leadership development. Furthermore, more research needs to be done in order to understand this underserved marginalized population. More information on this population will help researchers and practitioners to better serve them.

**Asian American and Pacific Islander Students**

The Asian American Pacific Islander population, which includes Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Hmong, do not fare as well as other Asian groups, such as, Chinese, Japanese, and Taiwanese (U.S. Census, 2010). According to Figure 1, Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Hmong all had a lower percentage of bachelor’s degree attainment, 28 percent, 15 percent, 16 percent, and 16 percent, respectively. These percentages also showed a much lower level of degree attainment compared to the overall Asian population. Furthermore, 34 percent of Vietnamese, 43 percent of Cambodians, 47 percent of Laotians, and 48 percent of Hmong reported having attended college, but not earning a college degree (American Community Survey Reports, 2010). What does this mean? The impact of low degree attainment impacts many aspects of their lives including unemployment, having lower paying jobs with no medical insurance, and living below the federal poverty line (American Community Survey Reports, 2010).
According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Asian American Pacific Islanders earned less than their White counterparts. Figure 2 shows the income distribution by race and ethnicity. Between 2007 and 2009, overall Asian Americans as a pan-ethnic category recorded a per capita income of $28,000 compared to $12,000 for Hmong, $16,000 for Cambodian, Laotian $17,000, and Vietnamese, $23,000. In fact, some Asian American groups (e.g., Taiwanese and Chinese) do better in income than any other ethnic and racial groups. Thus, it is important for researchers to disaggregate the data when it comes to Asian Americans, in order to understand what the data truly represents.
More specifically, there has been very little to no research focusing on specifically first-generation Vietnamese-American college students at highly selective private liberal arts institutions. The current literature and data for Vietnamese-American students exist in aggregate with other Asian-American groups. Furthermore, current literature only discusses these students in community colleges and four-year public institutions. Therefore, this study will help illuminate the changing demographics of first-generation Vietnamese-American college students attending these highly selective private colleges, particularly those who have been underserved and underrepresented in these private schools. Moreover, this study and, one hopes, others in the
future, will help to give these first-generation students a voice to hold up to the larger educational communities, and an opportunity to share their experience and rewrite their narratives. Finally, this study hopes to initiate a dialogue at these institutions about how to support these students in specific ways so that they can be successful in their college experience. In full disclosure, I am a first-generation Vietnamese-American college student, who struggled in navigating the college environment. This thesis was driven by both a professional interest, and a personal one as a first-generation Vietnamese-American college graduate who currently working at an elite private institution. One of the aspects of my work involves trying to help first-generation college students navigate an environment in which they lack of social and cultural capital when they first entered this institution.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

There are two conceptual frameworks that apply to this topic. The first framework comes from Bourdieuan social capital theory, which can provide insights on how resources that impact enrollment and persistence in first-generation college students. Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as the “aggregate of the actual or potential resources that are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition, in other words, to membership in a group” (p.103). In essence, social capital comes from opportunities for interaction between individual interactions: frequency, quality, and content of the interaction is essential. With this in mind, Lin (2001) suggests that coming from a two-parent home where both parents are college educated and have conversations with friends are two examples of social capital. Additionally, socioeconomic class and family income are closely related and are strongly impacted by financial resources, communities, and academic qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). Access to elite group memberships is very difficult for first-
generation students, given such factors as lower socioeconomic status, educational background or status, and underrepresented and minority status (Hoffer et al., 2003). If first-generation students are not offered access to the elite group memberships, they will find it difficult to understand and navigate the elite college environment. This will create undue stress and anxiety, and could result in academic failure.

The second theoretical framework comes from a cultural perspective. Bills (2000) and Coleman (1988) indicate that students not only bring a certain level of cultural capital, but the college experience itself provides a vehicle for acquiring additional cultural capital. Bills (2000) states that cultural capital appears to represent the “degree of ease and familiarity that one has with the dominant culture of a society” (p. 90). In essence, first-generation students did not grow up around adults who completed college, and therefore, are less exposed to the contributing factors that provide preparation and support as they navigate through college (Rodriquez, 2003). Other researchers (Inman & Mayes, 1999) have defined cultural and social capital as knowledge of the campus environment and campus values, access to human and financial resources, and familiarity with terminology and general functioning, which may generally be transmitted through parents, and may be lacking among first-generation students. This lack of knowledge may contribute to a sense of college “culture shock” (Inman & Mayes, 1999). As such, addressing the gap in social and cultural capital between first-generation college students and their non-first-generation peers would represent a significant advancement in supporting these students.

**Purpose of the Study**

*First in the Family: How High-Achieving, First-Generation Vietnamese-American Students Navigate the Elite College Environment, A Study Using Portraiture Methodology* is an
in-depth study of five first-generation Vietnamese-American students at an elite college. First-generation college students represent a minority in four-year, selective institutions, and therefore not much has been written about them (Arrendondo, 1999). Terenzini, Springer, Yeager, Pascarella, and Nora (1996) conclude that the proportion of first-generation college students will continue to grow as college opportunities expand due to financial aid programs and scholarships. This research will shed light on the experiences of these students and how to better support them, and other students like them. Given the importance of creating a diverse learning community that accepts students from diverse backgrounds, I hopes to influence the way colleges and universities work to improve the experience of first-generation college students, particularly those of AAPI descent. Furthermore, once they arrive on campus, it is critical for universities to support these students, and give them the tools they need to be successful. This research hopes to give highly selective colleges and universities greater insight into the unique experiences of first-generation Vietnamese-American students, and help these institutions provide the kind of support to these students that will allow them to serve as positive role models for future generations. Lastly, this research will add to the literature that does not currently exist for this population in this particular setting.

More specifically, Vietnamese college students are an interesting group to study. The mass migration in the mid-1970s to mid-1980s, due to the fall of Saigon, has produced a few generations of Vietnamese students in American. There is one group of Vietnamese students who were foreign born but have become U.S. citizens, and are now in their late 30s and 40s. The second group of Vietnamese students was born in the United States to foreign-born parents. These students tend to be younger and in their early 20s, and are considered second-generation. Finally, the last group of students was born in the United States to parents who were born here.
These students tend to be much younger, and considered to be third-generation. As more and more second and third-generation Vietnamese students matriculate into the educational system in the U.S., they will experience barriers similar to their first-generation peers. Institutions must learn from current first-generation students to ensure these second and third generation students have the resources and support they need to be successful when they get to college.

Furthermore, of the many Asian American and Pacific Islander population, Vietnamese-Americans are an emerging group. They are doing slightly better than their counterparts, more specifically Cambodians, Hmong, and Laos. However, they do not do as well compared to their South Asian and East Asian peers, particularly when it comes to educational attainment, college readiness, and socioeconomic status. I believe Vietnamese-Americans can break through in the areas mentioned above, and be able to compete with their peers in the global economy.

Methods

The study was conducted using the portraiture method, a qualitative research method developed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis (1997). Lawrence-Lightfoot and David (1997) define five essential features of portraiture: context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and aesthetic whole. Portraitists view human experience as being framed and shaped by the setting. The context of a portrait is the setting—or where data collection happens. The context takes into account the physical, geographic, temporal, historical, cultural, and aesthetic aspects of the setting. Portraitists study individuals to record their experiences and to interpret their perspectives.

The main purpose of the study was to understand and examine the lived experiences of Vietnamese-American students at a highly selective college. Furthermore, this study aimed to identify and analyze the barriers and challenges these students face while in college. I developed
questions that allowed me to gather information concerning the students’ struggles, how they dealt with those struggles, and how they navigated the elite college environment. I tape-recorded the interviews with the students and transcribed them. Each interview was 60-minutes in duration and took place at a location of the subject’s choosing. After critically examining the data, I organized the data into thematic areas. Lawrence-Lightfoot says, "The development of emergent themes reflects the portraitist's first efforts to bring interpretive insight, analytic scrutiny, and aesthetic order to the collection of data" (1997c, pg. 185).

In order to examine the experience of these students in elite environments, I recruited participants from one highly selective college, Ivy College (a pseudonym), located in the Northeast region of the United States. According to Times Higher Education's World Reputation Rankings, Ivy College is one of the most globally well-regarded universities (online, March 24, 2012), and U.S. News and World Report (2012) has consistently ranked Ivy College as one of the nation’s top schools. As a current staff member, I am familiar with Ivy College, and therefore understands the context and nuances of the students’ experiences in the study, while trying to keep my own bias at bay. According to Adler and Adler (1987), I am considered an inside researcher, one who conducts research within an organization with which he I am familiar with. I conducted one-on-one in-depth interviews with each participant, ensuring confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms.

**Research Question**

This study explored and illuminated the lived experience of first-generation Vietnamese-American college students at a highly selective institution, Ivy College. This study was guided by the following research questions:
(1) What does being first-generation mean for Vietnamese-American students at Ivy College?

(2) What challenges does a highly selective college environment present to first-generation Vietnamese-American college students?

(3) How do first-generation Vietnamese-American students navigate these environments?

Important sub-questions that the research considered include:

- How does social capital affect first-generation Vietnamese-American students’ experiences?
- How does cultural capital affect first-generation Vietnamese-American students’ experiences?

**Organization of Thesis**

Studying the experience of first-generation college students is not a unique endeavor. There is a great deal of literature spanning the various organizational and educational journals from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* to *Philanthropy Digest*, and from local newspapers to studies conducted by colleges and universities. However, the literature for first-generation Vietnamese-American students in highly selective colleges is scarce, and could even be characterized as non-existent. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the experience of first-generation college students, in addition to background information about the experience of Vietnamese-American people in the United States and the theoretical frameworks that guide the study. Chapter 2 includes a literature review that gives context to the theoretical frameworks: Bourdieuan social capital, and cultural capital theory. Bourdieu’s concept is connected with his theoretical ideas on class. Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology, which includes trustworthiness and quality assurance of the research. It describes the importance and quality of
a narrative approach as opposed to other research methods. This chapter also includes the methods of data collection and analysis including threats to and validity of the study. Chapter 4 includes the portraits of the participants, an analysis of the interviews, and a discussion of the findings from the interviews with participants. Chapter 5 concludes with important findings and understandings of the experience of first-generation Vietnamese-American students at a highly selective college. The thesis ends with some recommendations for colleges and universities on how they can better support these students.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

There are millions of immigrant families with children who came to the United States for a better life. However, it is not always an easy route to achieving the ‘American Dream.’ There are many barriers that can prevent this from happening. These barriers include social and cultural challenges, language difficulties, and social and economic status among others. Many immigrant families that dream of sending their children to college must surmount such barriers. For many of these families, their students will be the first-generation to attend college.

Studying the experience of first-generation college students is not a unique endeavor, however, relatively little literature exists on these students at elite liberal arts institutions. There is a great deal of literature of a general nature spanning the various organizational and educational journals from the Chronicle of Higher Education to Philanthropy Digest, from local newspapers to studies conducted by colleges and universities. However, I hope in this dissertation to narrow down the experience of first-generation Vietnamese-American college students to those attending elite liberal arts institutions. My literature research has indicated that those students who have made it this far and who come from humble beginnings have done something extraordinary that no one in their family has done before, being the first to attend college and attending one of most elite educational institutions in the world. Narrowing this research to better understand the experience of first-generation students at these particular institutions will produce strategies that these institutions can use to apply to the work they are currently doing, better understand what works and what does not, and figure out what more they can do to help these students succeed. More specifically, this research is about helping
Vietnamese-American students at a highly selective institution share their stories, in order to help this institution and others like it, understand their experiences, and help them succeed.

**First-Generation Students in Highly Selective Institutions**

Traditionally, highly selective four-year institutions have lacked representation from first-generation students and other underrepresented groups. However, in recent years, these institutions have begun to realize they must understand and embrace the growing population of this group of college students because they bring a diversity of experiences and unique perspectives to the college campus. Many scholars and practitioners have cited that diversity, broadly speaking, has become the basis of enhancing the learning experience for many students as it represents the difference between individuals and groups (Alger, 1998; Rudenstine, 1997; Tierney, 1993). Scholars worry that a lack of diversity in an academic environment would create ethnocentricity, the idea that your own ethnic group is superior to someone else's (Alger, 1998; Rudenstine, 1997). Research evidence regarding the individual benefits of diversity suggests that diversity enhances student growth and development in the cognitive, affective, and interpersonal domains (Tierney, 1993). Jonathan Alger, president of James Madison University, stated, “The educational benefit is universal in that all students learn from it, not just minority students who might have received a bump in the admissions process. Indeed, majority students who have previously lacked significant direct exposure to minorities frequently have the most to gain from interactions with individuals of other races” (Algers, 1998). Other university presidents such as Harvard’s Neil Rudenstine and Yale’s Peter Salovey, have also expressed the belief that a diverse community of students strongly benefits the process of learning. In an excerpt from *The President’s Report: Diversity and Learning* (1996), Rudenstine wrote, “We need to remind ourselves that student diversity has, for more than a century, been valued for its
capacity to contribute powerfully to the process of learning and to the creation of an effective educational environment. It has also been seen as vital to the education of citizens—and the development of leaders—in heterogeneous democratic societies such as our own.” Salovey has also affirmed “the importance we put on our community’s diversity and the need to increase it, support, and respect it.”

By creating a diverse learning environment, institutions open up different perspectives of learning in relation to ethnicity, race, gender, language and culture, sexual orientation, and class. Many researchers argue that diversity’s role in the school environment is essential to the strength of the higher education system. As highly selective institutions accept and embrace this premise, they have begun to recruit students from diverse backgrounds. Of the 3.4 million high-achieving, low-income high school students, less than 19 percent attend the most selective colleges in the United States, and they are less likely to graduate from highly selective colleges once they enroll (56 percent versus 83 percent for their higher-income peers) (Wyner, 2007).

Despite the increase in enrollment of first-generation students and other underserved populations, researchers have found that roughly three quarters of students enrolled in highly selective colleges come from families in the top quartile of the socioeconomic scale, whereas just three percent of students derive from the bottom quartile (Engle & Tinto, 2008). For the purposes of this study, highly selective colleges and universities refer to a group of private elite colleges such as Yale, Harvard, Dartmouth, and Princeton, that historically almost exclusively reserved admissions for the wealthy and elite classes of society (Karabel, 2005). Further, this thesis focuses on Asian American Pacific Islander students, in particular Vietnamese-American students at an elite college.
Asian Americans in Higher Education

According to the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE, 2013), AAPIs are a remarkably diverse community, comprising 48 different ethnic subgroups that speak over 300 different languages and represent a range of different immigration histories. The AAPI population is also rapidly growing and was the fastest growing racial group in 2012. Among the key civil rights issues AAPI scholars and advocates have pressed for are improvements to data practices in order to represent the heterogeneity in the AAPI community. As AAPI students continue to experience a range of educational outcomes, data practices that aggregate AAPIs into one category continue to be a significant barrier for understanding and responding to their unique and diverse needs (CARE, 2013).

Figure 3 represents the population categorized as a single entity, as well as in distinct sub-groups. First, the Asian American and Pacific Islander racial category consists of two distinct categories. A commonly used definition of Asian-American from the U.S. Census Bureau is as follows: “People with origins in the Far East, Southeast Asia and the Indian Subcontinent.” The commonly used definition of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, also from the U.S. Census Bureau, includes “people having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.” Within the Asian-American and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander categories are a number of ethnic groups, which represent sub-groups with shared nationalities, languages, ancestries, cultures, and often collective group histories.
Asian-Americans sub-group (Data Source: U.S. Census, 2010)
There are currently 1.3 million Asian-American students enrolled in higher education (CARE, 2011). CARE believes that this number will continue to rise in the next decade, given the expected rise of Asian-Americans from less than one percent in the 1960s to 19.5 million today (about 6 percent of the population). One result of this growth has been an increase in discrimination and bias against Asian-Americans (CARE, 2011). However, people have raised the question of whether Asian-Americans experience discrimination due to their success in educational attainment, career mobility, and socio-economic status (Muesus, 2009). After all, many people view Asians as the "model minority," given their recent success in all areas of their lives (social, cultural, and economic success) compared to other non-white groups in the United States (Muesus, 2009). The model minority myth did not become prevalent until the late 20th century. Today, even though Asians perform better on average than other groups, it is not the case that every single Asian student is an over-achiever (Muesus, 2009). When we disaggregate the Asian population into national-origin groups, we can see a more complex story. In 2004, less than 10 percent of Hmong, Laotian, or Cambodian adults in the US had college degrees, compared with about half of all Chinese and Pakistani adults (Muesus, 2009).

The National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) is a comprehensive study designed and implemented by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the Office of Educational Research and Improvement with assistance from other federal offices, various associations, and the research community. NPSAS conducted a study in 2007-2008 to look at the landscape of postsecondary education. The findings in this study represented a national representative sample of more than 100,000 students enrolled in U.S. postsecondary institutions. The NPSAS study defined immigrant students as those who were foreign-born with U.S. citizen status, whose parents were born outside of the U.S. Secondly, NPSAS defined second-
generation students as those born in the U.S. with one or both parent(s) foreign-born. Finally, third or higher generation students were those who were born in the United States with both parents born in the U.S. (NPSAS, 2008).

According to data from the NPSAS study in 2007-2008, immigrant and second-generation students constituted about 23 percent of the approximately 22.3 million undergraduates in postsecondary education (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, and Ginder, 2009), as compared to 19 percent in 1999-2000. Of this group, the majority were of Hispanic or Asian descent, 56 percent and 57 percent, respectively. However, Asian students accounted for the largest proportion (30 percent) of immigrant undergraduates, compared to 26 percent of Hispanic students. Conversely, Hispanics made up 42 percent of second-generation American undergraduates, while Asians made up of 16 percent of second-generation undergraduates. Black undergraduates made up 15 percent and 7 percent of immigrant and second-generation students, respectively. Of all the underrepresented groups, Asian immigrant undergraduates (foreign-born) presented the largest percentage of all undergraduates in the United States in 2007-08. This reflects the fact that in the last decade the United States has experienced an influx of Asian families to the United States, resulting in the greater number of Asian students in higher education.

It is important to note that immigrant and generational status sharply distinguished Hispanic and Asian undergraduates from all undergraduate students. About 66 percent of Hispanic and more than 90 percent of Asian undergraduates were immigrants or second-generation Americans, compared to 17 percent of Black and 10 percent of White undergraduates (NPSAS, 2008). These characteristics also distinguished Asian and Hispanic undergraduates from each other. More than half of all Asian students were immigrants (55 percent), compared
with only 21 percent of Hispanic students. Conversely, Hispanic students were primarily second-generation Americans (45 percent) versus 38 percent Asian students (NPSAS, 2008).

In comparing income, proportionally more Asians and Hispanics than all undergraduates were in the lowest income group. More specifically, 32-38 percent of Asian immigrants and second-generation Asian-American undergraduates were in the lowest income group, compared with 25 percent of all undergraduates (NCES, 2007-08; NPSAS, 2008). According to the U.S. Department of Education in 2007-08, low-income dependent undergraduates had family incomes of approximately $36,000 or less.

The Asian American and Pacific Islander population consists of over 40 different ethnic groups, which vary demographically with regard to language background, immigration history, religion, socioeconomic status, and educational attainment. A large portion of AAPI students are from low-income families, are the first in their family to attend college, and struggle financially to support themselves while attending school. Particular subgroups, such as Southeast Asians (Hmong, Laotian, Cambodians, and Vietnamese) and Pacific Islanders (people whose origins are Polynesia, Micronesia, or Melanesia) are often overshadowed by being grouped with other Asian-Americans. These ethnic subpopulations are at higher risk for lower income levels and poverty, language acquisition difficulties, lower graduation rates for high school and college, and occupational barriers.

A closer examination of the subcategories of the Asian-American umbrella will help with understanding how these subgroups perform in educational attainment. While large proportions of some ethnic sub-groups from East Asia (Chinese, Taiwanese, and Koreans) and South Asia (Asian Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis) have a bachelor’s degree or greater as their highest level of education, including some of whom earned their degrees in their homeland, there are
other ethnic sub-groups with very different patterns of educational attainment. Southeast Asians (Hmong, Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese), for example, have a much greater likelihood of dropping out of high school. Figure 4 shows educational attainment from various AAPI subgroups.

Figure 4: Educational level by Race/Ethnicity

Education attainment for various AAPI subgroups (Data Source: U.S. Census, 2010)

A number of factors contribute to differences in educational attainment between AAPI subgroups. One significant factor in the wide variation in education is the degree to which AAPI sub-groups vary by socioeconomic backgrounds, which results in AAPIs occupying positions along the full range of the socioeconomic spectrum, from the poor and under-privileged, to the affluent and highly-skilled. Chinese, Thai, Korean, and Filipino have higher educational attainment (Bachelor’s degree or higher) than Hmong, Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese.
Conversely, these showed higher percentages of less than high school diploma than Chinese, Thai, Korean, and Filipino.

Figure 5 shows the distribution of income for AAPI sub-groups, with a focus on the distance in the median household income for sub-groups from the median household income for all AAPIs. It is important to note the extent to which median household income for AAPIs in the aggregate conceals differences between AAPI sub-groups. Moreover the differences in income can be in both directions with some groups earning much lower incomes and other groups earning much higher ones.

Figure 5: Difference in Median Household Income for Selected Asian-American Sub-group, 2008-2010.

Household Income differences between AAPI subgroups (Data Source: U.S. Census, 2010)
Another factor influencing the socioeconomic status of AAPI subgroups is patterns of immigration. Consider that while a significant proportion of immigrants from Asia come to the U.S. already highly educated, others enter the U.S. from countries that have provided only limited opportunities for educational and social mobility. Pacific Islanders, defined as people whose origins are from Polynesia, Micronesia, or Melanesia, are a diverse pan-ethnic group in themselves, whose histories include challenges such as struggles for sovereignty. These struggles, along with other unique circumstances, are often overshadowed by being grouped with Asian-Americans.

**Vietnamese-American: A Portrait**

Vietnam is located in the eastern rim of the Indochina peninsula in Southeast Asia, and is bordered by China to the north, Laos and Cambodia to the west, and the Pacific Ocean to the south and east. Major cities include the capital city of Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), Hai Phong, Da Nang, and Hue (U.S. Department of State, 2006). Vietnam’s population is approximately 90 percent ethnic Vietnamese and 10 percent minority groups, such as ethnic Chinese, Montagnards (also known as “mountain people”), Khmer Krom, Cham, Hmong, and Thai (U.S. Department of State, 2006).

Vietnam’s history is marked by foreign invasions and civil warfare. The first known invaders were the Chinese, who ruled Vietnam for over 100 years. During this time, Vietnam adopted many of China’s philosophies, including Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. After China, the French arrived in 1858 and ruled Vietnam for about 60 years. In 1954, the Vietnamese communist leader, Ho Chi Minh, declared independence against the French (Hunt, 2002). However, the French refused to relinquish control of Vietnam until the communist leader Ho Chi Minh defeated the French in the north and divided the country to North Vietnam and
South Vietnam (Hunt, 2002). In 1955, South Vietnam declared itself the Republic of Vietnam, and in 1961, the South Vietnamese requested help from the U.S. due to an uprising from the Vietnamese communists in the north. As a result, war ensued.

Before the fall of Saigon in 1975, many people in Vietnam enjoyed a relatively quiet and peaceful life. Few people held jobs in various manufacturing, textile, and import and export businesses (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014). Nearly two-thirds of Vietnam’s population lived in a rural environment (Vo-Tong, 2005). For centuries, people who lived in rural areas have depended on agriculture for their livelihood. As urbanization took over, the rural-urban divide became more noticeable, particularly when it came to income difference (Vo-Tong, 2005). For example, in 2005, the per capita income for people living in Saigon was $2,000/month, compared to $300-$430/month for those living in rural areas (Vo-Tong, 2005).

However, the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 changed the lives of millions of Vietnamese people. It resulted in the massive resettlement of millions of families to the United States, Canada, and other countries world-wide (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014). The history of Vietnamese in America is a fairly recent one. Prior to 1975, most Vietnamese living in the United States were wives and children of American servicemen in Vietnam. However, their numbers were insignificant. According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization services, only 650 Vietnamese arrived from 1950 to 1974 as students, diplomats, and military trainees (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014). However, the fall of Saigon prompted a large-scale wave of immigration from Vietnam to the U.S. Vietnamese immigrated to the United States in three waves.
The first wave began in 1975 at the end of the Vietnam War, when the fall of Saigon led to the United States sponsored evacuation of over 125,000 Vietnamese refugees (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014). These Vietnamese were generally military personnel, political leaders, urban educated professionals who were associated with the U.S. military, wealthier, and possessed better English proficiency (Wieder, 1996). According to data collected by the U.S. Department of State in 1975, more than 30 percent of heads of first-wave families were medical professionals, 16.9 percent worked in transportation, and 11.7 percent were in clerical and sales jobs. Of the first-wave Vietnamese immigrants, only 4.9 percent were fishermen and farmers. Many people who left Vietnam in the first wave, and who had close ties with the American government or with the Republic of Vietnam during the war, feared the communist retaliation (Wieder, 1996).

The evacuation of these high-profile Vietnamese immigrants (first wave refugees) was well-organized. People were either evacuated by aircrafts or Navy boats (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014). Those who were airlifted by the U.S. government were left on military bases in the Philippines, Wake Island, and Guam. They were later transferred to refugee centers in California, Arkansas, Florida, and Pennsylvania. The Vietnamese refugees were initially concerned about American resentment when they arrived to the U.S. However, those concerns evaporated when the American people took the Vietnamese refugees in and provided shelter, food, and education. Non-profit organizations also pitched in to support the refugee families with finance and sponsorship (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014). Furthermore, President Gerald Ford signed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Act of 1975, which was a response to the fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War. The act granted the refugees from South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, special status to enter the country and established a domestic resettlement
program (Haines, 1996). This included providing financial assistance with relocation and resettlement for refugees. Under this act, approximately 130,000 refugees from South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were allowed to enter the United States with this special status (Haines, 1996).

The second wave of Vietnamese refugees started in 1980 and lasted until the mid-1980s, with many of the Vietnamese immigrants escaping on fishing boats. These people became known as the “boat people” (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014). The second group of Vietnamese immigrants lived mainly in the rural areas, were less educated than the first wave, and many were ethnic Chinese fleeing from persecution in Vietnam. The instability of Vietnam’s politics and economy under the new communist government led many to leave the country. Those who did stay and who were former military officers and government employees who worked with the U.S. government, were sent to reeducation camps. The reeducation camps were designed to immerse prisoners in a process of political indoctrination (Wieder, 1996).

Those refugees who left the country by boat experienced harsh conditions. Most of the boats were small, unsafe for sea travel, and crowded. While over 70 percent of the first wave of refugees came from urban areas, the social status of the “boat people” were more diverse, many coming from lower socioeconomic status; they were peasant farmers, fisherman, small town merchants, and former military officials (Zhou & Bankston, 1998). At sea, many of the people died from starvation, illness, and thirst. Furthermore, many of the women and young girls in these boats experienced rape by Thai pirates. Those boats that were fortunate enough to survive the long journey ended up in asylum camps in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and the Philippines. The refugees did not have a choice as to where they ended up. It was
a matter of their proximity to the country and whether that country would take them in. The second wave of refugees totaled almost 2 million people (Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

The third wave of Vietnamese refugees arrived in the United States in the 1990s (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014). Most were Vietnamese Amerasians, political prisoners, and ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese. Many refugees came as a result of being sponsored by family members who had lived in the U.S. for some time. They were not fleeing for political reasons unlike the first two waves. Once in the U.S., they were reunited with their families. Another group of refugees in the third wave were Vietnamese Amerasians, who were children of U.S. servicemen and Vietnamese mothers, and were sponsored by their American fathers. Political prisoners included former South Vietnamese government workers, military personnel, and intellectuals sent to reeducation camps were also part of the third wave of refugees (Gold, 1992). The Chinese-Vietnamese were from the entrepreneurial class of Chinese living in Vietnam. The Chinese-Vietnamese were similar to the boat people, in that their adjustment to the U.S. had been slower (Gold, 1992b). A total of more than 1.6 million Vietnamese refugees and Amerasians were resettled in the United States between 1975 and 1997. (U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2001).

Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the Vietnamese population in the United States has risen significantly, from 231,000 in 1980 to nearly 1.3 million in 2012, making it the sixth largest foreign-born population in the United States (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014). The growth occurred most rapidly during the 1980s and 1990s, when the Vietnamese immigrant population roughly doubled within each decade. Overall, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese have relocated to the United States, most settling in southern California, Texas, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Massachusetts, New York, Illinois, Washington State, and Washington, DC (Hunt,
Figure 6 below shows the Vietnamese immigrant population in the U.S. from 1980-2012.

Figure 6: Vietnamese Immigrant Population in the United States, 1980-2012

(Data Source: Migration Policy Institute and U.S. Census 2006, 2010, 2012)

In the U.S., the Vietnam War had become a prominent political issue. Some did not agree with the U.S. intervening in the war, and others felt it was the U.S. responsibility to intervene with the communist government and to support a democratic society (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014). As more Vietnamese immigrants arrived in the U.S. it became a crisis with overcrowding, need of food, shelter, and health care. Recognizing that the Vietnamese refugee crisis was a world problem, the United Nations convened the First Geneva Conference on Indochinese Refugees in July 1979. As a result of the outpouring of support from sixty-five
nations, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees received funding to support these refugees in the U.S. and around the world (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014). This also allowed more refugees to enter the country. Additionally, President Carter utilized an executive order to raise immigration quotas to double the number of Southeast Asian refugees allowed into the U.S. each month (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014).

As such, the Vietnamese population in the U.S. is the fourth largest foreign-born population from Asia, behind those from India, the Philippines, and China. Almost 40 percent of Vietnamese-Americans live in California and another 12 percent in Texas (Campi, 2010). About 44 percent of foreign-born Vietnamese have become U.S. citizens, the highest naturalization rate of all Asian groups (Campi, 2010). However, as recently as 2000, Vietnamese had the highest proportion of persons who spoke English less than “very well” at home. But nevertheless, Vietnamese median family income was the highest of all the Southeast Asian-American refugee populations ($46,929), according the 2000 U.S. Census. Furthermore, Vietnamese had the lowest rate of receiving public assistance (10 percent) among Southeast Asian groups (U.S. Census, 2000).

The Vietnamese who came to the United States, especially the second wave, had few skills and little to no formal education, which made their integration into U.S. society difficult. They also possessed very limited English proficiency, which made it difficult to look for jobs that required language acquisition. However, Vietnamese are entrepreneurial in nature, and found ways to support their families financially (Campi, 2010). The National Congress of Vietnamese-Americans, a non-profit organization that promote active participation of Vietnamese and Asian-Americans in both civic and national matters and in community engagements, believed that Vietnamese revitalized and re-invented some traditional jobs. Many
first- and second-generation Vietnamese became owners of small businesses such as auto-repair shops and restaurants. Moreover, low-skilled Vietnamese have changed the nail care and commercial fishing and shrimping industries (Online, 2004). The Vietnamese-American community is highly concentrated in the nail salon industry, one of the fastest growing categories of Asian-American businesses. According to the industry magazine *Nails* (2012), Vietnamese immigrants dominate California’s nail-care industry (80 percent) and about 45 percent of manicurists nationwide. In a National Public Radio show titled, *All Things Considered*, Alfred Oosborne, senior associate dean at the University of California, Los Angeles, shared that, “Affordable nail care was a niche just waiting to be identified and captured. The Vietnamese just happened to be the immigrant group that was willing to do anything, that was new to this country.” Many Vietnamese manicurists credited a Hollywood movie star, Tippi Hedren, who started the fad when she volunteered as an international relief coordinator with Food for the Hungry (NPR, 2012). While helping Vietnamese women in a refugee camp in Sacramento, Ms. Hedren showed off her long, glossy nails. The refugee women were so enamored by her nails that they asked her if she could teach them. From that point on, Ms. Hedren asked her manicurist to help teach these Vietnamese women nail technology. Today, the nail business pulls in about $7.3 billion annually, and continues to rise every year (NPR, 2012).

Similarly, in the commercial shrimping industry, Vietnamese refugees make up about one-quarter of the Louisiana’s commercial shrimpers, according to the Louisiana Shrimping Association (NPR, 2010). They first began settling in the New Orleans area after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Catholic charities in Louisiana made a huge effort to settle the newcomers, many of whom belonged to a minority group of Catholic followers in Vietnam. Most Vietnamese immigrants worked as commercial fishermen in Vietnam and felt at home in the
Louisiana swamps. They could keep their way of life without needing to adapt or learn much English (NPR, 2010).

As Vietnamese immigrants integrated and assimilated into American society, they started to compete and find ways to help the next generation of U.S.-born Vietnamese move ahead from the first-generations. The children of Vietnamese immigrants belong to the new second-generation, those U.S.- or foreign-born children of contemporary immigrants growing up in the U.S. and currently moving at a rapidly growing pace (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014). Now, as in the past, the emergence of a second-generation involves a new, decisive chapter in the American experience. After the first-generation moves to America seeking a better life for their families, now their children are realizing their dreams. For the most part, American history is a story of immigrant children fulfilling their parents’ dreams. But the past may not provide a reliable guide to the second-generation experience unfolding before us today.

Among today’s second-generation immigrants, Vietnamese children are the newest generation. As of 1990, 79 percent of all Vietnamese children could be classified as members of the second generation, having either been born in the United States or arrived here prior to the age of 5. Another 17 percent are considered “1.5 generation,” those who arrived in the United States between the ages of 5 and 12. Only 4 percent arrived as adolescents, and thus appropriately belong to the first-generation (Hunt, 2002).

Like their counterparts among the other immigrant groups, today’s Vietnamese children will be the first to see whether they can really achieve the “American Dream.” However, the conditions under which they live put that goal in doubt. Immigrant children, in general, are far more likely than their non-Hispanic white counterparts to live in poverty, to depend on public assistance, and to grow up in households where wage earners are disproportionately under-
employed (Hunt, 2002). For Vietnamese immigrant children, the situation is even more dire for many reasons. First, unlike most other current immigrants, the Vietnamese were pushed out of their homeland, forced to leave their country without adequate preparation and with little control over where will end up (Zhou & Bankston, 1999). Second, most families possess little to no assets, no formal education, work skills, English-language proficiency, or familiarity with the ways of an advanced society that would help them ease into the American culture. Finally, many Vietnamese families, when they arrived to the U.S., found themselves involuntarily dispersed, pushed into urban or suburban neighborhoods, where the residents were poor, high crime rates, and the schools were inadequate (Zhou & Bankston, 1999). However, the story of children of Vietnamese immigrant is not all that depressing. The second-generation Vietnamese immigrants attained more education than their parents. Nearly 45 percent of the Vietnamese graduate from college (Rumbaut, 2008).

Of the six major Asian-Americans groups, including Korean, Indian, Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese, Vietnamese are the least likely to have a college degree, and have the lowest median annual household income (Pew Research Center, 2010). In 2012, approximately 23 percent of Vietnamese immigrants age 25 and over had a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 27 percent of the foreign born from Eastern Asian and 28 percent of the total U.S. foreign-born population. The rate for the U.S.-born population was 29 percent (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014). About 60 percent of Asian adults ages 25 to 29 had at least a bachelor's degree in 2008. Among Asian subgroups, Asian Indians had the highest percentage of adults with at least a bachelor's degree (80 percent), while the other Asian category generally had the lowest percentage (36 percent) (NCES, 2007). The percentage of Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders who had completed college (18 percent) was lower than the percentages for each of the
Asian subgroups and lower than the U.S. average (NCES, 2007). U.S.-born members of the Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese subgroups had higher college attainment rates than members of the same subgroups that were born outside the United States (NCES, 2007). For example, within the Vietnamese subgroup, 57 percent of those who were born in the U.S. had a college degree, compared to 39 percent of those who were born outside the U.S. (NCES, 2007).

Median annual income for Vietnamese-Americans overall is lower than the median earnings for all Asian-Americans, $35,000 to $48,000, respectively. Figure 7 shows per capital income by Race/Ethnicity from 2007-2009 based on the 2010 U.S. Census. Being in a lower SES household means these students face numerous barriers to academic success. These barriers include the likelihood they will live in low-income neighborhoods where schools are under-resourced, teachers are not adequately trained to work with minority students, and some of these schools discourage students from pursuing college (Yeh, 2004). Additionally, students experience significant pressure to contribute financially to the family while succeeding academically, which adds to the stress. Families of Vietnamese students do not have the financial means to help their children navigate the college application process, and without support and guidance that process can be daunting and intimidating. According to Yeh (2004), financial constraints influence students to attend less-expensive colleges close to home, such as 2-year community colleges, and cause students to questions whether they can afford a degree.
Despite lower degree attainment and income, Vietnamese-Americans are the most upbeat about their children’s futures, among the U.S. Asian groups. About 48 percent of the parents expect their children’s standard of living to be much better than their own. Vietnamese-Americans are most likely among U.S. Asian groups to believe in the value of hard work. More than 83 percent agree that most people can get ahead if they work hard (Pew Research Center 2010). These aspirations have propelled the young generation of Vietnamese-American students to pursue higher education.

Vietnamese children seem to be doing well in school. Though a significant minority is lagging behind, the school success of the Vietnamese suggests that ethnic progress depends on more than just human and financial capital. Instead, the Vietnamese seem to have specific
cultural and ethnic characteristics that help them be successful in the long run. These characteristics come from hard work, strong belief in family values, can-do attitude, and getting along with almost everybody. These traits will play out at various points in their lives.

Table 1: Characteristics of U.S. Vietnamese Adults, 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>U.S. Total</th>
<th>U.S. Asians</th>
<th>U.S. Vietnamese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Born</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>74.1%</td>
<td>83.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>91.4%</td>
<td>69.6%</td>
<td>79.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Less than high school</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- High school</td>
<td>85.6%</td>
<td>86.1%</td>
<td>70.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Bachelor’s degree or more</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median annual income</td>
<td>$40K</td>
<td>$48K</td>
<td>$35K</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2010 American Community Survey.

The Nature of Current Studies

Researchers of first-generation college students tend to focus mainly on a qualitative approach by trying to understand the experience of these students in three categories: first-generation college students versus their non-first-generation counterparts; pre-college preparation by first-generation students; and persistence of first-generation college students in completing their degrees. However, quantitative and mixed method approaches, while uncommon, are still persistent in the literature. Table 2 shows various types of studies for the three categories described above, Quantitative (Qn), Qualitative (Ql), and Mixed Method (MM).
Researchers on this topic are immensely interested in looking at factors that help first-generation college students succeed. These factors include parental involvement in their child’s education, social networking, pre-college preparation, and the importance of friends, to name a few. Such factors provide indications of success for these students, and researchers are interested in how some students capitalize on these experiences and achieve success in college while others are unable to achieve similar results. Below are some examples of studies to have added to the literature of first-generation college students.

**Quantitative Studies**

The quantitative research of Pascarella, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) found that the level of parental postsecondary education has a significant unique influence on the academic selectivity of the institution a student attends, the nature of the academic and nonacademic experience, and the cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes of college. There were marked differences between first-generation and other college students in the influence of specific academic and nonacademic experiences on the outcomes of college. The research conducted by Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, and Leonard (2007) found that “living and learning” communities can be positive for first-generation college students. A living and learning community is a theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-generation versus non-first-generation</th>
<th>Pre-college preparation</th>
<th>Persistence of first-generation students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stuber, 2011 (Q1)</td>
<td>Inkelas, Daver, Vogt &amp; Leonard, 2007 (Qn)</td>
<td>Reason, Terenzini &amp; Domingo, 2006 (Qn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pascarella, Wolniak &amp; Terenzini, 2004 (Qn)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Museus, 2011 (MM)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Herndon &amp; Hirt, 2004 (Ql)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>McCarron &amp; Inkelas, 2006 (Qn)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
housing option that allow students to explore a topic or interest area while living with those who share the same interests. Living learning communities are about finding a group of people to talk with and to do things with, having a sense of belonging, and having the freedom to explore and discover. Students in living and learning communities often find a greater sense of community, an integrated approach to intellectual and personal growth, and stronger connections between classrooms and everyday life. Findings provide evidence that living learning program participation is beneficial for first-generation college students. After controlling for individual levels of self-confidence, first-generation college students in a living learning program statistically had significantly higher estimates of ease with academic and social transitions to college compared to those who were not participants in living learning programs.

**Mixed Methods Study**

It is imperative for researchers to investigate a variety of options for their research and the mixed method approach is one of those options. Sometimes data that has already been collected can be used for the researcher’s own research. A mixed method approach gives researchers a more concrete data set while at the same time providing the opportunity to describe the various themes and varied descriptions. One study, that done by Museus (2011), among those identified, was a mixed methods study. The quantitative data Museus (2011) used in his research were collected as part of a nationally representative longitudinal study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, which was hosted within the U.S. Department of Education. The qualitative data were collected through interviews with thirty first-generation Asian American and Pacific Islander undergraduate students who identified with either ethnic groups; the students were enrolled at six different four-year institutions, which served to generate an in-depth understanding of the inequalities in access faced by first-generation AAPIs.
Although it is true that, in the aggregate, Asian American Pacific Islander attend and graduate from higher education institutions at a higher rate than other racial groups, several scholars have demonstrated the fact that AAPIs are not a homogenous group and some Asian-American subgroups suffer from drastic disparities in college access and success. These groups include Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Native Hawaiian, Fijian, Guamanian, Marshallese, Samoan, and Tongan (Museus, 2011).

**Qualitative Studies**

There were numerous qualitative studies that enhanced this thesis. The topic of first-generation college students is best studied by conducting case study interviews with first-generation college students, and hearing directly from them about their college experience. By giving these students the opportunity to share their own experiences, and for the researcher to look at themes and patterns, these studies are particularly interesting. London’s (1989) case study *Breaking Away: A Study of First-Generation College Students and Their Families* contained a few conclusions: one, family forces propel these students to go to college and succeed; two, during adolescence and early adulthood the maturation of intellectual and moral capacities may by itself help promote more differentiation and autonomy; three, college-educated parents also bind, delegate, and expel their children. The rich detail of the interviews provided a way of highlighting the lived experiences of these students. The interviewer seemed to be highly skilled and was respectful of his participants, and the themes that were discussed were well thought out.

Stuber’s (2011) case study looked at the experience of white first-generation college students. The results in Stuber’s study showed that slightly more than half of study participants expressed few, if any, feelings of alienation or disengagement. Instead they described
themselves as well-adjusted socially and academically. A quarter experienced persistent and debilitating feelings of marginality, resulting in social and academic disengagement. Another quarter overcame their feelings of marginality en-route to becoming socially and academically engaged (Stuber, 2011). Although these students were from working class families, those who came from more economically stable families arrived on campus with resources that facilitated their adjustment. Stuber found that whiteness functioned as an asset and a liability, facilitating adjustment to college life for some and complicating it for others. It was difficult to find many studies that focused on white first-generation students because most focused on first-generation students of color. Based on this research first-generation college students deal with some very similar issues regardless of race; however, there are also some very contrasting issues. White first-generation college students do not necessarily have to deal with immigration issues because most were born in the United States. Furthermore, language is not a barrier for these students. These two issues are two of the most pressing issues for first-generation students of color.

Finally, Herndon & Hirt (2004) looked at the experience of black students as it relates to their relationship with their families. Results showed that families lay the groundwork for success long before black students get to college. Family and active kin can also be aware of the influence they have on their children in terms of perspectives on race (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). In addition, family can help ensure that their students are motivated. This study suggested that a college education offers black students career opportunities and social mobility. This research looked primarily at successful black students and what makes them successful. Much research on this topic comes from a negative approach but the research of Herndon & Hirt (2004) looked at the topic taking a positive approach.
Data Analyses

While much qualitative research looks for meaning in the lived experiences of their subjects, this type of research often lacks the ability to generalize its findings or leaves one with the impression that the study is not broad enough. McCarron & Inkelas (2006) studied the effect of parental involvement on the impact of success of first-generation college students. However, their study was limited by the lack of information on whether older siblings of first-generation college students attended college or not. However, their research did indicate that if older siblings attended college, these siblings provided cultural and social capital to their younger siblings (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Hendon and Hirt (2004) analyzed successful black students, the roles their families played in supporting the students’ education, and how family support affected college outcomes. Similar to McCarron and Inkelas (2006), Hendon and Hirt said their results were only generalized to the particular samples within their study. Other qualitative studies had the same issues and limitations for their research.

Similarly to qualitative research, analyses on quantitative research, based on my findings, had limitations and issues as well. For example, Zwick and Sklar’s (2005) quantitative research on Predicting College Grades and Degree Completion Using High School Grades and SAT Scores: The Role of Student Ethnicity and First Language revealed that their research had missing data and therefore their analyses were limited to certain variables. Other quantitative research such as Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo (2006) felt their findings relied on student reports of their gains in academic competence as the criterion measure in the study, and such self-reports were open to challenges to their construct validity. Other studies also had issues of
validity, particularly when the researcher’s primary source was based on a data set that was composed by other people.

There are many studies that address the experience of first-generation college students (Carnevale & Fry, 2000; Schroeder, 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yeager, & Nora, 1996; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2000) and the barriers that prevent them from being successful. These studies fall into three categories. First are studies that compare first-generation college students with other college students in terms of demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, and college aspirations (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Horn & Nunez, 2000). The second category consists of studies that focus on describing and understanding the transition from secondary to postsecondary education and students’ preparation for college (Lara, 1992; Terenzini et al., 1994; Weis, 1992). And finally the third category focuses on examining the persistence of these students in college, degree attainment, and early career labor market outcomes (Attinais, 1989; Berkner, Horn, & Clune, 2000, Choy, 2000, Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

There are many researchers who have studied the differences between first-generation students and non-first-generation students. In looking at racial demographics, these researchers found, first of all, that first-generation students are predominately ethnic minorities compared to their non-first-generation peers (Choy, 2001; Horn and Nunez, 2000). Second, first-generation students are more likely to come from a lower socioeconomic status (Bui, 2002; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Third, first-generation students experience a lower level of parental support and guidance due to a lack of knowledge of the college environment and resources (McConnell, 2000; Terenzini et al., 1996). Finally, the main difference between first-generation college students and their non-first-generation peers is that they experience lackluster pre-college
academic preparation (Choy, Horn, Nunez, and Chen, 2000) and have lower GPAs and SAT scores (Riehl, 1994).

Terenzini et al. (1995) studied the pre-college characteristics of 825 first-generation college students and 1,860 continuing students at 23 institutions across the United States. The study found that first-generation students are more likely to come from low-income families, be Hispanic, have weaker cognitive skills, have lower aspirations, and report being less involved with peers and teachers in high school. Furthermore, the study indicated that first-generation college students take longer to complete their degree programs, and received less encouragement from their parents. At college, they take fewer courses in liberal arts and instead take more technical and remedial courses. First-generation students study fewer hours, are less likely to go to a professor’s office hours, and are less likely to receive encouragement from friends and family members. The study concluded that first-generation students come to college less prepared and have more academic demands on them (Terenzini et al., 1995).

Terenzini et al. (1995) also remarked on the psychological and emotional obstacles that first-generation students face. They have anxiety about their ability to succeed and stressful changes in their relationships with their family and friends back at home. Rendon (1996) and London (1996) also remarked that first-generation students face a variety of psychological and personal stresses. London describes the identity development of first-generation college students in two categories: one category represents individuals who do not find their college experience unsettling, and the second category are those students who never expected to attend college and view themselves as “educational pioneers.” In both categories first-generation students deal with strong identity issues when they come to campus and those issues manifest themselves in other areas including academics and personal development.
Students who are identified as first-generation college students are considered at-risk in higher education (Ishitani, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996). These students are likely to grow up in low-income households, receive little or no support from parents, work long hours in college, receive poor preparation for college, and live in high crime areas, among many other factors (Terenzini et al., 1996). Additionally, first-generation students are more likely to take longer, sometimes up to seven years, to obtain a bachelor’s degree, tend to have a lower degree of aspiration, and may lack social skills (Ishitani, 2006; Nunez & Cucarro-Alamin, 1998; Pike & Kuh, 2005).

There have been several research projects that sought to produce empirical data on first-generation college students. Billson and Terry (1982) wrote a seminal study of 701 first-generation students at two Midwestern liberal arts colleges. They reported that first-generation students did not structurally integrate into the college setting as readily as their second-generation peers. They were less likely to live on campus, participate or support school sports, and did not join student organizations (Billson & Terry, 1982). This research concluded that both groups, first-generation and continuing students, shared aspirations for college attainment. However, first-generation students who left college were not convinced that college was the best way to attain success in life.

While there are many studies on first-generation college students, studies on first-generation college students at selective, four-year institutions are difficult to find. Arredondo (1999) did her research on first-generation students (n=223) compared to continuing students (n=324) at an elite, public, four-year institution. Findings in her research confirmed that, nationally, first-generation students do in fact differ extensively from children of college graduates on various pre-college characteristics. Arrendondo’s (1999) study shows that the
difficulties that first-generation students experience in college cannot be explained entirely in terms of traditional factors such as academic preparation and income. The second similar study was done by Clarke (2000) whose dissertation attempted to conduct a qualitative study of ten first-generation college students during their freshman year at the University of Pennsylvania, a highly selective private institution. The findings in her study indicate that first-generation students are high achievers who consistently earn above-average grades, work hard and become involved in the campus community, and do not draw inordinate resources from the institution (Clarke, 2000).

Arredondo (1999) found that being the first in the family to attend college poses a unique disadvantage for students who are trying to succeed in college, despite controlling for pre-college characteristics including pre-college academic preparation, income, ethnicity, and gender. She concluded that first-generation students were more likely to cover college expenses from scholarships, grants, and loans. The first-generation students in her study said their reasons for going to college were upward mobility, to get a good paying job, make more money, prove to others that they could succeed despite the odds (Arredondo, 1999). Arredondo also found that first-generation students had a more difficult time transitioning to college than their non-first-generation peers. These students encountered obstacles which interfere with their involvement and integration, and thus prevent them from taking full advantage of the college experience (Arredondo, 1999).

Similar to Arredondo’s research, Clarke’s (2000) result yielded similar conclusions. She concluded that all ten students in her study experienced varying degrees of difficulty with their transitions to college life in the first year. Her research also found that first-generation students have feelings of pride and utilitarianism, especially being a first-generation college student. She
quoted them saying, “It’s a big accomplishment for me to be here and knowing really how to appreciate that. So I want to tell somebody” (Clarke, 2000, p. 173).

Arrendono and Clarke’s research show that first-generation students are successful despite dealing with some obstacles. If colleges are accepting first-generation low income, students at higher rates they need to make sure that these students are succeeding and graduating from college for many important reasons. First, researchers have found that a baccalaureate degree is a means for upward social mobility (Callan, 2000; Clark, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), and by obtaining a college degree these students can find meaningful employment and contribute to the working society. Second, those students who are successful can serve as role models and provide support to those students who will come later. This ensures the viability of programs supporting these particular students. Finally, first-generation low-income college students help to create a diverse learning community and generate opportunities to have open dialogue on race, ethnicity, gender, and religion. Learning comes from classroom instruction as well as social and meaningful interactions with peers. The more diverse a campus is, the better it is for students to learn.

**Conclusion**

The literature review has indicated that those students who have made it this far, who come from humble beginnings, have done something extraordinary that no one their family has done before. Being the first to attend college and attending one of most elite institutions in the world are reasons why first-generations students have already achieved educational success. Focusing this research on the experience of first-generation Vietnamese-American college students at a highly selective institution will assist in developing effective strategies other institutions can use to apply to the work they are currently doing and better understand what is
working and what is not, and figure out what more they can do to support these students to successful.
Chapter III: Methodology and Instruments

In assessing the various methodologies, the most appropriate method for my research was a qualitative research approach. This approach aligned with some of the research that I have examined. I was interested in delving deeper by interviewing students at an elite institution about their experiences as first-generation college students. I wanted to hear in their own words how they felt about their experience. That was why conducting one-on-one interviews were critical to capturing those lived experiences. This study did not attempt to employ a treatment/control study; rather it attempted to gain understanding of how these students make meaning of their college experience, and how these meanings guided their ability to navigate the college environment. I focused on each student’s story in order to contextualize the meaning of pre-college preparation, influences of family, friends, school personnel, and personal reflections of their time at this particular elite college.

This study used a qualitative research approach to evaluate the barriers and challenges that were unique to first-generation Vietnamese-American college students. Furthermore, this study was interested in making meanings of these lived experiences to help guide institutional practices in terms of recruitment and retention of first-generation students. The main focus was to understand how first-generation Vietnamese-American students navigated the college environment and what factors had an impact on their success or lack thereof. This study focused on each student’s story at a given time in their educational experience at an Ivy College.

I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with five undergraduate students at Ivy College, located on the east coast during the 2014-2015 academic year. A qualitative research method called Portraiture was used for this study. It was developed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis (1997). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) defined five
essential features of portraiture: context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and aesthetic whole. *Portraitists* viewed human experience as being framed and shaped by the setting. The context of a portrait was the setting—or where data collection happened. The context took into account the physical, geographic, temporal, historical, cultural, and aesthetic aspects. Portraitists study individuals to record their subjects’ experiences and to interpret their perspectives.

The main purpose of the study was to understand and examine the lived experiences of Vietnamese-American students at a highly selective college. Furthermore, this study hoped to unpack the barriers and challenges these students face while in college. This study explored and illuminated the lived experience of first-generation Vietnamese-American college students at a highly selective institution, Ivy College. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What does being first-generation mean for Vietnamese-American students at Ivy College?

2. What challenges does a highly selective college environment present to Vietnamese-American college students?

3. How do Vietnamese-American students navigate these environments?

Important sub-questions that the research considered include:

- How does social capital affect Vietnamese-American students’ experiences?
- How does cultural capital affect Vietnamese-American students’ experiences?

**Site and Participants**

The study site is at a four-year, private, highly selective liberal arts institution of higher education, which is located in the northeast United States. This institution is a highly selective school and considered very prestigious. To assist in anonymity, no reference to the university’s
actual name will be used, and it will simply be called Ivy College. Ivy College is nationally and
internationally recognized and accredited, and currently supports over 6000 students in
undergraduate programs, 4000 students in graduate programs, and 10,000 students in
professional programs. The undergraduate population is 51% female, the graduate population is
48% female, and the professional population is 49% female (Anonymous, 2015).

Ivy College was chosen for several reasons. First, I had access to participants due to his
proximity to the institution. Second, Ivy College’s student body is diverse. Finally, Ivy College
fulfilled the criteria of this research as a highly selective institution. Table 3 shows the
demographic information from the class of 2019 (University factsheet):

Table 3: Class of 2019 Demographic and Ethnicity Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic Breakdown</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle Atlantic</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Territories</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian-American</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statistics provided by the Ivy College’s Office of Institutional Research showed that an
average of 10 percent of those in the classes of 2008 through 2013 was made up of first-
generation students (Anonymous, 2012). I hoped to get information regarding disaggregation of
data on Asian-American students at Ivy College. However, that information was not available at the time of the study.

In order to select a representative group of participants for this study, purposeful sampling was used. Purposeful sampling is a method that allows me to select a sample population based on prior information (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The reason for purposeful sampling was to ensure particular settings, persons, and events were selected deliberately in order to provide important information on the subjects that the other samplings are unable to provide (Maxwell, 1996). This prior knowledge means that participants were selected based on certain traits and characteristics which enable me to be more informed of the themes.

In this study, I conducted five semi-structured interviews and made visual observations of undergraduate students at Ivy College, student who self-identified as first-generation Vietnamese-American students. I used the definition of first-generation college students by Saenz et al. (2008), in which first-generation students are from families in which neither parents has earned a college degree. Students were purposefully chosen based on the following criteria:

1. The student was a current member of the undergraduate class at Ivy College;
2. The student was the son or daughter of parents who did not attend college; and
3. The student self-identified as Vietnamese-American.

Once IRB approval was granted from both Ivy College and Northeastern University, a list of Vietnamese-American students at Ivy college was shared to me. The list came from a Vietnamese student organization, a student-run organization at Ivy College. Another list was given to me with names of students who self-identified as first-generation college students.
Because my ethnicity was Vietnamese, I was able to identify names that I recognized as Vietnamese. To further insure that no names were excluded, I used a website on the World Wide Web to search for all names related to Vietnamese heritage. The final list was comprised of 254 Vietnamese names. A letter email was sent to all 254 students along with the IRB approval. The letter stated that in order from them to participate in the study, they needed to meet the three criteria mentioned above. Interested students who meet the criteria filled out an interest form. The form asked some initial demographic questions to ensure the students did indeed meet the three criteria. Ten students responded to the interest form, and five were selected for this study. The other five respondents were not selected because they decided not to participate in the study after initially expressing interest.

In order for participants to respond freely and with a clear sense of confidentiality, all participants’ names were changed to culturally germane pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Additionally, any names or titles proffered by participants that detailed identifiable information were removed to protect third parties.

**Data Collection**

I interviewed each participant for 60 minutes. Each participant picked the date, time, and location for the one-one-one interview. Once all appointments were confirmed I practiced with a colleague to make sure questions were not leading. The interview questions were open ended. Interviews were tape-recorded and sent to a professional transcription company, using the participant’s pseudonyms, to be transcribed. I used multiple digital recorders during the interviews. Interview transcripts and participant data was kept on a secure, password-encrypted computer. Any data that was handwritten was kept in my lockbox, located at my home, which required a key to access. Every effort was made to ensure that participants’ identities remained
anonymous and data remained secured throughout the research process. The interview protocol was broken into three categories: (1) information relevant to the participant’s educational experience prior to attending college, and interactions with family members, school personnel, and peers, (2) information relevant to the participant’s educational experience at college, and (3) information pertinent to how participants understood their integration within the social, personal, and intellectual realms of college life.

Data Analysis

The data analysis phase included three distinct stages to ensure that the data is organized in a clear manner and interpreted accurately. The first part of the analysis involved reading and rereading the interview transcripts, and reviewing the audio recordings. According to Maxwell (2005), this stage is important to gain understanding of the participant’s perspective and how discreet narratives form a cohesive bond within the discourse. During this stage, data was coded using simple terms and phrases generated from the participant’s own interview.

The second part of the analysis involved developing emergent themes within the data set in the interview transcripts. These themes were produced from the breakdown of discrete data, and based on the literature review. The extrapolation of emergent themes was an important part of the hermeneutic process, one that involves the researcher’s ability to understand the data in a clear manner and interpret the stories the participants shared about their experiences. The final stage involved mapping and clustering the themes, and how they relate and interact with each other.

In the seminal text, *The Art and Science of Portraiture*, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis (1997) illuminates illuminate the origins, purposes, and features of *Portraiture*. The portraits are “designed to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human
experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are
negotiating those experiences” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The portraits are shaped
through dialogue with the portraitist (the researcher) and the subject (Lawrence-Lightfoot &
Davis, 1997). One of the most powerful characteristics of portraiture is its ability to embrace
contradictions, its ability to document the beautiful/ugly experiences that are so much a part of
the texture of human development and social relationships. Furthermore, paradox, central to
portraiture, needs to be unmasked and made explicit as part of the methodological and aesthetic
discipline (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

To honor the work of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, I carefully read through the
interview transcripts to capture the “richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human
experience” of each participant. Emergent themes were identified as the “first efforts to bring
interpretive insight, analytic scrutiny, and aesthetic order” to the collection of data. The themes
that emerged from this study included secondary educational preparation, family/parent
experience and background, mentorship, social and cultural capital, socio-economic status,
barriers and obstacles, post-graduation plans, and career aspirations. I recorded the emergent
themes, and developed four primary themes that were most salient and shared by all of the
participants. These themes were: (1) Overcoming Barriers, (2) Navigating Two Worlds, (3)
Building Social and Cultural Capital, and (4) Parental Influence.

**Limitations, Validity, and Credibility**

As with most research, a complete analysis of the data requires recognition of the study’s
limitations. There were several limitations that stood out in this thesis. The first limitation lies in
that the fact that the participants were chosen from one institution, thereby limiting the ability to
genralize the findings to other institutions. The second limitation was the small sample size
(n=5), thereby this study limits its ability to validate and generalize participants’ voices and experiences to the general student body and similar student population.

Third, the participants themselves, especially since each one is a member of one homogenous grouping (first-generation Vietnamese-American students at a highly selective institution). This can be an issue as individual attributes such as ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, family marital status, and other aspects can significantly affect a student’s experience and perceptions. One can argue that first-generation Vietnamese-American students at Ivy College may or may not have the same experience as a VIETNAMESE student at another highly selective institution.

Finally, the data came from a small and narrow sample and the findings might not apply to other groups of students. Furthermore, these are the experiences of first-generation Vietnamese-American students in a highly selective institution and therefore may not be applicable in other settings or in other countries. Despite these limitations, according to Creswell (2009), the value inherent in qualitative research comes not from generalizability, but from its ability to derive contextual themes from specific institutions. More importantly, the findings will contribute to the understanding of how first-generation Vietnamese-American navigate the elite college environment, and hopefully encourage similar studies on other ethnic groups.

One primary concern in terms of interpretation of the data was my own bias. I am a first-generation college student and might have had similar or different experiences than the participants. With this experience, my expectations, values, and perceptions might influence the data analysis. Maxwell argues that qualitative research is not necessarily concerned with bias elimination, but with awareness. Finally, the data in this study are somewhat self-representative and retrospective, thereby further limiting validity and generalization. Despite these limitations,
I used trustworthy techniques and interview protocols to the best of my ability, thereby reducing the potential counter-productive effects on participants. I practiced the interview with a colleague and received feedback to ensure the tone was calm and the questions were unbiased or leading. Furthermore, the data presented an intimate and real glimpse into the lives of these students, and provided important insights and findings for future research to address the needs, concerns, and barriers that first-generation college students face at highly selective institutions.

Conclusion

The goal of this qualitative portraiture research study was to understand the experience of first-generation Vietnamese-American students at a highly selective institution, and understand how these students navigate this elite college environment. There was a wealth of quantitative and qualitative research on first-generation, low-income college students at 2-year and 4-year public and private institutions, low-graduation rates, and social and financial capital; however, these studies fail to address students in elite, highly selective private institutions. Are these students facing the same obstacles as those attending public institutions? Or are the participants’ experiences in this study completely different? How are the barriers the same or different?

My intention for this research project was to share data with researchers who are interested in this topic, and to add to the limited literature that currently exists. Additionally, my goal was to share the interviews with practitioners to develop strategies to help first-generation Vietnamese-American college students at their institution. It is important to create a diverse learning community and accept students from diverse backgrounds. However, it is critical for universities to support these students once they arrive on campus and give them the tools they need to be successful. I hope my research did just that: give schools greater insight into these
students’ unique experiences, and help these schools provide the kind of support that will allow first-generation students to serve as positive role models for future generations.

From the analysis conducted, four themes emerged regarding the experiences of these students. These themes were: (1) Overcoming Barriers, (2) Navigating Two Worlds, (3) Building Social and Cultural Capital, and (4) Parental Influence. It became clear that the students in the study overcame significant obstacles to make it to where they are today. Two students shared emotional stories of their parents and the considerable sacrifices they made to get them to college. While overcoming barriers constituted a large obstacle for students, it was only the beginning. Simply building up enough courage to pursue higher education was in itself a solitary and challenging endeavor. Four out of the five students in the study remembered having to go out of their way to find out more information about applying to college and the types of colleges that was available to them. All five students attended public schools that were overcrowded and lacked the resource and knowledge to support these students. All five students shared their stories of navigating in two different worlds, one that they grew up in and the new one they just came upon. These two worlds often clash and made it difficult for the students to navigate in them. The students recognized the need to meet people and learn from them. One participant shared that he went out of his way to meet people who were not like him in terms of socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, and interest. He believed that that is the way to build social and cultural capital at Ivy College. Finally, students shared that parents played a critical role in their decision to go to college. The students said it was not because their parents understood the college going process but rather they believed in their ability to go to college and do well. Many researchers have concluded that parental involvement is a viable predictor of postsecondary
aspirations (Hearn, 1984; Inoue, 1999). Chapter 4 will present in greater details the result of the research findings.
Chapter IV: Research Findings and Data Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative portraiture research study was to understand the experience of first-generation Vietnamese-American students at a highly selective liberal arts institution, and how they navigate the elite college environment. The participants involved in this study each provided richly descriptive narratives of their experiences, specifically their experiences as students in relation to their first-generation college student status. In this study, first-generation college student is defined as the first in their family to go to college, where neither one of their parents have a bachelor degree (Saenz et al., 2008). In this chapter, I will present the portraiture of each of the participants and explore the unique experiences each faced in their college environment.

The five participants in the study were current students at a highly selective four-year institution identified in this study by the pseudonym, Ivy College. The participants in this study were all traditional-age college students between the ages of 19-22 years old. At the time of the interviews, two were juniors, and three were seniors. Three of them were women and two were men. All of them self-identified as Vietnamese-American. All of the participants lived in on-campus housing, two were from the West Coast, one from the South, one from East Coast, and one from the Midwest. The students represented a wide variety of curricular interests. Of the five participants, two were in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields, two in the social sciences, and one in the humanities. These students were all pursuing a bachelor’s degree at Ivy College.

All of the participants received financial aid: federal, state, and institutional. Ivy College currently has a special financial aid program that seeks to remove economic barriers for students
who want to attend the institution. Two of the five participants were enrolled in a program for low-income students due to their parents’ income. These students received full financial aid to pay for their tuition, room and board, and received a stipend for books. Their parents were not required to contribute at all financially to their education. It is the institution’s effort to make sure students can afford to attend Ivy College, regardless of inability to pay for tuition and room and board (Admissions & Financial Aid, 2015). Overall, Ivy College has a very generous financial package for most students. Their financial aid program seeks to increase low- and middle-income students’ financial aid. According to their website, 70 percent of all students receive some form of financial aid and 100 percent graduate with no debt. About 20 percent of students’ families pay nothing for attending Ivy College if their parents have total incomes less than $65,000 (Admissions & Financial Aid, 2015). Additionally, families with incomes between $65,000 and $150,000 will contribute less than 10 percent of their income, and those with incomes above $150,000 will be asked to pay proportionately more than 10 percent (Admissions & Financial Aid, 2015).

These students have found support in family and friends, particularly from church or community leaders and guidance counselors. The participants expressed they received tremendous support from their teachers in their Advanced Placement classes in high school. At Ivy College, students received formal support from peer advisors, residential life staff, academic advisors, academic support offices, and the dean’s office.

Ivy College has around 20,000 students across the undergraduate, graduate, and professional schools. There are roughly 6,400 undergraduate students. Ivy College’s diverse student body makes it hard to describe the typical student. Students come from all 50 states and from over 80 countries. Ivy College students are active around campus with over 400 official
student organizations including extracurricular, co-curricular, and sports. In addition, there are many opportunities for students to volunteer at the local elementary and high schools. Over ninety-seven percent of Ivy College undergraduate students live on campus for all four years, creating a strong campus community and undergraduate experience (Anonymous, 2015).

Table 4: Participants demographic information:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Mai</th>
<th>John</th>
<th>Kim</th>
<th>Jimmy</th>
<th>Nicole</th>
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**Mai Nguyen-Nonprofit, Senior, Female**

Mai (a pseudonym) was a bright and cheery young Vietnamese-American woman who arrived at the interview for this study with a lot of energy and enthusiasm. She looked quite comfortable in casual jeans and a light sweatshirt. The interview took place in the early evening hours and like most college students, Mai was alert and awake, ready to tackle what was left of the day. Mai was wearing long straight black hair to her shoulders with bangs that touched the top of her glasses. Her oval, open face, yellow pinkish skin, and naturally happy smile gave the impression that Mai actually welcomed the opportunity to talk about her experience. Mai was familiar with me and expressed that she felt comfortable doing this interview with him. After a few minutes of explaining the purpose of the study and confidentiality agreement, the interview began.
Mai was a senior at Ivy College when she was interviewed for this research, studying Government and Migration Rights. Mai grew up in a working class neighborhood in Green City (pseudonym), a poor suburban town on the West Coast. Her father worked as a welder and her mother as a manicurist. She shared that all her parents’ friends had jobs in three narrow areas: waiters, construction workers, and house cleaners.

Green City has a population of 32,769 at the 2010 census. The racial makeup of Green City was over 40 percent White 10 percent African American, and 10.0 percent Asian. Hispanic or Latino comprised of over 60 percent According to the 2010 United States Census, Green City had a median household income of $47,769, with 17 percent of the population living below the federal poverty line.

Mai said that Green City was an interesting place to live because it was located in between beach cities, which were very affluent. She said, “We are the poor stepchild of these wealthy beach towns in California.” There were two high schools in her town. Her high school had 200 students and about 30 students went directly to a four year institution—that is about 15 percent of graduating seniors. She expressed that only 2 or 3 students go to elite schools or highly ranked public and private universities. “It’s interesting to see, to have a foot in both waters in the sense that I was attending a very poor school and ended up going to an ivy university.”

**Parents Living in Vietnam**

Mai’s mother grew up in an upper middle class family in the South of Vietnam. Her grandfather attended school in the United States. For a family to afford a U.S. education means
that the family was doing quite well in Vietnam, in terms of household income and social capital. Mai’s mother came to the United States by airplane because her grandfather was in the military, so they were sponsored by the U.S. government. Unlike most Vietnamese refugees who escaped Vietnam by boat, facing grave dangers, Mai’s mother was very fortunate in this respect. Even though Mai’s mother grew up in a well-educated family, once she came to the U.S. she did not go to school. Mai posited, “Once she came to America, it was too late. Her choices were slim.”

Her mother did not get support from her parents to go to school. Instead they preferred that she stayed home to take care of her children. She said her mother tried to go to college but the language gap was too great. As a result she became a manicurist. Some people felt it was not much a career pathway, especially living in the U.S., but to Mai’s parents, it was a way to make money without have to get a college degree.

Mai’s father was from a poor family in Vietnam. He worked in a factory and immigrated to the United States by boat during the second wave of immigration. After he arrived here, he attended a community college to learn English and gain some job skills. He ended up becoming a welder and worked for a manufacturing company. Mai said her father’s job was physically tough on him. “He’d come home with his hands soiled and oily or he’d get a cut.” He had a much tougher transition from Vietnam to the U.S. than his wife.

Mai expressed a strong interest in studying government because she wanted to mobilize poor working communities that “aren’t necessarily able to advocate for themselves through education.” Mai felt it was her responsibility to use her Ivy League degree to support poor communities, and to connect these families with resources. Growing up she did not meet any people with higher level professional jobs. She said, “We didn’t know lawyers among my
parents’ friends or in our neighborhood.” She mentioned that studying ethnicity and migration rights is important to her Vietnamese-American identity. She was interested in learning the mass migrations of Vietnamese refugees leaving their country to find new homes to settle down around the world. It allowed her to understand the patterns of how communities of color migrate to a place and why they choose to move to a particular place. She said that growing up she did not know anyone who was Korean, Chinese, and Japanese. “A lot of it was with Latino students and African American students…black students,” she shared.

Mai credited four people who were critical in her academic success and eventual acceptance to Ivy College. These people were her grandfather, her older sister, Will (pseudonym) her high school friend, and Jason (pseudonym), a guy she met at a conference at a highly selective institution. Mai admired her grandfather because he always inspired her to do well in school. “Show me your grades. Yours grades are high. Here’s $20.” She would remember the encouragement from him. Since Mai’s parents worked a lot she spent a lot of time with her grandparents. She said her grandfather was a motivating factor because, “He was more present all the time.” She said it was not something she blamed her parents for because they were working hard to provide for the family.

Mai’s older sister was four years older than her and attended highly ranked public college in the state where they lived. Her sister helped her with the college application and showed her how to apply for financial aid. Mai was always competitive with her sister. She said, “I felt I had to be doing better than my sister so I can prove to her and my parents that I could do better.” She said it was a friendly competition but it was also an important element that motivated her to do well in school and to seek out help when needed. Mai said her sister, “helped me pave the
Will was another person that had a big influence in Mai’s life. There were not many students from her high school that attended a four year college, never mind a prestigious school. Will was one of those classmates who excelled in everything and he attended Ivy College during Mai’s senior year in high school. Mai met him in Key Club and learned about leadership from him. Key Club is a high school organization sponsored by Kiwanis International. Key Club members perform acts of service in their communities. They also learn leadership skills by running meetings, planning projects, and holding elected leadership positions at the club, district, and international levels (www.keyclub.org, 2015). Mai became President of Key Club and later Lieutenant Governor, which allowed Mai to work across six different schools within her region. She said that that was where she met many people. She eventually became Key Club District Governor for the west coast region. This introduced her to even more people and gave her access to top leaders in those states. She credited Will for introducing her to Key Club because she would not have known about it without his suggestion and influence. He introduced her to people who were different from her-different races, ethnicity, socioeconomic classes, and educational levels. One of the people he introduced her to was Jason. Will also encouraged Mai to study hard, and to prepare for the SAT. Although she could not afford to take an SAT course, she was able to borrow her friend’s SAT preparation book to study.

Jason was from an affluent city located near an elite institution on the west coast. He came from a very different world from Mai’s. He lived in an affluent neighborhood, attended a private boarding school, and had parents who were executives at Fortune 500 companies. Mai
said, “He was telling me most people at his school got 2400 on their SAT scores, and most attended Ivy League schools.” She said the houses in his neighborhood were worth over $1 million, where the houses in her neighborhood were valued at $200,000. She was intrigued about his life of eating smoked salmon and caviar. This was a life that was different from Mai’s. However, Mai said she felt that Jason really cared about her, and they became very close friends in a short period of time. Jason accepted her background and took her under his wings by pushing her to do better in school and get a higher score on her SAT. One day he said to her, “Why is your SAT score only 1900. You can do much better. You can get a 2400.” She was shocked that he believed in her. She studied extra hard and raised her score by 200 points. He also encouraged her to apply of all the ivy leagues schools because “you just never know. You’d have a good chance.” Not only was Jason comfortable with the college application process, he knew how to make the college application competitive with Ivy Leagues schools. Jason attended a private school where he received support from his teachers, school counselors, and his peers. In addition, his school had workshops on the college application process, and applying to scholarships and financial aid for both students and parents. Furthermore, both of Jason’s parents attended highly selective colleges. Mai said that without Jason she would have never applied to Ivy College. “Through talking with him it seemed like everyone was doing it – everyone was applying to the Ivies. I thought I would just apply to the state universities.” This public university system is highly ranked among the public universities.

Mai shared that the entire Ivy College application process was unknown to her parents until she told them she was accepted. “I remember my dad cutting a watermelon and then I was just like, ‘Oh dad, I got into [Ivy College]. Then he’s like, oh, what? Wow. Okay. That’s cool. All right.” Mai said her father was very calm about the good news although she knew he was
very proud of her – proud of the fact that she did not ask them for help and did it on her own. She cried when she did not get accepted at an elite university on the east coast. At that moment she felt she wasn’t good enough for the ivy schools. But her outlook turned around when she soon received word that her acceptance to Ivy College and another highly selective university.

Mai explained to me that she did not want to burden her parents with the college process because she knew they were busy working and were always tired. She also knew that her parents would not have been able to help her with the college application process because they had never done it before. “It was the frustration of trying to explain to them. I get a little bit emotional. I wish I can explain it to them but it’s not an option,” she said. Mai’s frustration was not because she felt her parents did not support her but rather she wanted them to be part of this life changing experience for her. Another reason why her parents did not understand was because of the language barrier. She called it a technical language barrier.” She was more saddened by the fact that this was something important to her, and yet they were not able to understand what she was going through with the college application process. Mai said this feeling of sadness and frustration came out in other situations. She posited, “There’s just multiple times where I’ll share something and they’ll just ask a question that will really irritate me. Then I have to remind myself it’s a language barrier. It’s not that they don’t love me or they don’t appreciate me. I know they do.”

Mai described her first year at Ivy College in one work, “grueling.” She said, “I’d never do it again.” Some of the issues she dealt with were feeling a lack of belonging, feelings of isolation, inability to connect with her roommates and the Asian-American community, and lack of understanding from advisors and administrators. She felt at numerous times the “imposter
syndrome of trying to be everybody else.” She said it was an isolating feeling because nobody understood what she was going through.

Mai shared that people, especially her academic advisor, dismissed certain challenges she was facing. These challenges included being homesick, struggling with her academics, and trying to make friends. Her advisor would make comments like “oh, everyone deals with that.” Or: “You’ll acclimate.” Mai’s interactions with her peers were often awkward, and at times students expressed hostility toward her. She said, “Everyone at Ivy College had two homes except for this girl, but she’s international.” Mai was considered international because she looked non-White and therefore they considered her to be the exception to owning two homes. Mai said this really affected her first year experience at Ivy College because people around her were oblivious to her struggles and the challenges she faced in being a low-income first-generation student. It made her more distant from her peers, and she missed home.

Mai was emotional when she talked about joining the Asian American student organization to find community and solidarity. The Asian American student organization was a largest student run organization on-campus to provide a social space for Asian-American students. Mai said it was hard to fit in because the members in the organization made her feel even more self-conscious and some members told her that she was ungrateful for being given an opportunity for this great education. Furthermore, the experience of Asian-American students at Ivy College was broad and varied and therefore made it difficult for people to understand her situation. She did find other female Vietnamese-American students who spoke the same language as her and it made her feel safe. There were many discussions with her peers about race, and these conversations ended up being very raw and emotional. She felt she was either the
token Asian in a large group of White students or ended up being, “…the one having to educate everyone. I didn’t want to put up this mirror or just have to teach someone all the time. It was exhausting to explain to people about race.” She was also called by one of her closest friends “reverse racist.” This was where Mai was accused of saying that, “whiteness is the standard for everything.” Her friend said that Mai discriminated against White students because she had a chip on her shoulder. Mai said she learned from that experience because she thought only people of color experience racism. She never realized that White people experience racism in a different way.

Mai said her social and personal experience at Ivy College got better as she found a community of people from all backgrounds and experiences. However, she was not prepared for the academic rigor of Ivy College. She said that as a senior she still struggled with academics. She always put academics first but it wasn’t enough to do well. Although she did well in the public high school she attended her preparation for Ivy College was lackluster compared to many her peers who attended private preparatory schools. She said people talked about grades as if everyone was doing well. “Did you hear about grade inflation?” one student would quip. “I was just like ‘Well, if my grades were inflated, I’m still getting B’s.” She wondered if every one of her classmates were honor students. She said, “If everyone was getting a 3.7 GPA where does that put me? And that’s with grade inflation.” She felt out of place and avoided the conversation around academics and grades with her friends. “I think it’s a personal thing I’m challenged with and I hope to resolve once I graduate.” She said the academic support at Ivy College was not there.
Mai’s academic advisor has a background in history of science, which is different from her major. “I cannot really relate (with my advisor).” This proved to be very problematic for Mai and she could not get sound advice from him unlike the other students who got his attention when they were applying for medical schools. She said that when she shared with him that she was really sad, he would dismiss it as “Oh, everyone experiences that.” She did not connect with him and doubted that he connected with her. She said, “It would have been nice to have an advisor who was more similar in that sense.”

Mai’s social life at Ivy College

Mai had a lot of friends at Ivy College. She had two types of friends: friends from her classes, extra-curricular activities, and volunteer work, and the second type were what she considered “real friends.” Mai met a lot of people through her extra-curricular activities and classes. These were people that she got along with and with whom she had daily interactions. Some were people with whom she studied, and others she would plan programs, events, and conferences with. Most people in this category tended to be “wealthy, affluent, and White.” She said she was quite aware about “these things.” She did not consider these people as truly her friends because she thought her interactions with them were more transactional than meaningful. She did not share personal stories with them nor did she come to them for emotional support. She said that in a way they served a “different” function in her life.

The second type of friends was those whom she considered people she could rely on when she was feeling down or dealing with personal issues. She considered her roommates her true friends. They were all Vietnamese-American students, came from public high schools, and were low-income. She said, “My friends tend to come from the same experience and
background as me. They make me feel comfortable, and they understand me.” She felt comfortable talking to her friends about being first-generation and low-income. They became a valuable support system for her.

Mai said she worked hard to try and branch out to socialize with people outside her “real friends” group, other than the people who she worked on volunteer projects with. “It’s very hard,” she said. “I feel like a traitor or cop-out because I feel like I’m doing something I don’t really feel comfortable doing.” However, with the support of her friends she did meet people outside her usual circle. Mai felt it was important to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. She liked taking on new challenges and this gave her new things to tackle. For example, Mai was always uncomfortable talking about socio-economic class with people she did not know well. However, she was able to build up courage and comfort to have the conversation on this topic. Another example Mai shared was that people made assumptions that she was similar to other affluent international Asian students. She would get annoyed and often ignored them. However, Mai learned to be patient and explain to them where she was from. She has learned to be proud of her upbringing and family background by sharing that information with other students.

Mai spent a great deal of time in her interview talking about social class. She said her roommate was “very” affluent. One of her roommates was an international student from a country in Asia. Mai said the differences between them were many. Her roommate wanted to work at Goldman Sachs, a global banking and investment firm, and Mai wanted to work in the not-for-profit sector. Her roommate’s family held power in the country she came from. Mai said, “When I visited her country her dad knew everyone. Her uncle’s a billionaire. It’s just
mind-boggling that we can even be friends.” Mai expressed earlier in the interview that she did not connect well with students from a different social class and racial background. But when she talked about her international Asian friend, it sounded as if she connected well with her.

Mai felt strongly that one of the main reasons she had a good connection with her friend was that they both had the same values: family, education, and loyalty. She said it did not mean it was always easy to navigate their friendship. Mai gave an example of her friend purchasing a bottle of champagne for $52 and forgot her credit card, so Mai had to pay for it. Mai felt uneasy asking her friend to pay the money back but it was a lot of money for her in comparison. Mai does not buy expensive things very often. “I work hard for my money. I don’t ask for money from my parents.” She ended by saying, “There’s just a lot that goes into that.” Money conversations came up often in Mai’s circle of friends, and when it does come up it is often difficult to have that conversation.

The topic of being first-generation came up often, both in the classroom and outside the classroom. When it would come up in the classroom, Mai felt a need to defend herself and other first-generation students. “I still need to prove myself again.” She tried to speak up about her experience of being first-generation but she was afraid people would judge her. “Am I not good enough because I’m first-gen?” She said that she goes back and forth on whether being first-generation is a good thing or bad thing. She followed up that statement by saying “It’s just a thing. I just have to deal with it.” Mai expressed being very conscientious about what she says and the meaning behind it. One could see that she was still struggling with the label first-generation college student. At times she was proud of that position, and at other times she was not so sure. She said, “It’s definitely a roller coaster. Who can I talk to about getting help on an
essay without the fear of being judged? I think about it a lot and it makes me sad. Then after that I take the next step and ask someone I trust to help me.” Mai seemed to be able to find a solution every time she felt unmotivated. She was able to summon the ability to navigate these confusing situations on a regular basis. At the end of the conversation on first-generation status, Mai quipped, “It’s not a negative label to be called first-gen. It comes off as an accomplishment in realizing, accepting that there are more obstacles and being okay with that and things are possible. Goals are possible.” This was not a ringing endorsement from Mai, but it sounded like she found some peace with being first-generation.

Mai was graduating that May from Ivy College and the topic of finding a job came up. Unlike some of her other friends and classmates who were going into banking and consulting, Mai wanted to work in a non-for-profit or government agency. She was ambivalent as to whether to go for a job that paid well or one that gave her joy and excitement. She was conflicted because she could help her family out financially if she got a job that paid her well. Additionally, she felt a sense of responsibility to her family to “make it big” and do something with cache and name recognition. She said Ivy College had given her the opportunity to do better for herself and her family and getting jobs in banking or consulting would get her in the right direction financially.

Mai said her parents had never enjoyed what they did for work but it was a means to justify the end. She said, “They just do it because they love me and my sister, and want to provide for us. Making money has always been their main objective. Pursuing a passion feels very self-indulgent to them.” Again, Mai felt very conflicted because on one hand she did not want to follow the path her parents had taken, and yet on the other hand she felt responsible for
making the most out of her Ivy College diploma. She also mentioned that she felt guilty because her parents did not have health care and that her father had not gone to the doctor in over 20 years. Furthermore, they did not have a retirement plan and would eventually rely more and more on her and her sister for financial support in their old age when they can no longer work for a living.

Mai feels pressured by her parents to get a good paying job. She recently had a conversation with her father because of the impending graduation.

“Dad, what do you want me to do?”

He’s like, “I want you to make money.”

“Okay. How much money do you want me to make?”

He’s like, “You should be able to make $300,000 coming out of Ivy College.”

Mai was concerned because that amount of money was unrealistic, even for an Ivy College graduate. “I share this example to some of my friends because they don’t understand what a job search is like. They always had these high expectations that I need to find a well-paid job. The need for money is very much there.” Mai received an offer to work for Teach For America as a teacher, with a salary of $40,000. When she told her parents they said, “Why would you do that? We don’t support you. It’s only $40,000. You’re wasting your Ivy College degree.”

Mai mentioned in her interview that gender often played an important role in her identity growing up, in addition to being a first-generation college student. “It was difficult to navigate those two identities at Ivy College, being Asian and first-generation.” As most students like her, Mai was trying to navigate moving from working class to the educated class, and that her future
will be better than her parent’s. Additionally, Mai lamented that when people saw her, all they saw was a petite Asian female, and would often make comments like “oh, you’re so cute and Asian.” She said she wished she did not have to deal with that offensive labeling because it denoted to her that she was weak and meek, and did not have an opinion. She was often offended by these comments and did not know how to respond to them.

In the last few minutes of the interview, Mai shared with me an example that she said encapsulated her overall experience at Ivy College. In her sophomore year at Ivy College, her mother fractured her left knee in two areas, and she had to leave campus to help support her mother. She spent 16 hours at the hospital talking to the doctors and nurses, and translating back to her parents what the medical professionals were sharing with her. Before this incident her mother had never been to a doctor other than going to a Vietnamese doctor, where she would pay upwards of thousands of dollars in cash and received very little medical care. Mai questioned the Vietnamese doctor’s ability by sharing that “who knows what kind of medical care my mom received with the Vietnamese doctor.” She said the experience of going to a “regular” hospital with her mother, advocating for her medical needs, and nursing her mom back to good health taught her the importance of self-advocacy and determination. She said her parents had worked so hard to get her to this place in her life, and it was now time for her to give back and help her parents. Mai said, “My parents helped me up to this point, now it’s my turn. They are passing the baton to me.”

Analyzing Mai’s Portrait

Mai’s interview displayed many interesting intersections of her identity, of overcoming obstacles and challenges, forging connections and relationships, strong parental influence, and,
the most salient, the theme of living in two distinct worlds. Mai discussed on many occasions in her interview the complexities of someone navigating two universes that were often conflicted with each other: attending an under-resourced public high school and now attending the elite Ivy College, her status as a low-income working class student versus her roommate’s affluent status, and with her relationship with Jason, whose family lived in a million dollar house compare to her hometown where homes cost one-fifth of Jason’s neighborhood.

Mai’s ethnic identity revealed her ambivalence of having discussions about race and class with her peers. She wanted to be taken seriously not just as an Asian-American female, but as an intelligent ambitious woman who has opinions. She was often mistaken by her peers as someone who comes from money because she hung out with other Asian students whose families were affluent back in their home country. Many of her White peers saw Mai as a confident and smart Asian student on campus. Mai expressed that these same students expect her to do well due to their belief in the Model Minority Myth, where Asians are expected to do well and not cause any problems. Mai felt the opposite. She often thought to herself, “How can they think that I come from money? Is it because I have Asian friends who are rich? They would be shocked if they knew I was a first-gen and on full financial aid.” Navigating these two worlds has continued to put a burden and stress on Mai’s daily activities. She said, “I just want to be like other students and enjoy my friends and my classes.”

Finally, Mai’s parents have always been a constant influence in her life. Mai understood the sacrifice her parents made in order for her to have a better life than they did. She appreciated the support and comfort they gave her. However, there were many occasions where Mai was frustrated with her parents because they could not do more for her, such as help her with the
college application or to connect her with other professionals in her field of study. Mai shared there were times when her parents would ask her a question and she would be short with them because she expected them to know the answers. Afterwards, she felt guilty for being rude to them. Mai continues to navigate between the world her parent were living in and the new world she has created for herself.

**John Tran-Entrepreneur, Senior, Male**

John arrived a few minutes late to the interview because he was confused about the location. John was polite in his apology and was very calm and collected. It was the interviewer’s first time meeting John, who appeared to be very friendly. He came across as a confident young man, wearing jeans that were one size too big for him and a Led Zeppelin black sweatshirt. He apologized for dressing sloppy due to staying up until all night studying for a computer science exam.

John was born in a big city in the South, and was raised there his entire life until he left for college. John’s parents escaped Vietnam in the early 1980s around the time of the second wave of Vietnamese escaping Vietnam on fishing boats. When they arrived in the United States his parents had nothing in their possession except for a few articles of clothing and a few dollars in their pockets. “I remember my dad telling me he came with some boxers on and a t-shirt and my mom a dress…they had like five dollars with them and lived in a refugee camp for a while,” John reminisced.
John’s hometown

John’s hometown is a suburban town located 25 miles northeast of a large urban town in the South. It is the ninth most populous city, and is the headquarters for many large automobile, food, and technological corporations. John remembered growing up with not a lot of “things,” such as clothing, toys, and candies. They did not go on family trips nor did his parents spend a lot of time with him. They were always busy working two to three jobs and trying very hard to make ends meet. “Growing up I wouldn’t say we had much. We didn’t have a choice but to be frugal.” John shared.

John said the public high schools in his hometown were competitive, and he worked hard to be competitive with his application to the Academy of Mathematics and Science (AMS). He knew that many families had the resources to help their children get additional tutoring for the entrance exam to AMS and these families knew people and had connections to the school. He or his family had no connections. However, he was able to do it on his own, and it made him proud. Instead of spending time at home John immersed himself in his academics and got involved in the math and science organization on his campus. He said a big turning point for him in terms of academics was when he was accepted to AMS. According to their website AMS is, “…a unique residential program for high school-aged students who are high achievers and interested in mathematics and science. While living at this academy, students in this two-year program complete a rigorous academic curriculum of college coursework at a local university.” While a student at AMS, John excelled not just in his academics but he also took on various leadership roles on campus. John was recognized for his work and received numerous awards
and accolades. In addition, he got involved with conducting research with professors at the local university.

**John’s Parents**

John’s parents immigrated to the United States when they were teenagers. His mother grew up in an upper middle class family because her father was a business owner. They lived a comfortable life until the communists took over and everything was taken from her family. John’s father, on the other hand, was poor. He was the eldest of five children and took over parental responsibilities when both of his parents passed away. When John’s parents arrived in the United States they both worked hard; at times each one of them would work two jobs to make ends meet. His mother worked in a restaurant by day and a hospital at night. While working two jobs his mother took classes at the local community college to improve her English and ended up getting a secretary certificate. She worked as a secretary at an insurance company. His father also worked two jobs, attended the local community college, and eventually got his certificate in engineering. John said that his parents only socialized with people within the family, and that they did not trust people outside the family. It was difficult for them to make new friends in his hometown because of language barriers and a lack of social connections. It was the reason why they stuck to hanging out with members of the Vietnamese community who spoke the language. Their acclimation to the United States was difficult for them because the South at that time did not have many Vietnamese refugees, unlike places such as California and Minnesota. They focused most of their time and energy on working and going to school.
John’s College Application

John spent a lot of time during the interview talking about the college application process because it was a daunting process. He felt alone and did not get as much support from his school on his college and financial aid application. His parents did not even know he was applying to college. He said, “I just did it because my friends were doing it. But I didn’t know what I was doing and didn’t get any help from anyone.” There was no one to turn to. He was unclear on how to write a resume and a friend shared his resume with John so he could copy it. John said the college essay was the most difficult part of the application process. He said, “It took me months to write those essays. I really spent a lot of time just writing essays, throwing them away, and just didn’t feel they were good enough. I never thought I could do it.” Because John did not know what he was doing he applied to all the schools his friends were applying to.

Overall, John applied to 15 schools and to his surprise, received admissions to all of them. He said, “I got into every school I applied to and it was kind of a shock for me.” Among the 15 schools to which he was accepted were several highly selective institutions located within and outside his home state. He ended up attending Ivy College because of its generous financial aid package. He also chose Ivy College because it was a Level 1 research institution, and he had done a lot of research in high school. At the beginning he was interested in Biotechnology as a field of study, but later changed to business and entrepreneurship.

When John shared with his parents that he got accepted to all the schools he applied to, they were very proud of him. They cried from the excitement and the realization that their son would get a good education overwhelmed them. John said, “I called my parents and my mom was…she was crying so much.” I asked John why he thought his parents got so emotional, and
John responded that they always believed in him. He said they also wanted the best for him and that he deserved it for all his hard work but they did not have the resources to help me. They were proud that I did it all by myself. He added, “I guess I didn’t have much anywhere and this was the first time anything has ever happened in my family. This is a chance to pursue my dreams and for me to leave this and break the routine, I guess.” What John is referring to as “a chance to leave this…” is the chance to live the American dream and do what his parents were unable to do – get a college degree at an elite institution, and eventually land a good paying job. Many first-generation students and their families’ dream of upward mobility and a ticket to attend a great school is the first step in realizing that dream.

John said his parents had worked extremely hard to provide a great life for him and his brother. They gave up their lives in Vietnam to come here for a better life. They were thankful for the generous support the U.S. had given them. John said, “It didn’t even really matter how much we had or what we had. They’re in America, that was enough for them, and that was great.” John’s parents were always humble, and they do not take anything for granted. Because John’s parents never had an opportunity to pursue a college degree, they have put all their effort and energy into supporting and taking care of him and his brother. John said his mother never got a chance to be a lawyer and it made him sad. John learned a great deal from his parents, about hard work, perseverance, and being humble. He is grateful to his parents for teaching him these values as a young boy.

**John at Ivy College**

John shared that he always wanted to be a doctor but decided to lean more towards biotechnology because it combines science and business. “I came into school studying Biology
and ended up taking business type classes and really enjoyed it.” John also worked during his time at Ivy College, at times working 10-15 hours a week to help pay for books and going out with his friends. At first, John took a job at the library because they paid their student workers well, but he soon realized that startup technology companies also paid well. As a result, he worked for an education technology start-up near Ivy College. John became the apprentice to the CEO and was able to follow him around. He said, “I learned everything he did.” At first John was working on marketing materials and doing simple things like delivering mail and making coffee runs, but eventually he took on more complex projects. He started taking on product development projects and eventually business development sales work. John said he was hooked, and loved his experience at the education start-up firm. He was able to learn from someone who believed in him. The CEO gave him many great opportunities to learn and grow. This was during his freshman year at Ivy College.

By after gaining experience and skills at the education start-up firm, John decided to start two student organizations on campus to get other students interested in start-up endeavors. During his sophomore year he found the Biotechnology Association and Ivy Adventures Association (IAA), which is an entrepreneurship group. Through IAA, John was able to leverage his relationships and brought in many speakers to Ivy College’s campus. The organization grew from 10 members to over 100. Many of his peers were impressed by his ability to bring in top CEOs from start-up firms. He also used those connections to his advantage. John was interested in learning how to be a venture capitalist, where one would go out and look for money to help start new companies. John said there are no clear pathways to doing this work, and getting hired in consulting firms was nearly impossible, particularly for a young inexperienced undergraduate. These firms often have a structured recruiting cycle where
they recruit graduating seniors in the fall semester, and John was only in his second year. Knowing this, John emailed as many people as he could think of, who were in the sector, asking if he could work for them. He also leveraged the connections he made through the entrepreneurship organization. During this time, he met one graduate student at the business school who raised $5 million during his second year, and was able to start up a new company. Eventually, the graduate student asked him to join his company in California to work for one summer. He went to work for the start-up company, and learned a great deal that summer. He also made some important connections with people in the start-up sector, and was offered a second summer job. “I had a lot of fun. I learned a lot and closed some deals.” He went between two jobs that summer, and made enough money to help his parents out. John said he worked between 12-15 hours a day. After the summer ended, the second firm offered him a full time job, which he called his “dream job.” However, if he took the offer he would have to quit school. After thinking it over carefully, John decided to go back to school to finish out his senior year at Ivy College. He said the offer was enticing because he felt strongly that if Mark Zuckerberg was able to do it, perhaps he could as well. He also felt the pressure from his parents to finish college and get his degree. In the end, John admitted his parents had a strong influence in his final decision to go back to school.

John spent a good deal of his interview talking about his experience working in these various firms. He was excited and felt it was his calling. “I’d never imagined in my wildest dreams that I would end up with this kind of work. It never existed in my world until I got to Ivy College.” The knowledge and interpersonal skills John gained over the summer clearly helped him make connections with people in the industry. He was able to navigate between the college environment and professional environment, and he was humble and appreciative of all that had
been given to him. He expressed that it all started with his experience at his high school (AMS) where teachers taught him a great deal about working hard, reaching out to connect with people if he wanted something, and to never be afraid.

John talked about his group of friends at Ivy College. He said they were mostly people from his business classes and extracurricular activities, particularly student organizations. John’s friends came from all backgrounds and experiences. One group of friends had similar interests in business, technology, and entrepreneurship. Another group of friends were people who were interested in music and the arts. He said the two groups of friends did not always mesh well together so he tried to keep them separate.

In high school, John thought all his successes were the result of dumb luck. However, since he came to Ivy College, he came to realize that there was some luck but there was also hard work involved. He used to think that money was everything because of his family’s low-income background, and that he needed to make as much money as possible after college. He felt strongly that this would allow him to support his parents. However, after going through three years of college John has learned from his mentors, his friends, and just being around the college environment that money is not the most important thing. Ivy College has really pushed him to think beyond making money, but rather to find something he was passionate at, whether or not he it came with a big paycheck. All his friends said money will come, eventually. John matured in his first couple years Ivy College because of the people he was surrounded by and the opportunities he had been given. At Ivy College, he was allowed to take risks and try out new things. As a result, he was not afraid to fail. In fact, John felt that it was important for him to fail when he is still young. This way, the consequences were not so damaging.
When John first arrived at Ivy College as a freshman he was quite scared. He thought everyone at Ivy was wealthy, white, and legacy. He said he was completely wrong, adding, “I was proven wrong. I ended up in an incredible room with people that really inspired me in very different fields.” He felt most students were down to earth but possessed talents and intelligence. He said the college environment was very different from his hometown in terms of people’s open-mindedness and feeling like they can do anything. John was not worried about his grades while in college. He took courses in biology, chemistry, computer science, but he also took classes in humanity, sociology, and music. He dabbled in singing, acting, and played the guitar. His fear of trying new things went away after he arrived at Ivy College. He saw other people doing interesting things, and he would copy them. As a result of trying out new things and taking classes in various disciplines, he met many different people who had widely varying interests. He said this exposure to such variety of things made him a better person.

John said he dated a girl whose culture was different from his own. She was Caucasian, Jewish, and grew up in a large Midwestern town. Her parents were divorced. While she did not grow up with great wealth, her parents were well educated. They both had attended Ivy League schools. John felt a strong connection with her because they both enjoyed connecting with people at Ivy College. John remembered how lucky he was to have met his girlfriend, and to get a chance to learn from her.

When it comes to talking about wealth and affluent friends, John does not feel comfortable sharing his experience with them. He expressed, “I avoid talking about wealth at all times. I try to never bring it up because other people don’t want to talk about it.” He thinks that wealthy people do not want to talk about the subject because they feel guilty that they have more
than others, and this will perhaps be perceived as an injustice. John expressed that his parents
did not know anyone who was an executive, and therefore did not teach him how to navigate this
type of complex environment. They never had a conversation with him about race and class. He
felt that his more affluent friends were well connected because their parents were successful, and
they knew other successful people. John said Ivy College changed everything for him. “Ivy has
opened so many doors for me because it can. I can meet with CEOs, executives, and talk to them
like any other students on campus. Back at home I would never get these opportunities. In a way
Ivy leveled the playing field for me.” He said he had to work very hard to make these
connections, unlike some of his peers who were already well connected. “Some of my
roommates and friends who come from more wealthy backgrounds, and every summer their
parents set up internships and job opportunities for them. They didn’t really worry about finding
mentors.” John reminisced. John said he had to work extra hard to get the summer internships
and fellowships. However, he does not resent all the hard work. It had paid off for him, and
made him feel accomplished.

In describing his freshman year at Ivy College, John said he was frustrated and felt like
he did not understand how to connect with his professors and administrators. He saw his friends
meeting with these people, and did not know how to set up an appointment with them.
Eventually, John attended a workshop on networking and set up his first meeting with a senior
administrator. He said from that point on, he made a promise to himself that he would set up at
least 1-2 meetings per week. He eventually connected with CEOs and executives in Fortune 500
companies. John shared, “I think the frustration I experienced at the beginning was a blessing in
disguise because it challenged me to push myself beyond my comfort zone. It set me up for
working harder.” John’s sentiment is widely shared by other first-generation college students.
Before coming to college, most students have not had the opportunity of connecting with people outside their family and outside their teachers at school. With this new environment, they have worked hard to understand how to have conversations with people.

John was asked to reflect on what it means to him to be a first-generation college student. He replied, “I think most of them don’t realize I’m first-gen.” He further explained that perhaps first-generation status had more of an impact on his inability to talk to his parents about college, rather than his ability to succeed in college. His parents were not able to give him advice on academic courses, extracurricular activities, and connect him with internships and jobs. However, John felt strongly that at Ivy College everyone was the same. He said, “In school, we’re like all in the same situation, like Ivy has really leveled the playing field.” There are times when John wished he could talk to his parents about politics or global warming, and about the economy or scientific discovery. However, John realized his parents would never understand these topics nor would they understand the new environment he was currently in.

John said there were times when he does not know how to pronounce a word or mispronounced it. He was often embarrassed at the moment, but he tries to make an effort to learn and say it correctly the next time. “Like there are some things that I pronounced wrongly all the time. I had no idea until I came to Ivy. My parents just said it that way, and no one ever corrected me.” He said now that he is at Ivy there is pressure for him to help his family members and relatives back at home to correct them when they say something incorrect. He said everyone in the family, including his relatives, were looking to him for answers, mainly because he was attending an elite private college. “There’s a lot of pressure there. Sometimes I just shut down.”
John carried with him a sense of duty to his family, community, and friends back at home. He felt strongly he needed to help people understand what it was like to attend a school like Ivy College, especially the young people who aspire to attend a similar school. Having conversations with his relatives around career goals and aspirations can be difficult at times. They all wanted him to go to medical school and become a doctor. They have no clue what an entrepreneur does or what start-up companies are. Many immigrants from Vietnam were often poor and illiterate. Most have not had a chance to have a formal education, let alone attend a highly selective college. Similar to his own family, they came to America with no money, no possessions, and no college degree. Many immigrant families aspire to get a good education and a good job. Therefore, for many of these Vietnamese families, being a doctor denotes the highest level of success, financial stability, and societal status. However, John saw it differently. He defined success as having the ability to convince people to believe in him, thereby investing millions of dollars in his company. Furthermore, he wanted to prove to his family and relatives that one can be successful by taking an alternative career pathway that is typical of that of the Vietnamese way.

John said he enjoyed dancing as an extracurricular activity because it helped him handle the stress of college and the pressure of having to be successful. He said as a child he was quiet, and people made fun of him, especially his aunts and uncles. He said dancing allowed him express himself in ways that he was not able to before. It gave him confidence to take on other challenges in life, and to stand up for himself. He said gaining confidence has allowed him to be in touch with his creative side, which he never had an opportunity to explore as a child. John spent a lot of time in college doing many fun activities with his friends such as wine drinking, trying out new restaurants, and dancing. He said academics were not on his priority list. “I
prioritize my work, extracurricular, social life, and finally school.” John was not too worried about his grades because it was not the most important thing. He worked hard to get to Ivy College, so he does not have to prove to himself and others that he is capable of doing the work.

John said many people equated good grades to being Asian. He further elaborated that so many times people tell him he was smart because he was Asian. It bothered him that in order for him to be smart he had to be Asian. He wondered why he cannot just be smart because he was smart not because he was Asian. Consequently, he understood where those feelings came from. He felt strongly that many Asian students spend all their time on academics because they all want to end up being doctors and lawyers. As a result, they end up not enjoying themselves in college and would miss those four very important years. “I see a lot of them go into being doctors, lawyers, and finances because they want to make money. I see a lot of problems with that because they are doing it as a means rather than as an end.” He said that he is worried for his fellow Asian peers because they were choosing professions based on what their parents want to them, not necessarily what makes them happy. John said he has made a concerted effort to go against the idea of doing something just for financial gain.

John explained with intensity that he does not think much about his race or ethnicity in college. He said he hangs out with more Asian-American people outside of school than he does at Ivy College. He realized early on when he came to Ivy College that Asian-American students tend to only socialize with other Asian-American students. They tended to not spread out to other race and ethnic groups. John made a decision at that point to not follow what other Asian-American students were doing. Instead he opted to meet people with backgrounds and
experiences different from his own. John did not want to be categorized as just an Asian guy but rather he wanted people to see his identity beyond his race.

John said he has experienced a lot of micro-aggressions in his life. Micro-aggressions are everyday slights and putdowns from one person to another around race, gender, and socio-economic class. John said it was common for people to say something like this to him on a regular basis: “This class has a lot of Asians, so it’s going to be hard, or it’s going to be bad.” In high school, he experienced racism and discrimination more blatantly. At Ivy, racism was much more nuanced. He said this kind of racism was more difficult to deal with. He said he felt angry when people treated him like a second-class citizen. John did not know how to fight back and respond to people when they say something that was offensive. “I can’t say anything against racist remarks because it made you feel like an outcast. This kind of aggression was really about making you feel like you’re not good enough. It made you feel like there’s something different about you that can never be reconciled, and that you can never live in a very white dominated society as an equal.” Listening to John talk about racism was striking, especially in light of what he shared earlier in the interview, of trying to fit in and meet people who are not like him. What John was sharing was a contrast to what he was experiencing every day, in terms dealing with micro-aggressions and racism. Similarly, John has experienced racism from other Asian students. They observed that he did not hang out with other Asian students and therefore assumed he was not proud of his own race. His ex-girlfriend was Caucasian, Jewish, and did not fit the typical profile of a Vietnamese girlfriend. This was objectionable to some of his Asian peers.
In reflecting on his overall experience at Ivy College, John said he was grateful to have received full financial aid, and to be able to focus on his education rather than finding a job to make ends meet. He has met a lot of people that he otherwise would not have a chance to meet, people that his parents were not able to introduce him to, and those who operate in very different social and influential circles. He said Ivy College has leveled the playing field for him by giving him the opportunity to work hard, and allowed him to access certain social spaces. John shared, “I would have never known or been able to connect with anyone but Ivy has opened so many doors for me to do that.” John said he had to work hard to get the things he wanted and that he did not want just a handout. “Yes, I had to take advantage of those resources. It didn’t just come to me. I couldn’t just sit back and get it, but knowing that there’s an ability to do it, I think that’s what’s powerful about being at Ivy; you can do anything you want.”

Analyzing John’s Portrait

John espoused the epitome of straddling two worlds, the first world was his humble up-bringing and not having much in the way of personal possessions growing up, and the other world was the new environment at Ivy College where John amassed a high level social and cultural capital. He took every opportunity to meet people, whether they were students from student entrepreneurial organization or CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. John openly admitted that he did not always know quite how navigate in these unfamiliar spaces, but he worked hard at learning from peers and professionals who gave him a chance. John was a quick learner but he also worked extremely hard to win people over. He came across as a confident person who recognized his luck for having the opportunity to attend Ivy College. He pushed himself to meet
as many people as possible and learned ways to communicate with them without feeling afraid, intimidated, or out of place.

John’s relationship with his parents was strong, in that they supported him in what he wanted to do with his life. However, he wished at times they could understand what he was going through. He clearly recognized his parents were not able to connect him with professional people or help him navigate the college environment. It was noticeable from the interview that John started building his social and cultural capital through his involvement with social clubs and doing research with college professors at his local high school. He continued this at Ivy College by starting his own social organization and reaching out to business executives for job opportunities. Throughout his years at Ivy College, John developed relationships with students and administers on-campus, as well as professionals off-campus who gave him opportunities to work for them. John expressed that he started developing relationship building skills in high school. “I think it started in high school where my teachers taught me a great deal about working hard, reaching out to connect with people, and to never be afraid.”

Kim Do-Mental Health Advocate, Senior, Female

Kim arrived at the interview room with her head down and her long black hair covering her face. She looked slightly tired and did not look the interviewer in the eye upon greeting him. Kim appeared out of breath, and her oversize shirts and pants were covering her slightly oversized figure. She appeared a little nervous having just come from a class where she had taken a midterm. She expressed that she was not completely prepared for the exam. The class was on mental health disorders and the psychological effect these disorders have on people.
Kim was born in Vietnam and immigrated to the United States when she was six years old with her family. She first arrived in a rural town on the West Coast. This town was a predominantly White town. In her first grade class, she was the only Asian girl and only one of two Asians in the entire school. This changed when she and her family moved to a large city approximately sixty miles away.

**Race Relations According to Kim**

Kim spent the next fifteen minutes talking about race relations in America. She did not understand why certain people were not proud of their own heritage, and where they came from. Kim said it was one thing to try and assimilate to the new culture but it did not mean one had to give up their own culture. Kim referenced reading short stories from Amy Tan, who was a prolific writer that focused on assimilation and acculturation after moving from China to the United States. Amy Tan was embarrassed by her mother and grandmother. Kim said she does not agree with Amy Tan’s perspective on feeling embarrassed with who she was. “I really hated Amy Tan’s stuff. I thought it was really disrespectful, and I used to be very angry at this idea of Asians, or just people of color being ashamed of their heritage in order to assimilate.” Kim posited that she never felt the pressure to assimilate because she grew up in an ethnically diverse environment.

**Kim’s Parents**

Kim identified as half Chinese and half Vietnamese. Her father was ethnic Chinese but was born in Vietnam. “I wouldn’t really identify with my Chinese half as much. I was raised in more of a Vietnamese household. I can speak Vietnamese and Cantonese.” In the 1940s and
1950s during China’s Cultural Revolution and Great Depression, many Chinese people escaped the country and traveled south to Vietnam to find jobs and started a new life. Kim believed her grandparents did exactly that, although her father moved back to China for a short period of time before finally settling back in Vietnam.

Kim believed her parents did quite well in Vietnam. They were truly middle class. “My dad was a businessman in Vietnam. He worked in shipping and was relatively successful…enough to buy two houses.” Kim’s mom was a manager at a yogurt shop, and went to school to be an accountant. When Kim’s parents met, they had a comfortable lifestyle. However, after they moved to the United States things changed. They no longer had their business. They had no friends and no connections. They did not speak, read, or write in English. They were far away from their friends and family. “Coming here my mom worked as a cashier in an Asian supermarket, and my dad worked as a print technician, I guess. They worked long hard hours and never did anything fun.” Kim realized that her parents made a big sacrifice for her and her sister’s future. Kim shared that in Vietnam, she considered them upper middle class but once they got here they were “definitely working class or lower class.” Kim said they had to start from scratch and it was very difficult. As a result of the sacrifice and hard work her parents made, Kim said she and her sister were always required to go to college. Kim said her mom would usually say, “Oh, you have to go to college. You have to go to a good college. You have to find a way to pay for that education because we’re not going to pay for you. You have to get a good job.” Kim understood that this was a typical pressure an immigrant parent would give their children. She thought to herself, “How was I going to find a way to pay for my college education? Where do I go for help? Who can I turn to?” Kim said these were the questions that were running through her head every time her mother mentioned college.
Kim said access to free or affordable healthcare was difficult. The paperwork to apply for government subsidized health benefits was hard to figure out, and her parents were always afraid they would make too much money to qualify for these benefits. However, they did not make enough money to afford medical insurance on their own. Kim said her parents were always worried about healthcare and her mother would try and look for jobs that paid her cash so she did not have to file taxes on her earnings. “She loved finding jobs that would only pay cash. I guess these were the types of issues you encounter when you’re working class.” This stress and pressure affected Kim because they were worried that if one of them got sick they would not get the appropriate medical care they needed to get better. Kim said growing up there were many things that worried her. As the older of the two children in the family, Kim had to fill out all the paperwork for everyone in the family; whether it was an application for public assistance or application for a job, Kim did it all. She would go on doctor’s appointments and even interviews with her parents so that she could translate for them. Kim said she was always worried that she would mess up on the application and put down the incorrect information. In looking back she did quite well and felt proud to help her family through some tough times in their lives.

**Kim’s High School Experience**

Kim’s move to the town was a big culture shock. “All of a sudden, there were a lot more Asians in my school. The school in my new place was primarily composed of minority students, Asians and Hispanics. There were not too many black students, and very few white students.” Kim’s high school had mostly Asian and Hispanic students and the two races never interacted with each other. Even though Kim was a high achieving student she did not hang out with the other high achieving students. Her group of friends was mainly creative and artistic people who
aspired to be singers, songwriters, and writers. Kim said, “I didn’t really hang out with them. I didn’t really like those types of people.” Kim was referring to a group of kids who were considered the AP group, or Advanced Placement group. Kim and her friends started a Chinese group even though only one of them was actually Chinese. She said they just wanted a place to hang out and call home.

**Kim’s College Application**

Attending an under-resourced public high school made it difficult to find support and resources to apply for college. Many of the counselors were familiar with the state university systems, but they were not familiar with private schools, never mind elite private schools. She had to do all the research herself. She said her parents expected her to go to college all along. However, they were not able to help her because they were not familiar with the college application process. They never attended college.

Many of her friends understood what they needed to do to get a four year degree. They would start at a local community college and then transfer to a four-year college. That way it would be cheaper and they would not have to make loans. While that was one option, Kim learned from a friend that highly selective private schools give full financial aid packages to low-income families. Kim was not sure of the exact amount but she had a strong feeling at the time that she would qualify. She said none of her friends were aware of this, and when she shared the information with them they thought she was making it up. “My friends were basically telling me I was screwing myself over financially because I’m applying to schools where I have no chance of getting in, and even if I got in, they’re not giving me any money.” Kim did not listen to them, but instead she applied to a highly selective college as an early admissions applicant and did not
get accepted. She was sad and thought perhaps her friends might have been correct. Once she
got over the shock and disappointment, she continued her early admissions applications to a few
state schools as well as a few other highly selective colleges, including Ivy College. Since Kim
applied early to an elite university on the West Coast, she learned how to make her application to
Ivy College stronger. She spent more time on the personal essay, and was very intentional about
whom she asked for recommendation letters. To Kim’s surprise and happiness, she was accepted
to Ivy College. “When I got into Ivy College I was really, really surprised. I think to a certain
extent I got into Ivy because my application for [it] was more serious and genuine than my
application for the [elite university on the West Coast]. My application to [that university] might
have come across as silly and not serious, but for Ivy College it was a little bit darker. I guess
that’s what appeals to those people. I don’t know. But I got in, and it was a good feeling.”

Overall, Kim said that even though the college application process was difficult and
stressful it worked out for her in the end. She felt empowered that she was able to navigate the
entire college application on her own, completed the financial aid application, and awarded
numerous scholarships and awards. She said her parents were extremely proud of her and it
made her felt good. Her mom literally told everyone she knew, even people she had never met
before. “My mom told everyone at work. Yeah, so they were really happy for me. She just told
everyone she could. For her, it was like their dream come true.” Kim received full financial aid
at Ivy College. It meant that her parents did not have to contribute anything to her tuition and
room and board.
Kim at Ivy College

Kim’s first few days at Ivy College were difficult. “There were so many White people here. I had never seen this many in my life. Even more than Sonoma, but I was younger then.” Kim felt left out because she did not stay on campus during orientation. Instead she stayed with her aunt who lived an hour from campus. Kim would come in during the day and attended all the orientation workshops, and at night she would go home and hang out with her aunt’s family. She did not get to attend any parties nor did she have time to bond with the other students. Kim missed out on getting to know the other students. People appeared to know each other after only a few days and friendships were being formed.

Kim wished she had stayed on campus because now she had to actively find people to hang out with. Kim said this affected her initial experience at Ivy College. She felt withdrawn and depressed at the time. She never went out of her dorm room except to go to classes, or have her meals. Furthermore, Kim said she felt overwhelmed by the overall experience, her peers, the buildings, her professors, and the overall atmosphere. “I remember the first week I was really intimidated by how beautiful the buildings looked, or how different they were compared to where I came from. For a whole week all I did was looked at buildings.” Kim called her parents often because she was homesick. They were sad not seeing me on a daily basis but were also excited for me. She could not talk to them about being homesick and feeling overwhelmed because she did not to disappoint them. They kept telling her, “You are in the best place in the world. You’ll be very successful.” This added pressure made the experience even more difficult. For the first time Kim wished she could rely on her parents to help her navigate through this difficult time.
Kim reported that her roommate was very different from her. Her roommate’s parents came to visit her frequently and often took her out to fancy dinners. They never talked much. “It’s hard to say whether or not we got along. We got along in the sense that we never really talked to each other. She was an athlete so she had to leave early for practice. We never saw each other.” Her roommate’s parents were stockbrokers, who worked on Wall Street and made a lot of money. Her roommate was quite social, had a lot of friends from her boarding school, as well as people from her sport. They would hang out in their dorm room. Kim never brought her friends to her room because she did not feel comfortable having them over.

Kim quickly realized that many people at Ivy College came from affluent families, whose parents worked in Fortune 500 companies. “One of the first things that occurred to me here, and one of the first things that I was appalled by, was that there were people here who have been raised with lots of money, who went to elite middle and high schools, and now an elite college.” Kim did not feel comfortable being around people who were more affluent than her. They often did not understand her nor do they care to take the time to get to know her. She also expressed the impression that these students will end up running the country and would not make decisions for the best interest of working class people. “That’s been the reality for a long, long time, and I have to accept that that is the truth.”

Kim was not aware of her first-generation status until she came to Ivy College. She did not realize that being first-generation was part of her identity until she met other students who shared similar experiences as her, giving her the language to describe her experience. Kim shared that in high school she was taught about race relations in America and socio-economic class. It was not difficult to understand because people around her were from the same socio-
economic class, and they were all students of color. She soon realized how much more difficult it was to talk about race and class at Ivy College because there were many more people who were not minorities, and who came from middle and upper socio-economic class. Kim had to adjust her thinking on these issues and became more aware of which class she belonged.

**Kim’s Volunteer Work**

Kim was deeply involved with helping other people and giving back in her community. While at college Kim volunteered at a small claim advisory office to help support people in small claims court. She provided them with legal help, interpreted applications, and connected them to lawyers. Kim said most people who go to small claims court were people who were not able to afford a lawyer, who might not know the law very well, and might not even speak English very well. Kim provided training to Ivy College students so that they could also help these clients.

Kim was also involved with a student run group that provided education, training, and support for sexual assault victims and perpetrators. Kim also volunteered at a local area rape crisis center that was not affiliated with Ivy College. She provided one-on-one counseling for young women who were dealing with crises and connected them with resources. Kim’s involvement with these organizations came from her upbringing of giving back and helping those less fortunate. Kim said she was grateful to have a good education and it felt right to give back, by giving her time and experience to organizations and issues she cared about.

As a result of her involvements with nonprofit organizations, she felt more prepared and knowledgeable than her peers on social issues in the U.S. Her identity as a woman has positively affected her ability do this work and to connect with women survivors of sexual assaults. “I was
more familiar with the mental health concerns than a lot of my peers were. I was more familiar with the sexual assault concerns than a lot of my peers were.”

Kim had to deal with disappointment with her academics. She was used to getting all A-’s in high school and now she was not. It was a struggle for her to stay at the top, especially attending a school where everyone was smart and competitive. She never learned how to manage her time well, balance school and extra-curricular activities, or had an advisor to support her. Most of the people around her attended boarding schools where they were taught these important life skills, and how they could apply these skills to various situations and environments. Kim had to learn quickly about balancing academics and extracurricular activities. “I definitely became more aware of myself, how I operated, and what academic pressure I do well in, what type of academic pressure I don’t do well in.” Kim took this to heart and started to practice study skill strategies on all her assignments and preparation for exams. Her grades did improve, but not by a lot. Writing essays were the most difficult for Kim. She was not taught how to write papers that were more than three pages long. Most papers in college required students to write at least 10 pages, and she was not used to that. She said, “In high school our papers were about three pages long. You can write that in a few hours. For long papers here it’s different because it takes a lot more time. I often feel intimidated to ask my professor.” Kim was worried to ask for help because she did not want people to find out that she was struggling. This internal conflict that Kim experienced did not serve her well. It affected every aspects of her life, including academics, social, and personal development.
Kim’s Mental Health

Kim shared during the interview that she had been suffering with depression. “I would go through periods where I don’t eat, sleep, or do anything. It gets really bad.” She thought this was part of the college transition, not doing well on your academics, and feeling like she did not fit in at Ivy College. The pressure of having to succeed all the time can be difficult for high achieving students. Kim had had success in her life. However, that success came with a price. The price she paid was dealing with letdowns, questioning her ability, having low self-esteem, and feelings of isolation and not fitting in. As a result, she was suffered from depression. Kim always felt the academic pressure from her parents had deeply affected her. She said having to write these long papers forced her to be in her room for extended periods of time, and that was when the depression would kick in. “Once I’m isolated from other people, it’s a lot easier for me to stay isolated. It’s a really unhealthy habit that perpetuates itself. It’s hard for me to interact with other people.”

Kim did not seek support for her depression nor talk to her friends about it in the beginning. Soon she realized she had friends who were also experiencing something similar. One of her closest friends was put on medication for anxiety, and Kim realized that she was not the only one going through this. Kim finally sought help from the University’s Mental Health Services. She saw her therapist once a week. The therapist helped her cope with the depression much better. She also changed her lifestyle by exercising more and eating healthier foods. She tried to maintain this healthy routine and constantly reminded herself to take it easy. Kim mentioned that mental health was a big problem at college and that many students hid this illness from their friends because it would come across as weak. She believed that students self-
medicate and self-diagnose their medical problems, a phenomenon that is a concern for most school administrators. Many schools like Ivy College try to be proactive and work hard to reach out to students to talk about mental health issues before a problem gets out of control.

Kim did not talk to her professor outside the classroom. She never attended office hours nor would she know what to do if she were to see them in their office. She was intimidated by them, and did not know how to connect with them. “I always feel like you need to have something to ask when you go to their office hours, and I don’t have anything to ask.” Kim felt most students were not genuine when they see professors. They do it because they want their professor to write a letter of recommendation. Kim understood that visiting with professors was important but she could not get herself to do it. “I just feel like part of the reason I don’t go to their office hours was because I don’t want to go for the sake of going. I don’t like that type of non-genuine attitude. On the other hand, that just means I don’t really have a strong relationship with my professors.” Kim clearly understood the downside of not getting to know her professors. She believed that this will come back to haunt her one of these days.

Kim was not sure at the time of the interview what she wanted to do with her life. She was a couple months before graduation and yet she had not applied to any jobs. “I just don’t know what to do, or what I’m even interested in.” She said, “My uncertainty about the long-term goals has been preventing me from looking at the short-term goals, and it’s a really bad dynamic.” Kim plans to capitalize on some of her connections. She knows she needs to do some outreach and plant the seeds that might help her get a job. She would like to continue working in mental health counseling and sexual assault, but she is not sure if this is a viable option given that she will not make a good salary. Perhaps she is considering taking an entirely different path.
As Kim reflected on her overall experience at Ivy College, she was starting to realize that this new college degree would not mean much to her. She has been in the Ivy College bubble for so long that she feels numb. Ivy College has sheltered her from the outside world for the last four years. Now she felt a sense of vulnerability to have to leave the Ivy walls and deal with the real world. “I don’t feel like the Ivy College degree means anything at the moment because I haven’t accomplished anything at Ivy College, or at least anything to be proud of. To me, my Ivy College degree means I’m just finally out of this place. It really means nothing.” Kim has strong negative feelings about her experience at Ivy College, and was ambivalent about its effectiveness. However, she has heard from her friends that a degree here would open up many doors for her. So far Kim has not seen that. But she quickly realized, “I haven’t done anything to open up these doors.” Kim hopes that these people were right, that she will receive multiple job offers. “If that is true, than they have proven me wrong. I want them to prove me wrong.”

Analyzing Kim’s Portrait

It was clear from the interview that Kim had dealt with extremes in her life. She went from living in a predominately White neighborhood in a small town to one that was predominately Asian and Hispanic in a large city. Kim went from an under-resourced public high school to attending one of the most selective institutions in the world. She was thrilled when she got accepted to Ivy College but now that she was graduating she felt the degree would not mean very much to her future. Kim went from getting straight A’s in high school to getting average grades in college. Finally, Kim struggled with depression throughout her time at college and blamed it on her parents for putting too much pressure on her. However, these were the very
people she was grateful for, particularly for the sacrifices they made for her to have a brighter future.

The most salient theme from talking with Kim was her ability to overcome barriers. She did not possess coping mechanisms or learn the strategies to deal with conflicts, self-doubt, and negative feeling towards other people. Unlike the other participants, Kim came across as a tortured soul, someone of unstable footing, and expressing resentment to the world. Kim’s narrative was one that displayed the difficulties of finding strength and opportunities in the midst of finding one’s self. Kim straddled between working class to elite class. She had difficulty transitioning from public school to a private elite college, and from Vietnam to one of the wealthiest nations in the world. Mai still has much to work on in terms of ability and comfort in navigating between these two worlds. On one hand, she appreciated the opportunity that was given to her by attending Ivy College, but on the other hand, she did to know how to show her appreciation. This internal conflict that Kim possessed was perhaps one of the reasons she felt this college degree will not mean much to her.

**Jimmy Tran-Medical School, Junior, Male**

Jimmy arrived to the interview in wearing a white button up collar shirt and bright yellow blazer. He appeared cool, calm, and collected. His blue backpack sat over his left shoulder and he reached out his right hand to shake the interviewer’s hand. He was warm, polite, and had a nice smile on his face.
Jimmy’s Parents in Vietnam

Jimmy was born in a major port city on the central coast of Vietnam located on the coast of the Eastern Sea. Jimmy shared in the interview that he was conceived in a refugee camp in Malaysia where his mother and father met. They decided to go back to Vietnam to have the baby. Jimmy’s mother got on a boat and headed back to her hometown where her parents were living. A few years after Jimmy was born, his family decided to move north to the big city of Saigon, and settled down in a Catholic community. Jimmy’s family was religious, and they went to church every week. The community in which he grew up in was close-knit. “It was a sort of an assemblage of different houses. It’s a pretty run down place, but a close community. It was pretty safe.”

In Vietnam, Jimmy’s family lived a small brick house 45 minutes from the big city of Saigon. Jimmy’s mother grew up poor. His grandfather owned a rice field so the entire family worked as farmers. Jimmy’s father sold lottery tickets and made about ten cents a day for 8 hours of work. Neither of his parents went to high school because their families could not afford for them to go to school. Both parents stopped going to school when they reached eighth grade. Additionally, his parents were the oldest in their respective families, so they had to end up working long hours to take care of the entire extended family.

Jimmy Immigrated to the U.S.

When Jimmy was four and a half years old, his family immigrated to the United States and settled in a populous town in the South. They settled in a Catholic community. His family was sponsored by his grandfather, who arrived a few years before them, and had made enough
money to pay the way for his entire family to come to America. “My town is like a crossroads town. People in [the state] will know about it, but it’s not a very famous city. It’s rather quiet.” Jimmy said growing up was like living in the “ghetto neighborhood.” This was where many immigrant families settled when they arrived to the United States.

Many immigrants who lived in this town ended up working at Tyson Foods, a giant meat-processing factory. Immigrants came to this town because it was easy to find jobs at Tyson Foods. “The job market is easier to access for people. It’s easier for immigrant people, who generally can’t speak English, to get a job at Tyson’s. All you have to know is how to cut meat and work hard. That’s where my father ended up.” Jimmy’s mother ended up being a nail technician, which is a popular job for female immigrants from Vietnam. The attraction of getting a nail license and making a lot of money are the two reasons many people go into nail work. His parents worked long hours, sometimes 12-14 hours a day, so he spent most of his time afterschool with his grandparents.

**Jimmy’s High School**

Jimmy was a shy student. He did not socialize with other students at his school. “I didn’t really like elementary school. I didn’t interact with the other kids.” This was a departure from his rambunctious personality when he was living in Vietnam. “I was kind of like a tyrant in my group of friends. When I was young, people generally did what I told them to do. However, when I moved to the States everything changed for the worst.” Jimmy said he was shy and introverted. He did not talk to his peers at school, and never hung out with them afterschool. However, things got better in high school. He was able to make a few friends at the local high
school and focused a lot of time and energy into his academics. Jimmy got good grades and studied hard to make sure he got all A-'s. He said it was fairly easy to accomplish.

In looking back at the transition from Vietnam to the United States, Jimmy said one of the reasons he was so shy in elementary school was because his parents put him in a school that was not the right fit for him. There was a lack of student and staff diversity, and the school had an inability to understand and support immigrant students. He also shared that not being able to communicate well in English was a difficult. “I don’t remember when I learned English but I think that was part of the difficulty in communicating, a barrier between me and my peers.”

Jimmy was a few years behind in his reading, writing, and mathematical skills. At times, he was frustrated and was not able to express himself. Language was one of the biggest barriers for Jimmy. He explained, “Just not being able to express myself [in English] was hard. I think also some of it had to do with the fact that since I was home a lot, I never really went out with friends. So there was a lot of time for introspection and time to think about myself. I always felt out of place from the social atmosphere.”

Jimmy attended a large under-resourced public high school. Teachers and counselors did not have high expectations for students. In fact, they expected most students to attend the local community college, or if they were talented they might end up going to the state’s flagship university. Most students stayed in town and never wanted to leave their home. “No matter how talented you were, no matter how smart you were; because of the fact that you had literally no support, it was expected that you would get into [a state university]. It just frustrated me that even some of my school’s valedictorians, some salutatorians, would go to the local community college.”
For Jimmy, he relied on his teachers to help him explore different options for college. He was adamant about not attending a local college, and to prove to other students that there were more options for college out there. Jimmy spent a lot of time with his English teacher, who helped edit his college essay. The teacher encouraged him to apply to any school he desired, as long as he spent time working on the application. Jimmy applied to seven colleges, and did not apply to any other highly selective colleges except for Ivy College. He said, “I didn’t apply to any other Ivies. I thought like hey put in the Hail Mary, see what happens. That was the college application process.” Jimmy was not too serious about going to Ivy College. He thought he would apply to see what would happen. When he received the acceptance email from the school he could not believe his good luck. He thought they had made a mistake. When he shared the good news with his parents they were beyond belief. It took his father a few moments before he realized what had happened. Even though his father was not an emotional or physical person, Jimmy knew that his father was proud of him. “He [Jimmy’s father] had heard about Ivy College because it was a highly selective school, and many people have heard of it even if they did not know anyone who went there. It kind of registered with him that he had done a good job with me. It was an emotional time.” Jimmy shared that people at his high school were happy for him as well. “Most kids in my school just think of graduating, never mind going to college. For them, it meant a lot that I was attending a good college. They just broke down and cried. It was a rarity. I felt good that I was able to break the boundaries of where students end up after they graduate.” In fact, the news reverberated throughout the school and community. Jimmy was carrying a whole town on his shoulders. Many teachers who had taught for a decade had never experienced a student being accepted to Ivy College. “Finally they had a student that they could
kind of claim, who had gone outside of the bubble.” Jimmy said at times, the experience was overwhelming and surreal. He was happy to be the person to go beyond the status quo.

**Jimmy at Ivy College**

Jimmy’s first few weeks at Ivy College were difficult. He experienced for the first time hiking in the mountains with other first year students. The purpose of the outdoor program was to give students the experience of living outdoors and bonding with their classmates. Jimmy had never been up a mountain before and within the first ten minutes of hiking he threw up. Additionally, he lost his keys to his dorm room, misplaced his college identification, and got a wart on his foot. Jimmy could not believe his bad luck. “This is the life now and I was struggling to manage it.” Needless to say, it was not a good initial experience at Ivy College for Jimmy.

Jimmy had two major groups of friends. The first group was the Ivy College Vietnamese Association. This student led organization was the only Vietnamese group on Ivy College’s campus that supported Vietnamese students. The organization provided a space for students to come together and share their experience, usually over a meal. Most of its members were first-generation students who had similar backgrounds as Jimmy’s. This student group gave Jimmy a sense of belonging. He felt safe around them, and was able to be himself. Additionally, they spoke Vietnamese, and he felt comfortable conversing in his native language.

The second group of friends was from Model United Nations. Model United Nations attract a diverse group of college students from around the world to address current global issues. Participants have an experiential learning in which they have the opportunity to learn how the
United Nations works. Furthermore, students develop skills in diplomacy, negotiation, critical thinking, compromise, public speaking, writing, and research (www.nmun.org, 2016). Jimmy said he enjoyed debates, and that it was a good way for him to meet people. “When I got into Ivy College a lot of people emphasize networking. You need to be social and be able to have decent conversations with people.” Jimmy realized early on that the two friend groups were starkly different from one another. The Vietnamese friends were mainly first-generation and low-income. Their discussions tended to center around their culture, family background, and dealing with micro-aggressions. His Model UN friends tended to come from private schools, were mainly Caucasians or international students, and were from affluent backgrounds.

Jimmy spoke about money and how he did not have to work his first two years at Ivy College. Jimmy received full financial aid from Ivy College. Unlike his friends who had one or two part-time jobs, he got support from his family. Even though they were far from being wealthy they were able to help him when he needed money to go out with his friends. His parents believed in allowing Jimmy to focus solely on his education. The only time Jimmy’s parents had to contribute to his education was when he did a study abroad program in France and they had to cover his airline cost.

Jimmy was studying Neurobiology at Ivy College in hopes of going to a top medical school. His parents wanted him become a doctor. It was highly regarded in the Vietnamese culture, and it would allow Jimmy and his family a comfortable life. Jimmy shared to the interviewer that he was not doing well academically in the first couple years, and that he was always trying to catch up. He failed two exams in his junior year. He feared he might have jeopardized his chances of going to medical school. “Academically here at Ivy College, I kind of
always felt behind the curve. A lot of that was my own fault, because I wasn’t able to balance between my extra-curricular and my academics.” Jimmy carried a lot of guilt around because he does not want to disappoint his parents. His goal by the end of his junior year was to bring his grade point average up to 3.55. Finally, Jimmy concluded that, “I like my life, but I’m also supremely disappointed in myself for not doing better academically. It’s just kind of an ongoing challenge.” Many first-generation low-income students often felt depressed because they ended up not doing well academically, and fear of letting their parents down.

In reflecting on his first three years at Ivy College, Jimmy said there were many things he would do differently. For example, instead of trying to be in so many clubs and dedicating so much time to Model UN, he would have studied harder and get help with study skills. Secondly, he would ask for help from tutors and professors. He was too shy and intimidated to go to his professors’ office hours. Finally, Jimmy said he would choose his classes wisely and not take so many science courses in one semester.

Jimmy also noted that Ivy College could do a better job supporting first-generation college students. The first year transition was extremely difficult for Jimmy. He wished the school had appointed him an advisor who would be able to help him out and to allow him to talk to this person on a regular basis. He would like to have seen Ivy College intervening more when they saw students struggling in their academics. He felt strongly that Ivy College should train its professors to recognize the signs that a student is struggling, and suggest options for them to get help. “There were lots of things in that first year that slapped me in the face. First exam, everybody struggled. That was actually the first time that I viscerally experienced how hard it
was at Ivy College. My first essay at Ivy College was seven to eight pages. Before that I’d never written a paper longer than three pages. It was a huge shock for me.”

Despite his negative feedback to Ivy College, Jimmy was quick to defend it. He has appreciated the opportunity to attend the school, and did not want to sound like he was complaining. In the end, Jimmy wanted to help Ivy College be better at what they do, and to give them feedback so they could help a new crop of first-generation students. “There are not very many things that I will criticize Ivy College about because in the end I loved it here.”

Analyzing Jimmy’s Portrait

Jimmy was one of the more articulate students in this study. His English was by far the best of all the participants, and his communication style was complex. Jimmy lived in two distinct worlds while attending Ivy College. He was close to his Vietnamese friends and appreciated the comfort of understanding them and vice versa. On the other hand, he navigated a different culture of the Model UN where he stated that many of those students were more affluent and tended to be White. These two worlds did not overlap, and he seemed fine with this separation.

Jimmy’s dilemma lay in the fact that participating in Model UN allowed him exposure to the dominant groups, both in race and socio-economic status, and therefore gaining valuable social and cultural capital. However, the result of spending too much time with Model UN affected his academics and perhaps his dreams of becoming a doctor, a dream that his parents had for him. For many first-generation students, juggling multiple priorities, expectations, and dreams can be daunting.
Nicole Tran-Investment Banking, Junior, Female

At the time of her interview, Nicole was an enthusiastic 20-year old student at Ivy College. She came to the interview nicely dressed in a beautiful white blouse, stylish denim jeans, and a pair of knee-high boots. Her hair was a warm dark brown color, and she wore it back in a ponytail. Nicole was excited to participate in this study because she wanted to learn more about first-generation students at a place like Ivy College, and how they navigate the elite college environment.

Nicole’s Home Town

Nicole lived with her parents in a small town in the Northeast, where the population was 98 percent White. She said most people in the small suburban town stay there to work after they graduated from high school or college. They tended to be comfortable with having just one job and did not aspire to do anything more. Most families were working class, and they loved living in a small town where everyone knew everyone.

Nicole’s parents both immigrated to the United States in their early 20s, and they met here and got married. They arrived in the early 1980s and had a difficult time adjusting to the new life in America. Nicole’s mother started out working as a seamstress and her father tried to go to school to get a two year associates degree in Industrial Technology (IT). After a few years, Nicole’s mother was able to get a certificate in Accounting and worked for a local company, and her father became an IT consultant at a big firm in a nearby city.

Nicole said her high school was not diverse in terms of race and ethnicity. Over 90 percent of the student body was White, which reflected the population of the town. “I definitely
had to grapple with some identity issues and figuring it out.” She had to deal with race issues on a daily basis. Living in a predominately White town was difficult. Her peers were vocal about her skin color and race. They would make fun of her ethnicity with certain funny facial gestures. “They didn’t understand. I felt embarrassed when my parents would open all the sliding doors and play Vietnamese music very loud. My neighbors would ask me, ‘What is that? That’s weird.” Nicole was conscious about all of these comments, and what people have said about her and her family. She said it took some time for her to feel comfortable with being Vietnamese and things started to change in high school. “By the time I got to high school, I don’t think people viewed me that differently. I mean they knew that I was Vietnamese but socially, I’d grown up there just like them, so at that point it didn’t really make a difference.”

Among her Vietnamese friends and relatives, Nicole felt different from them. Her parents raised her in a different way, by allowing her to make her own decisions at a young age. “My parents were very hands off. They really pushed me to be independent. Never asked me about my grades, never told me I needed to do this sport or play this instrument. I made my own decisions.” On one hand, Nicole appreciated the way her parents raised her, and allowed her to develop her own personality. However, she wished, at times, they were more involved with her day-to-day activities. “In high school, I ran track for four years. I was captain and my parents didn’t go to one track meet. On one side, I thought it was like the best way they could have prepared me, but on the other hand, sometimes I felt that I needed more support. That’s definitely something that was hard for me.” Nicole was conflicted with her upbringing and how her parents raised her.
Nicole reflected on a story her father shared with her that she will never forget. It was a story that taught her the importance of education and to never take it for granted. “My dad told me when he arrived in America, he really wanted to go to a top technological institution. He knew it was really amazing for computer science, and that’s what he was studying. At that point, he was studying at a local community college, and he ultimately transferred to a selective university, where he received his Associates degree. But he was determined to go to [a highly ranked technology institute] so he applied and the school told him that his English wasn’t good enough. So he would wait outside some classes and wait for the professor to come out and then he would ask to sit in the back of the class and just learn. They allowed him to do that.” Nicole said this was one example of where her father showed her that education was important rather than just telling her. She has used that story to motivate her, especially when she was off track and did not care about school. “I could feel my dad’s passion and his commitment to education.” Her Vietnamese cousins were always told to study hard and get good grades, but they were not shown how to do that. Conversely, Nicole’s parents just told her to be happy and enjoy learning.

Nicole’s High School

Most students at her high school did not care about their academics. They were mostly into social activities and sports. “My school was not high achieving. Only two people in my class of about 250 went to elite institutions, and I was one of them.” She generally hung out with “not very high achieving kids,” but she said they were fun. Because she ran track for four years she met some great people from the team. “For some reason I hung out with kids that messed around and got arrested sometimes. I don’t know why, I just hung out with kids that weren’t like me. Even though I took classes with kids that were smart like me, socially I didn’t hang out with
people that cared about school the way I did.” This was a part of Nicole’s high school experience that she has not figured out. She felt she was living in two different worlds.

**Nicole’s College Application**

Nicole navigated the entire college application on her own. She did all the research herself, decided on which schools to apply to, and submitted the applications. She did not rely on her parents or guidance counselors to help her. Instead she would inform them and they would acquiesce to her decisions. “In terms of college decisions, and where I applied to, it was all up to me. I did all the research myself, and my parents did not even play a role at all.” Nicole learned how to be resourceful because her parents gave her a lot of autonomy at a young age.

When it came to college Nicole was very organized. She made an Excel spreadsheet with all the schools, deadlines, and links to the application. She also looked at various scholarships and applied to as many as she was able to. She said her older sister was less organized and not self-motivating so she did not go to a good college. Nicole’s sister was not as ambitious as she was in high school. “For some reason, by the time I was a high school student, I was equipped with the ambition and skills to navigate this process successfully.” This resiliency factor was one of the reasons Nicole was so successful in her college applications. She was accepted to 9 of the 10 schools. Nicole was accepted to many of the highly selective institutions she applied to.

Trying to figure out what school to attend was a difficult one. Nicole decided to visit the top four schools to get a better sense of the campus and students. Each school she visited, she was assigned to an Asian student who took her around and served as her host. She was frustrated because she did not want to have only one perspective. “Every school I visited made the assumption that I should be placed with an Asian host, when I just wanted to be treated like any
other prospective student. I was annoyed because I don’t think that’s fair because I’m Asian you just assumed I would be a better fit with an Asian student.” In fact, Nicole felt more comfortable with someone who was different from her and not necessarily of her own race or ethnicity. She had grown up in a predominately White town and felt comfortable being around different types of people.

Another pressure Nicole experienced was her parents. Throughout her entire life and certainly during the college application process they did not meddle in her decision. Once she got accepted to all these prestigious schools, they suddenly wanted to exert their opinions. “My parents wanted me to go to Ivy College because of the name recognition. However, I felt differently. I wanted to find a school to I felt comfortable with, and would give me a good education.” At the time, she was leaning towards [another highly ranked university] but her parents challenged her to consider Ivy College. “They finally had an opinion and it made me mad.” Nicole pushed back because she was not used to her parents paying so much attention to her college decision. In the end, Nicole realized her parents just wanted her to make the right choice. In the end, she chose Ivy College.

Nicole at Ivy College

Nicole was a junior when she was being interviewed for this study. She had enjoyed her first two years at Ivy College and continued to network and build lasting friendships. Nicole’s friend group were mostly girls from her social club, and they spent a lot of time having meals, going out to parties, and hanging out in the dorm rooms. “In my dorm building itself, I almost have like a little family of friends. We eat dinner together every night. It’s a mix of like 10 girls, 10 guys. I’m so lucky to have made these friends and I can tell them anything.” Nicole revealed
that she belongs to an exclusive social club on campus. These clubs tended to be single gender, and almost exclusively made up of White students, who come from affluent backgrounds. Nicole understood that she was not the average club member. “I probably don’t fit the stereotype of my club. Generally these clubs have a high proportion of affluent members. I don’t even know how I got in. I actually really like it, and I feel like I’ve met people I wouldn’t have normally met. I feel like I’ve had a chance to be put in some social situations where I feel like I’m out of place, but I then learn to define myself by being the person I am. In that sense it’s been a challenging but very rewarding experience.” Nicole shared that she was proud of her background and where she came from. It had taken her some time to come to the point where she felt comfortable sharing her parents’ story to her friends. She talked about the amazing food her mother makes and has invited her friends to her house to enjoy the food. She has learned that certain areas of her identity, that were different from her friends, were the parts that have made her strong and unique.

Nicole learned, at an early age, how to adapt and acclimate to any new situation. As a result, she had alienated herself among Asian-American students. “A lot of people, even in high school, would say, you’re not really like Asian. I’m like, ‘I am Asian.’ I don’t like it when people say things like that but I understand what they mean. I’m sure they are trying to fit me into a stereotype in their mind.” Nicole believed that people have certain understandings or stereotypes about Asians. They believe that Asians tend to be shy and are not very social. Nicole believed the method in which her parents raised her made her different from other Asians, and in particular Vietnamese. She is often told by people that she does not fit the Asian stereotype. “My parents raised me in an unorthodox way, in a household that placed a massive emphasis on independence and trust, but from a different point of view on travel, culture, and food.” Other
than the girls in her social club, Nicole rarely hung out with other students. She certainly did not hang out with other Asian students. She said she took a Vietnamese class in her first year at Ivy College. She met some wonderful Vietnamese people in class but nothing solidified into any close friendships.

Academic studies have been a difficult transition for Nicole from high school to college. Nicole felt she was not doing as well as she would like because the classes were too big, and she felt too intimidated about going to professors’ office hours. In high school she was able to see her teachers, and they got to know her. As a result, she did extremely well with her classes. “The transition to academic life at Ivy College was a challenge because in high school I was so close with my teachers. I would tell them about anything that was going on in my life. I would cry to them about things. It’s not the same here at Ivy College.” Nicole said she generally does better in smaller classes. It gives her a chance a get to know her professors. Nicole attributed her difficult transition to attending a public high school that did not necessarily prepare her for an elite school like Ivy College. However, she did not regret that experience because it gave her a diverse perspective and experience. Furthermore, she said her parents would have not been able to afford for her to attend a private school.

Nicole shared that one of her greatest accomplishments so far at Ivy College was the work in the Business Club. This club brings together students who are interested in business and discuss ways to connect with people in the corporate world. Nicole had been involved with this club since her freshman year and was recognized for her hard work. “I think I’ve gained skills and been able to meet people that I wouldn’t have been able to meet. Everything I do I just love meeting people, and that’s one of the biggest reward for me.”
Nicole was vocal about certain areas that Ivy College failed her and her first-generation peers. These included lack of support and resources for students of color and first-generation students, inability to access certain social spaces, and the difficulty of transitioning from a public school to a private college. She felt strongly that with a lack of social connections and support from people outside of school it was difficult to succeed. Nicole compared this to her more affluent friends and peers who had more connections and role models. Nicole expressed very clearly what she meant by this:

When I got to Ivy College the path to my future became unclear, and the different possible routes were intimidating. I didn’t have role models growing up to start forming ideas of what my future should look like or what it could look like. I struggled a little bit till I figured out what it was that I wanted to focus on. Sometimes I felt that’s been a setback for me. Lots of my regrets went back to not having strong role models, and the resources that other people had, or their parents to tell them you should do this or do that. Advices I received were coming from my own peers. When you go to a prep school, the advising is tailored to people who achieve at these high levels, However, my guidance counselors were used to advising students who apply to college that are perhaps less selective, so they weren’t in any place to give me the preparation for the future that I needed. I’m struggling with that but I’ll be fine.

One example Nicole shared was the difficulty of finding a summer internship at an investment firm because she did not have the right connections. Most of her friends already had summer internships and jobs lined up due in part to their parent’s connections. “Junior year internship search is like the worst. The environment is almost like toxic on campus because you
get bombarded by all sorts of questions, and people want to know where you are working at. It’s just competitive. And most people are judging a bit and it’s high pressure time.” Nicole expressed being aware of this pressure and having to find a job at a company that everyone recognizes. However, not everyone can find those jobs easily if they have no connections.

Nicole’s future looks bright. She has a lot of interest in business, law, and the nonprofit sector. She goes back and forth between going to business school and law school. She is interested in a job and career that requires problem solving, analytical skills, and communication skills. Nicole said she struggled between finding a job that is well respected and one that pays well. She wondered if she can find both.

Analyzing Nicole’s Portrait

In many ways, Nicole has been negotiating and navigating between two distinct worlds her entire life. A student with her background – public school educated, first-generation college student, working class family, and immigrant background – socializing with the elite, legacy, upper class, white students who attended private schools their entire life. “In a way I defy the stereotype of what it’s like to navigate a place like Ivy College where these two worlds meet. I’m proud of myself for doing this I guess.”

Of the five interviews, Nicole’s exhibited the highest level of social and cultural attainment. She admitted the challenge she experienced at a young age when she attended a predominately White school, where she was only a handful of minority students on campus. She was self-conscious of her race, what clothes she wore, and the types of food she ate during lunch. However, Nicole stated that she learned a great deal through that experience and was able to find
acceptance from her White peers. By the time she got to high school she was comfortable with her White friends and they were with her. In fact, she even brought them home to meet her parents and tasted the Vietnamese food her mother prepared. Nicole said she would never have imagined she would get to that point of inviting them home. At Ivy College, Nicole was familiar with the dominant culture, and felt an ease in navigating it. In fact, she was accepted to one of the most exclusive social clubs on campus, where most members were from White affluent backgrounds. Nicole said, “I’m the complete opposite to the other members in my club. I’m low-income, and first-generation, but I think they accept me because I can be myself. I’m real and they liked that.”

At the conclusion of the interview, Nicole appeared content and motivated to continue her path to finding happiness, and a career that would suit her. She said she learned a lot from this interview, and it gave her an opportunity to reflect on her experience at Ivy College. She learned to be proud of her achievements and all the decision she has made to this point. She has found comfort in what she considered being “bi-culture” and capitalizing on the best of both cultures. It appeared likely that Nicole will continue to straddle two different and distinct worlds, and navigate successfully between them. Perhaps someday these two worlds will overlap to the extent that Nicole will not have to navigate between them, but rather among them.

**Conclusion**

From the analysis, four themes emerged regarding the experiences of these students: (1) Overcoming Barriers, (2) Navigating Two Worlds, (3) Building Social and Cultural Capital, and (4) Parental Influence. It became clear that the students in the study overcame significant obstacles to make it to where they are today. Two students shared emotional stories of their
parents and the considerable sacrifices they made to get them to college. While overcoming barriers constituted a large obstacle for students, it was only the beginning. Simply building up enough courage to pursue higher education was in itself a solitary and challenging endeavor.

Four out of the five students in the study remembered having to go out of their way to find out more information about applying to college and the types of colleges that were available to them. All five students attended public schools that were overcrowded and lacked the resource to support these students. All five students shared their stories of navigating in two different worlds, one that they grew up in and the new one they just came upon. These two worlds often clash and made it difficult for the students to navigate in. The students recognized the need to meet people and learn from them. One participant shared that he went out of his way to meet people who were not like him in terms of socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, and interest. He believed that this was a way to build social and cultural capital at Ivy College. Finally, students shared that parents played a critical role in their deciding to go to college. The students said it was not because their parents understood the college application process but rather they believed in their child’s ability to go to college and do well. Many researchers have concluded that parental involvement is a viable predictor of postsecondary aspirations (Hearn, 1984; Inoue, 1999). Chapter 5 will present the discussions and implications of the research findings.
Chapter V: Discussions and Implications

The final chapter summarizes the themes present in the data analysis, and provides recommendations for highly selective colleges and universities that have an interest in first-generation students, as well as for parents, other family and community members, high school teachers and counselors, college admissions officers and administrators, faculty, and college students themselves. These recommendations are based on the experiences of first-generation college students at one elite institution, although they can also be applied to other similar institutions of higher education.

This qualitative study examined the lived experiences of five first-generation Vietnamese-American students at a highly selective institution, and how they navigate this elite college environment. The portraiture methodology was employed in order to present narratives of these students that encompass context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and aesthetic whole. Furthermore, the study drew on two theoretical frameworks to explore these students’ experiences. The first framework came from Bourdieuan social theory, which claims that social capital impacts enrollment and persistence in first-generation college students, and that socio-economic class and family income are strongly impacted by financial resources, communities, and qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). The second framework was cultural theory, which claims that cultural capital represented the degree of ease and familiarity that one has with the dominant culture of society (Bills, 2000).

This study attempted to shed light on how first-generation college students navigate an elite college environment. This research was guided by the following questions:
(1) How does the status of being a first-generation college student affect the college experience for Vietnamese-American students who attend an elite college?

(2) What particular challenges do elite college environments present for first-generation Vietnamese-American students?

(3) How do Vietnamese-American students navigate these environments, within the frameworks of their expectations?

Sub-questions that the research considered include:

- How does social capital affect Vietnamese-American students’ experiences?
- How does cultural capital affect Vietnamese-American students’ experiences?

To assist in the collection and examination of the participants’ data I employed a qualitative research method or approach developed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis (1997) called Portraiture. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) define five essential features of portraiture: context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and aesthetic whole. Portraits view human experience as being framed and shaped by the setting. The context of a portrait is the setting—or where data collection happens. The context takes into account the physical, geographic, temporal, historical, cultural, and aesthetic aspects. Portraits study individuals to record their subjects’ experiences and to interpret their perspectives.

Other researchers have defined cultural and social capital as knowledge of the campus environment and campus values, access to human and financial resources, and familiarity with terminology and general functioning, which may generally be transmitted through parents, and
may be lacking among first-generation students. This lack of knowledge may contribute to a sense of college “culture shock” (Inman & Mayes, 1999).

In analyzing the data and looking at the rich descriptive experiences of the five portraits of these first-generation Vietnamese-American students, four themes emerged: (1) Overcoming Barriers, (2) Navigating Two Worlds, (3) Building Social and Cultural Capital, and (4) Parental Influence.

**Overcoming Barriers**

In analyzing the interviews, it was clear that all five students overcame significant barriers to make it to the level of a highly selective college. They shared stories of the emotional roller coaster rides they experienced through grade school, high school, and college, and the considerable sacrifices their parents had to make to get them here. Arriving in college, these students lacked social and cultural capital to navigate the elite college environment with greater ease. The students often experienced racial discrimination and harassment. Their peers expected them to do well in math and science classes, and thought they were not very social people. Mai expressed, “I don’t know what these people expected from me. They want me to be the smart Asian in the class, but yet never ask me for my opinions. I’m tired of being the token Asian in my class. When they need an Asian voice they ask me, as if I can speak for all Asian people.”

Four out of five participants expressed being treated like a model minority, where people believe Asians are doing well and do not need support. Many people would go even further and argue that since Asian-Americans are doing so well, they no longer experience any discrimination, and that Asian-Americans no longer need public services such as bilingual education, government documents in multiple languages, and welfare (Chu, 2002). Furthermore, using the first
stereotype of Asian Americans, many just assume that all Asian Americans are successful and that none are struggling. While some of this is true, it does not tell the whole picture. Additionally, when we break the Asian population down into sub-groups and national origin, we see a more complex story. As described in the literature review (Callan, 2000, Clark, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), some AAPI groups do not fare as well as other AAPI groups (South Asian and East Asian students, for example). Participants expressed concerns regarding this model minority myth, and oftentimes, they struggled to bring the topic up with their peers, fearing retaliation and resentment.

Of the three women interviewed for the study, two experienced gender bias in their families. Kim expressed that her parents wanted her to graduate, get a good job, and move home to support the family. “My parents expect me to move home and support them once I finish college. I wonder why they don’t ask that from my brother. I guess maybe that’s the traditional Vietnamese thing.” Kim felt torn between what she believed was her duty and responsibility as a good Vietnamese woman to support the family and the desire to pursue her dream of living on her own and finding a career that would make her happy. Mai spoke briefly about the cultural norms of being a Vietnamese woman. She understood clearly what was expected of her if she were to live in Vietnam. However, her entire life has been in the U.S. Perhaps she has already adopted a new tradition and culture, and at the same time, has tried to respect the culture her parents are from. Mai came across more resolved on this topic than Kim. It is likely that this is a common part of the acculturation that most immigrants go through when they arrive to a new country. It is interesting to note that the two male participants did not once mention having any obligations to move home after graduation. They talked about supporting the family once they
graduated and found a well-paying job. They did not mention having this type of conversation with their parents.

Navigating Two Worlds

The most fascinating theme that emerged from these students’ experiences related to the theme of living in two worlds: one in which they grew up and the new one in college. The students in this study expressed that living in this unusual space that overlaps between their first-generation and low income background and their aspirations is challenging. On one hand, they were working hard to understand and navigate this elite college environment in hopes of gaining social and cultural capital, two important areas first-generation students often lack. On the other hand, they felt disconnected from the people back at home. First-generation students tend to have a difficult time dealing with the new environment and perhaps new social and cultural capital they have just gained (Bills, 2000; Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988).

Participants shared that sometimes their parents understood their aspirations for attending college but were considerably less supportive and less understanding of their decision to participate in extra-curricular activities and other involvements other than academics. Students shared that it might have to do with the Vietnamese culture and the strong focus on doing well academically in school. Kim said, “All they care about is grades. My parents don’t want me to volunteer or waste my time on other activities. It’s kinda sad if you ask me.” Some participants expressed their families’ lack of understanding in their college experience translated into the students feeling disappointed and sad.
Another issue of navigating two worlds was the development of new language and communication styles. Students found that their own words and the way they communicate changed while away in college and this often separated them from their families and friends in their hometown. Jimmy shared that before he left for college a few of his good friends told him, “Don’t let Ivy College change you, you should change it!” Jimmy did not understand what his friends meant by this until he came home after attending Ivy College for a year. When he came back to visit, his friends told him he was a different person. “We think you’re different now. Maybe college did something to you.” Jimmy was initially baffled by this comment, but he finally realized what his friends meant by what they had told him before he left for college. Other students commented that conversations between them and family members and friends were often strained. They felt people back at home saw them in a different light because they were attending an elite private institution. Mai reflected that she might have to cut off connections with some friends back home because they have been critical of her. “I have goals that I have set for myself and I won’t let people get in the way. It might mean that I stop being friends with some high school friends. They don’t understand me anymore.”

The issue of navigating two worlds was not only directed towards family members and friends. Students in the study shared that they struggled to acclimate to the academic world at Ivy College. Kim distinctly remembered the struggle she had when she was asked to write a 20-page essay. “Up to this point I had only written a 2-4 page essay. It was both daunting and intimidating to write a 20-page paper. I didn’t know where to start.” Kim went on to share that she was too scared and shy to go to her professor’s office hours for help. She remembered in the end she received a C grade. It was the first time she had received that letter grade; she continued, “And it wasn’t the last time either.” Kim’s description of the struggles she experienced at Ivy
College was indicative of those of her friends, who were also first-generation. She said, “Sometimes we struggle together.” In fact, Kim was not the only participant that struggled to shift gears from attending an under-resourced public school to an elite private college. All five students expressed some level of academic failure, whether it was failing an exam or getting an average grade on a paper.

In fact, all five students expressed disappointment with their grades during their first year at Ivy College. To them, it was partially the overwhelming feeling of being around so many smart, talented, and affluent students, and the lack of academic preparation from their public, under-resourced high schools. Furthermore, first-generation students lacked the ability to seek out support from tutors, advisors, and professors. The research of Billson and Terry (1982), who studied first-generation students at two Midwestern liberal arts colleges, indicated that first-generation students did not structurally integrate into the college setting as readily as their second-generation peers. When Mai was in high school she relied on her two male friends to help her navigate the college application process. In fact, she has relied on her friends at Ivy College for support and guidance. Mai said that she was able to find balance between her academics and extracurricular activities, but it took her a year to figure it out. She observed how her friends find balance, and would employ those ideas for herself. Other students in the study also mentioned academic and tutoring support services that they found out through their friends. Thus, this study has showed that friends play a critical role in helping the first-generation Vietnamese-American students navigate Ivy College.
Building Social and Cultural Capital

According to some researchers, students not only bring a certain level of cultural capital to college, but the college experience itself provides a vehicle for acquiring additional cultural capital (Bills, 2000; Coleman, 1988). Bills’ (200) research states that cultural capital represents the “degree of ease and familiarity that one has with the dominant culture of a society.” In essence, first-generation students did not grow up around adults that completed college, and, therefore, were less exposed to the contributing factors that provide preparation and support as they navigate through college (Rodriquez, 2003). Therefore, first-generation students have not had a chance to develop social skills and acquire social capital growing up. In fact, for many of the participants, it was their first time at Ivy College that they interacted with professionals outside of their households and high schools.

Social life at Ivy College was starkly different among the five participants. Mai’s social life was about learning and understanding how people on campus navigated certain social spaces on-campus, some more successfully than others. Mai observed her peers and learned how they negotiated among their friends. One factor that enhanced her ability to make keen observations was the courses she took in Sociology. John’s social life consisted of extra-curricular activities that interested him. He picked activities that were connected to his field of study. For example, even though John started college studying in a STEM field, however, he quickly became interested in social entrepreneurship, and this interest resulted in his starting a large business-related student organization on-campus. Additionally, John’s other friends came from Model UN where he enjoyed building connections with people who enjoyed “mock trials” and traveling. Outside of these two areas, John did not have any other close friends. Kim had an
interesting approach to making friends at Ivy College. She made strong connections with people who were ethnically and culturally similar to her. Most of her friends were of Asian descent and had similar interests in terms of food preferences, types of movies, and discussion topics. Furthermore, Kim was interested in people who cared about social justice issues. She cared deeply about helping those less fortunate than her by volunteering for a suicide hotline and working pro bono in an office that provided services for immigrants.

Jimmy mainly hung out with Vietnamese students at Ivy College. He said it was what he felt comfortable with because they spoke his language, enjoyed the same food as he did, and understood the traditional family dynamics. Jimmy was adamant about staying connected with his roots. Of all the participants, he was the most recent arrival to the United States at the age of 5 years old. Perhaps this might have had some effect on Jimmy’s ability or willingness to connect with students who were different from him. It could also have meant that he appreciated the rich family traditions and wanted to continue that tradition.

Nicole’s social life was quite different from all the participants. She grew up in a small predominately White town and learned strategies to connect with people who were different from her and yet stay true to her roots. Partly due to that formative experience, Nicole was able to be accepted into one of the most exclusive social clubs on campus. When asked why she thought she was accepted she answered, “I don’t know. I was being my authentic self and maybe people like that.” Perhaps Nicole did not realize that part of her success in navigating and negotiating in these exclusive spaces was because she had been exposed to similar environments and conditions her entire life, and was able to build strong social capital. She experienced this when she was in high school but actually did not realize it. Nicole shared, “For some reason, by the time I was in high school, I was able to navigate social life quite successfully. I had a lot of
friends, mostly the cool kids. I didn’t hang out with the smart kids as much. I’m not sure why. Maybe that’s why I was successful at getting selected for my club at Ivy.” Being accepted to an exclusive social club allowed Nicole to make connections with not just her peers but her parent’s peers as well. This could result in helping her understand the dominant culture, connect her with job and fellowship opportunities, and a myriad of other benefits and opportunities.

The issue of family income and socioeconomic class is a main factor related to cultural and social capital for first-generation students. During college, cultural and social capital show up in certain areas, such as: knowledge of the campus environment and campus culture, access to resources (professors, administrators), access to financial resources, familiarity of the language of the dominant culture, and general ease in navigating the college campus (Bills, 2000; Bourdieu, 1984; Coleman, 1988). Of the five students in the study, only Nicole had some cultural and social capital before attending Ivy College. Nicole grew up and attended a high school in a predominantly White, working to middle class neighborhood. She learned how to navigate the White culture, and knew where to access resources to propel her to be successful. It might also be the reason she was able to be accepted into the most exclusive social club at Ivy College.

Interactions with professors in the classroom and during office hours play an important role in helping first-generation Vietnamese-American students break down barriers and feelings of intimidation with their professors. First-generation students are not equipped with the tools to navigate these types of interactions (Zwick & Sklar, 2005). Many participants in the study noted that they never went to see their professors because they did not know how to interact with them. Mai said, “I cannot really relate with my professors.” This proved to be very problematic for Mai and she could not get sound advice from professors, unlike the other students who got
professors’ attention when they were applying for medical schools. Kim said she had a difficult time finding advisors or professors to write her a letter of recommendation for graduate schools, or serve as a reference. “I don’t think my professor even know who I am. I never speak up in class or go to office hours. How can I ask them for a reference letter if they don’t know me?” Many researchers asserted that out-of-classroom transactions between students and professors produced positive student outcomes (Astin, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991).

Participants in this study expressed the important role their peers played in their college experiences. They said peers strongly influenced their social, personal, and sometimes academic lives. They received job and internship opportunities through their friends. The connections they made with employers were oftentimes through their friends’ parents. When trying to find a summer internship at a reputable financial investment firm, Nicole said she relied on her friend’s parents to help her connect to the hiring manager. “My friend’s parents helped me prepare for the interview, and it was very helpful.” Furthermore, Ivy College’s role in helping first-generation students find meaningful connections with their peers was critical to their overall success. Nicole said getting internships was pretty competitive and frustrating at the same time. However, she said, “If you have the right connections, it not too bad, I guess.”

Finally, this research shows that every participant gained social and cultural capital as a result of attending Ivy College. However, some participants gained social and cultural capital than others. This is evidenced by their ability to get access to people, resources, and opportunities at Ivy College. It also showed that pre-secondary preparation played a critical role in setting these students up for gaining more social and cultural capital once they arrive on campus. What was interesting was that some participants, such as John and Nicole, recognized
their social and cultural gains. They were cognizant of what they needed to do to connect with people and what the end results of these connections were going to be. For other participants, they had yet to realize the strides they had made up to this point. Kim’s comment regarding the meaning of her college degree at Ivy College was quite surprising. While she was among one of the most elite college graduates in the world, Kim felt her degree will not bring her much success. When pressed what she meant by this she was not sure.

**Parental Influence**

Participants expressed numerous reasons for attending college; however, one of the most important reasons was the influence of their parents. Five out of five participants in the study reported that their parents, family, and community leaders played a crucial role in their decisions to attend college. Participants shared that parental support and encouragement of postsecondary education was one of the top reasons they attended college. Participants shared that their parents wanted them to have a better life than they themselves did, and that they felt that by going to college and obtaining a college degree their children would be able to do that. Their parents believed that finding a job with a decent salary and health benefits was the “American dream.” This is how their parents viewed the true definition of success. Participants shared that their parents attributed a lack of college degree to their low-income status. Therefore, the parents’ deeply held beliefs, resulting from their own experiences, led many of them to instill in their children the importance of a college degree.

Parental support persisted throughout college with regular phone calls. However, all of the participants in the study expressed that they did not discuss their academic study with their parents, fearing that the parents would not understand the particulars. The conversations were
rather superficial vis-a-vis sleeping, eating, making sure they did not party too much, and the
weather. Most parents did not understand the importance of balancing academics with co-
curricular activities and sports. They also did not understand the importance of building
relationships and networking, and building social capital. As a result, students felt disconnected
from their parents when it came to talking about academics, social life, internships, and
postgraduate jobs. Unlike their peers, they could not rely on their parents to help them navigate
the job search or to introduce them to people that were potential hiring managers or who knew
people who were hiring.

Hoffer et al. (2003) suggested that access to elite group memberships is very difficult for
first-generation students, given such factors as lower socioeconomic status, educational status,
and underrepresented minority status. This was certainly the case with the Vietnamese-
American students in this study. All five students did not rely on their parents to help them with
college life, academic support, and outreach for jobs and internships. This research revealed that
Vietnamese parents tended to believe their children must focus on their studies and get good
grades, and not focus on extra-curricular activities and sports. It was exactly why they believed
their child had gotten into a great school. All participants expressed sadness when it came to
their inability to connect with their parents and wanting to ask them about career options,
graduate studies, and fellowships. Participants expressed that their non-first-generation friends
seemed to know what they wanted and how to gain access to certain resources. They felt their
friends received help from their parents. For example, Nicole expressed the discontent she felt
towards her peers when it came to looking for summer internships. “It’s early spring semester,
many months before summer starts, and all my friends have summer internships lined up.
They’d ask me where I was working. I would be embarrassed to say to them that I don’t have
one yet. There’s a lot of pressure during junior spring.” Current research show that first-generation students differ in significant ways from their non-first-generation peers when it comes to parental involvement in the college-going process (Meseus, 2011; Pascarella, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004). These differences do play a crucial role in the educational aspirations and attainments of first-generation students in the pre-college years, during college, and post-baccalaureate endeavors. The study by Pascarella, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) showed that parental involvement in postsecondary education has a significant influence on students’ academic and nonacademic experience, and the cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes of college. In addition, Billson and Terry (1982), who studied first-generation students at two Midwestern liberal arts colleges, concluded that first-generation students did not structurally integrate into the college setting as readily as their second-generation peers. They also concluded that both college groups, shared aspirations for college attainment, but first-generation students left college not convinced that college was the best way to attain success.

Parents who encourage their children to go to college, even though they are not familiar with the college application process, make the difference in how students view college attainment and graduation. All five students in the study valued their relationships with their parents, the unwavering support they received from them, and the endless love they received. However, the students wished they could connect with their parents on the academic level, and wished that the parents were able to help them navigate the college environment. They wanted to be able to share with their parents how they were doing in school, what issues they were experiencing, and how to balance academic and extracurricular activities. For example, Jimmy was often unsure whether he should put in an extra two to three hours to study for an exam or go to a networking reception, where he had the potential of meeting hiring professionals. This was
something he wished he could have gotten some advice from his parents about. However, he realized his parents will just tell him to study. Nicole expressed that were grades were not as high as she would have liked, and was often conflicted about going a dance party with her club members. “There’s usually a social event every Saturday night, and this is the one time I get to hang out with the male and female club members. Sometimes I go and other times I have to prepare for an exam. I hate missing out.”

As evidenced by the data in this study, positive emotional and social support from family members, friends, and parents were critical in encouraging a positive outlook and academic success for first-generation students. Mai credited several people who were important to her academic success and eventual acceptance to Ivy College. These people included her grandfather, her older sister, her good friend in high school, and a young man that she met at a conference at another highly selective college. Mai said her grandfather was a motivating factor because, “He was present all the time.” The results from this study showed these first-generation Vietnamese-American students represent not only themselves but their entire family, and their hopes and dreams rest on the student’s success – their ability to graduate, find a good paying job, and support the family. Furthermore, these students serve as a role model to younger children in the family or relatives in hopes they could inspire and help the new generation of future scholars.

The literature indicates that the ability of first-generation students’ parents to be involved may be constrained by a host of other variables that accompany first-generation status, such as lower socioeconomic status, fewer resources, less parental integration into the professional workforce, and less familiarity with the college-going process (Terenzini et al., 1996; Warburton et al., 2001). The data from this study support the findings from these studies. First-generation
parents can only do so much to support their children, and they understand the limitations of that support.

**Implications for First-Generation Vietnamese-American Students**

Two million people fled Vietnam between the end of the war in 1975 and in the mid-1990s (Hunt, 2002). Almost 800,000 left on fishing boats, and most headed for Hong Kong, Malaysia or Indonesia (Hunt, 2002). Widely known as the ‘boat people’, many of them often did not survive the treacherous journey because their boats sank, were attacked by pirates, or they died of starvation. Those people who reached land usually found themselves in refugee camps, as other countries in Southeast Asia were reluctant to accept them. The majority were eventually taken in by the U.S., though Australia and Canada also welcomed substantial numbers. Although the boat people never expected to return to Vietnam, at least while the communist government was in power, many have since visited their homeland. As many new Vietnamese immigrants set down roots for themselves and their families, they focused their attention on the younger generation and their future. Education became a focal point for Vietnamese families. This is where they have focused much of their time, energy, and resources (Alger, 1998).

As a result of their journey to a foreign land, Vietnamese people have developed a culture that places a strong emphasis on being part of a community and that underscores the importance of family (Alger, 1998). The Vietnamese people believe that one’s individualism is below the needs of the family and community. This is how Vietnamese families survived traditionally. Children are duty-bound to take care of their families. America, on the other hand, believes in the power of individual development (Alger, 1998). Americans are often told to follow their dreams and have ambition in whatever they want to do. The philosophy is to take care of oneself.
first before considering other people. The Vietnamese-American culture conflicts with this philosophy, where they have to negotiate between their own needs and dreams with that of their family. In some way, for Asian immigrants, to learn to negotiate between the individual and the community is the most important lesson they have learned, a skill much needed in order to navigate both cultures.

There is much evidence from the participants in the study that showed the impact of bicultural conflict, gender role, and ethnic identification. As the Vietnamese culture begins to take shape in the American society, young Vietnamese are facing difficulties in balancing between these two cultures. For example, Kim talked about the pressure she felt from her mother. Her mother would constantly remind her and her sister, “You have to go to a good college. You have to find a way to pay for your education. You have to get a good job.” Kim understood that she must fulfill her duty as a young Vietnamese woman to not disappoint her parents. She must succeed so her parents do not regret leaving Vietnam. John experienced something similar, in that his relatives expected him to become a medical doctor because he was attending an elite institution. They often reminded him of his responsibility to get a good paying job so he could support his parents when they get old, and that they have someone to be proud of.

The tensions between individual self-fulfillment and commitment to the family and community have an impact in the quality of life and psychological well-being on the young Vietnamese generation. They are constantly being reminded that they came from nothing, and from a poor country that did not allow them to go to school. Now, it was their chance to take advantage of this great educational opportunity in the United States. These students were often
reminded by their parents and other people in the Vietnamese community that they were the lucky or chosen one, and that there were so many young children who did not make it safely to American. John shared in his interview that, “My parents worked extremely hard to provide a great life for me and my brother. They gave up their lives in Vietnam to come here for a better life. I’m thankful for that.” It is evident that John wanted to make his parents proud. As a result, he must continue to do well in school.

The first-generation Vietnamese-American student experience is a unique one. First, family values and traditions are critical within the Vietnamese culture, and this cultural aspect was amply evident with all five of the students in the study, across gender lines. The Vietnamese family tradition is historically patriarchal, where the father, or in some cases the eldest son, makes all the decisions for the family. Young girls and women work to serve the men in the family. While some aspects of this tradition may have faded due to acculturation to the United States, remnants still exist in many Vietnamese-American families. Two of the three female participants in the study expressed having feelings of obligation to family, which meant they felt a responsibility to move back home after graduation. It was also implied through their conversations with their parents.

Second, Vietnamese parents are different from other Asian groups, such as Chinese parents, in that they do not seek out attention to themselves or to their families. In recent years, there have been many discussions about the “tiger moms”, where Chinese mothers push their children to the limits, in order to make them competitive for college acceptance and other things in life. Vietnamese parents do care about their children’s education, but they would not push their children to resent or go against them. In all five narratives, the students never once mentioned
that they were pressured to do more than they possibly could in school. Parents expressed the importance of education, but they were often hands-off when it came to making college decisions, and on some occasions, decisions around career choices.

Third, Vietnamese people are fairly new immigrants to the U.S. compared to other Asians groups, i.e., Japanese, Chinese, and Korean. As a result, they have not had many generations of college graduates from American colleges and universities to guide the younger generations. Social and cultural capital theories state that we gain social and cultural capital through sustained exposure to individuals and membership (Bills, 2000; Bourdieu, 1986). In essence, social and cultural capital comes from interactions over a period of time between individuals. As the title of this research denotes, first-generation Vietnamese-American college students work diligently to build social and cultural capital in order to influence the next generation of Vietnamese-American college students. As evidenced by the testimonies of the five students in the study, they all have gained some social and cultural capital by attending Ivy College, and have branched out to other people through social clubs and student organizations.

Finally, despite the odds these first-generation Vietnamese-American students face, they end up fighting for every opportunity that they have to work so hard on. They work extremely hard to do well, build good relationships with people, and are often thankful for the opportunities they have been given. Some of the hard work and resiliency can be attributed to the Vietnamese’s history and their survival through many generations of turmoil and political unrest in their own country. Vietnam has been occupied by countries much more powerful than they are since the 19th century. The Vietnamese have not had freedom and democracy for over 200 years. As a result, hundreds of thousands of the Vietnamese have fled their homeland to seek for
a new life for future generations. Perhaps this constant chaos and turmoil have built a culture that is strong, resilient, and humble. We see this in the students in the study. They express appreciation for Ivy College, and for the opportunity to receive a first-rate education and a generous financial aid package. In the future, they will look back at the friends they made while attending Ivy College, and realized how important these relationships will benefit them and their children.

Ivy College gave these first-generation Vietnamese-American students a chance by admitting them, and these students took advantage of the opportunity that was given to them. Ivy College expanded their support further by providing full financial aid to those students who were low-income, many of whom were also first-generation college students (Anonymous, 2015). However, these students had the best chances of being successful when faculty, staff, and senior administrators provided the infrastructure and advising, in working collaboratively to achieve a common goal. First-generation Vietnamese-American college students bring unique and diverse experiences to the student body, and add a rich story to the life and learning environment at a school such as Ivy College. The success of these first-generation Vietnamese-American students and others like them depends not simply on the individual merits of these students or the quality of the schools they attend, but also on the social and cultural capital provided to them by the communities surrounding them. When these young students succeed in the American educational system, they can move into new powerful positions in the American social structure. Hopefully, in the process, being Vietnamese is part of becoming American.
Recommendations for Practice

Ivy College has continued to recruit talented students to its institution and provide need-blind and generous financial packages to low-income, first-generation college students. Need-blind admissions and generous financial aid packages are two policies at Ivy College that have been critical in ensuring first-generation students are given an opportunity to attend an elite institution and not have to worry about financial constraints (Anonymous, 2015). However, once these students matriculate, this institution must set them up for success. Below are some suggestions of how Ivy College and similar institutions can do to support the first-generation Vietnamese-American students.

1) Vietnamese students who arrive at Ivy College are often overwhelmed, intimidated, and feel alone in their experience. For some, it might have been the first time they set foot on campus. It would be helpful for these students if they were assigned to a current Vietnamese student to help orient them, and introduce them to the school. Most participants in the study expressed the importance of having an person who had been through similar experiences like themselves, and who could understand what the they were going through. Ivy College could reach out to current Asian administrators and faculty members who are themselves first-generation, and asked if they would be interested mentoring a first year Vietnamese student.

2) Ivy College should coordinate outreach with departments across the campus from academic advising to mental health services, from student affairs to financial aid. These departments should reach out to Vietnamese students in a more coordinated
way, targeting their messages to these students, and hiring staff members that are first-generation themselves.

3) Training of staff to include the history of Vietnamese students and understanding their culture is important. In addition, setting up a panel discussion with first-generation Vietnamese-American students would help staff have a better understanding of this population.

4) Students in this study expressed that when they reached out to mental health services they had to wait for a couple months for the first available appointment. The students expressed disappointment that they had to wait so long to see a therapist. Furthermore, when they do see a therapist, they felt the therapist was not empathetic to their situation or simply dismissed their experience as something that all students go through. I recommend hiring more therapists with similar backgrounds as Vietnamese students to have a stronger connection with them and decrease the wait time.

Do Not Paint One Broad Stroke

While the portraits of the participants in this study share many similarities, first-generation status being one of them, it reminds us that not all first-generation college students are alike, and their experiences vary from person to person. These elite institutions often seek students who are self-sufficient, independent, and resourceful. However, resourcefulness comes more easily for students who understand the college environment and its complexities because they have people in their lives who can support them. The data from this study indicate that first-generation Vietnamese-American students can find the elite college environment
overwhelming and difficult to navigate, and that these students can often feel out of place. It is
the institution’s responsibility to ensure that all students succeed, not just certain students. In the
end, the coordinated, integrated approach called for here will benefit everyone, including
students, families, and the institutions themselves.

Admissions and financial aid officers should partner with high school counselors to
provide guidance and support to first-generation Vietnamese-American students, and invite
Vietnamese alumni to come back and talk about their experience. It is important for institutions
to hire first-generation Vietnamese-American college students from within to go back to their
high schools to recruit first-generation students and share their stories. There is a strong
correlation between these students and those who end up applying to college and eventually
matriculating (Lin, 2001).

Furthermore, elite institutions should provide accommodations and airfare for first-
generation Vietnamese students to visit their campuses before they decide to attend their school.
When the students do visit the campus, schools can connect them with current first-generation
Vietnamese-American students. This initial connection will make a difference once the student
starts school. They would then have someone who they are familiar with to help them with the
transition of being at a new campus.

**Topics Identified for Future Studies**

It is clear that additional research needs to be done on this population. This study has
contributed to the limited knowledge and literature on the experience of first-generation
Vietnamese-American students at an elite institution, and there are more opportunities to study
other aspects of this topic. For example, it would benefit colleges and universities to understand
how Vietnamese-American students choose their first job out of college, and why they made that choice. Does being from a lower socioeconomic status impact their decision? Another research topic on Vietnamese-American students could be the impact that older siblings play, particularly those siblings who have a college degree. Does it impact the college navigating experience for these students? Finally, a study on the impact of Vietnamese-American students attending private, preparatory secondary schools and their preparation for college would be useful in understanding pre-college preparation. Do these private schools do an effective job in helping these students gain social and cultural capital?

Conclusion

Over the course of the 2014-2015 academic year, I interviewed five first-generation Vietnamese-American college students at Ivy College, and collected and analyzed the data to effectively answer the research questions that guide this study. The participants were open, honest, and allowed themselves to be vulnerable in the interviews. The research questions were guided by the following areas: personal experience as it relates to first-generation status at a highly selective college, support from family, friends, and institution, and social and cultural capital. These findings reflect the unique experiences of each student in the study. Many of the participants’ expectations, perceptions, and outcomes were similar, yet each student brought a unique perspective to the study. Every participant faced successes and failures in his or her particular way with resiliency and self-confidence.

The significance of this study can be measured in a few areas. First, this is one of the few studies on first-generation students in an elite college setting, and perhaps the first using portraiture methodology. Second, this study is the first on first-generation Vietnamese-American students at a highly selective private institution. Third, the findings in this study will support the
existing literature that first-generation Vietnamese-American students, regardless of where they attend college, experience a multitude of barriers and obstacle they must overcome in order to graduate from college. Finally, this study will pique the interest of future researchers who might be interested in exploring other variables that affect first-generation college students at elite institutions, such as pre-college preparation, the effect of mentorship, and sibling impact on first-generation students.

As this study and others have shown, students who are the first in their family to go to college are considered at-risk (Ishitani, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996). First-generation college students are likely to grow up in low-income households, receive little or no support from parents, work long hours in college, and receive poor preparation in high school (Terenzini et al., 1996). Based on the interviews of the participants in this study, they lacked social and cultural capital to help them navigate the elite college environment. However, in spite of these obstacles, one commonality among these students was that they each found a way to navigate forward and overcome obstacles. They drew on their parent’s migration experience and the strength they possess in leaving Vietnam and coming to foreign land where they did not know anyone nor were they family with the language, culture, and social environment. These students also drew on the resiliency factor they possess and emphasizing hard work and strong family ties. This research points to the fact that first-generation college students should not have to navigate this environment on their own, but rather, these institutions need to provide substantial resources and support to help them be successful. The prescriptions recommended in this study point to a future where all first-generation Vietnamese-American college students no longer feel isolated, lost, and forgotten, but rather perceive being first-generation as a badge of honor, an integral part of both their personal identity and a factor in shaping a positive experience in college.
Appendix A

Interview Protocol
The purpose of this study is to better understand the lived experience of first-generation Vietnamese American students at elite colleges in the United States. As elite institutions accept more students of color they are attracting and enrolling record number of low-income students and first-generation students of color. This demographic of the student population has changed dramatically in the last decade. This study will attempt to better understand the experience of first-generation Vietnamese students in an environment that has historically been solely reserved for the wealthy and white, and to help elite institutions understand how best to support a growing population of students.

This study is intended to learn about your experience as a student here at Harvard College. Specifically, I am interested in learning about your experience as it relates to being a first-generation Vietnamese American student at Harvard. Today I’d also like to talk about issues of socioeconomic class, decision-making, and your overall experience at Harvard. Do you have any questions? Let’s get started.

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Tell me about your best experience at Harvard thus far.
3. What is a typical weekday like for you?
4. What is a typical weekend day like for you?
5. Are there ways that finances and/or your family’s economic situation have affected your undergraduate experience?
6. How would you describe your conversation about money with your peers?
7. Tell me about your peer groups.
8. With whom do you socialize?
9. What do you do together?
10. Do you have more affluent peers?
11. Do they tend to be other Vietnamese students, or students who are not people of color?
12. Do you receive any financial aid from Harvard?
13. Tell me about your work experience while in college.
14. Let’s talk about your academic pursuits at Harvard. Do you feel that your high school has
prepared you for the academic requirements at Harvard?
15. What about in relation to your peers?
16. Describe your experience with the curriculum. In your academic pursuits, have issues of
   personal finances or socioeconomic class ever been evident? When? How?
17. Describe two or three of the academic challenges that you have faced as a student at Harvard.
18. Describe your academic relationships with professors and academic advisors.
19. Do you feel that you have had to work harder than other students to earn a good grade? Why?
20. How do you identify yourself?
21. What labels do you apply to your identity?
22. Let’s focus on your extracurricular activities. What have you been involved in during your
time at Harvard?
23. What more can Harvard do to support you?
24. If I were entering Harvard for the first time as a freshman, what advice would you give me?
25. Are there thoughts you’d like to share about other aspects of your experience or other items
you’d like to discuss that we’ve not touched upon today?

At this point in the interview, I will try to summarize some points of the student’s experience,
using some of their own words and taking a minute to see if there are other questions that I could
ask (also cognizant of time and student’s continued interest).
Unsigned Informed Consent Document

Appendix B
Unsigned Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, School of Professional Studies, Department of Education

Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Lynda Beltz (Principal Investigator), Loc Truong (Student Investigator)

Title of Project: First in the Family: How High-Achieving, First-Generation Vietnamese-American Students Navigate the Elite College Environment, a Study Using Portraiture Methodology.

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

You are being asked to participate in a research to better understand the experiences of first-generation Vietnamese-American students who attend elite colleges. You were selected as a possible participant because you have been identified as a student who is both a first-generation college student and Vietnamese-American, and because you are currently enrolled in an elite college. Please read this form thoroughly and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to participate in this study.

This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decided to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview with me that will focus on your experience as a first-generation Vietnamese student at Ivy College (pseudonym).

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this study is to better understand the lived experience of first-generation Vietnamese American students at elite colleges in the United States. As elite institutions accept more students of color they are attracting and enrolling record number of low-income students and first-generation students of color. This demographic of the student population has changed
dramatically in the last decade. This study will attempt to better understand the experience of first-generation Vietnamese students in an environment that has historically been solely reserved for the wealthy and white, and to help elite institutions understand how best to support a growing population of students.

**What will I be asked to do?**

You will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview.

**Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?**

If you are interested in participating, I will schedule a time and location that is convenient for you. The location is entirely up to you and convenient for you. The interview will take between 30-60 minutes. Brief (less than thirty minutes) follow-up interviews or telephone conversations may be conducted, as needed and if you are willing. You will be invited to review the interview transcript and make corrections.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

There no risks associated with this study. However, some questions may elicit personal reactions or feelings that are unanticipated. All questions are optional, however, and you should never feel compelled to answer questions for which you are uncomfortable. As a participant in this study, you may request to receive a copy of the summary findings upon completion of this project.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study.

However, one benefit of this study may be in knowing that you will have contributed significantly to the understanding of the experience of first-generation Vietnamese students at one elite college and how they navigate that environment. To date there are very few studies of this population of students in elite institutions. The results of this study will be shared with the institution and with the larger network of scholars in higher education. It could help to educate advisors and higher education administrators in how to best support these students in elite college environments.
**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project.

The records created in this study will be kept private. Transcriptions will not include your name or any other identifying information. Research records will be kept in a locked file in my home office. No persons at your institution will be given access to your responses, now or in the future. All electronic information will be coded and secured using a password-protected file. The researcher is the only person who will have access to the recorded files, and when he is finished transcribing and analyzing them, they will be destroyed. Access to the records will be limited to only the researcher.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board see this information.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of your participation in this research.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a student at Ivy College.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

The researcher conducting this study is Loc Truong, a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Department of Education. If you have any questions about this research, you may also contact Loc Truong’s faculty advisor, Dr. Lynda Beltz,
If you have any questions about the research, about your rights as a research participant, or if you experience any research-related harm or injury, you may contact Loc Truong at truong.lo@husky.neu.edu or by phone at 617-496-2371.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

You will receive the following payment to compensate you for the time it takes to participate in this study: a $10 American Express gift card at the end of the interview.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

There is no cost to you to participate in this study.

**I agree to take part in this research.**

____________________________________________  ________________________  
Signature of person agreeing to take part  Date

______________________________________________  
Printed name of person above

____________________________________________  ________________________  
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent  Date

______________________________________________  
Printed name of person above
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