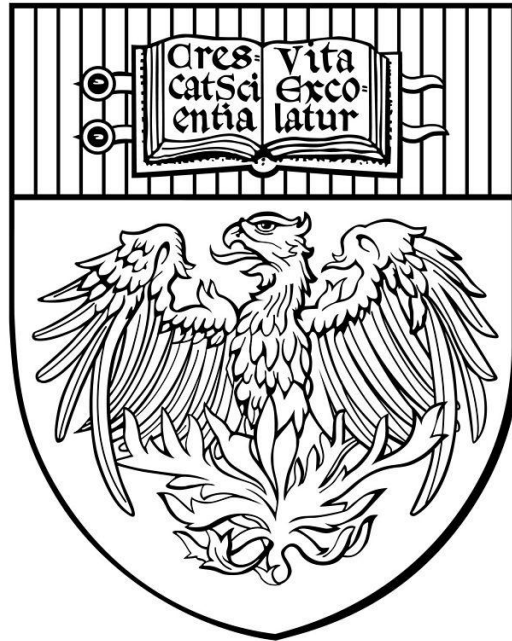


**Belonging and Uncertainty in Elite Institutions:
A Case Study of Chicago Public School Graduates at
UChicago and Northwestern University**

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Abstract

This thesis explores how CPS students transition to elite universities like Northwestern University and the University of Chicago, focusing on differences in preparation between selective enrollment and neighborhood schools. The study examines strategies students use to navigate belonging, particularly regarding affluence and exposure differences. It emphasizes the need to avoid generalizations about CPS graduates, highlighting diverse identities and challenges. Qualitative interviews with 12 CPS alumni at UChicago and Northwestern reveal four navigation strategies: community building, identity renegotiation, selecting supportive courses or majors, and symbolic boundary setting. The thesis recommends policies to support CPS graduates' transition, address preparation gaps, promote equitable opportunities, foster belonging, and reshape the narrative of who belongs in elite academic spaces, prioritizing every student's value and capability.

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Introduction

The disparities within the Chicago Public School (CPS) system have far-reaching consequences, which are particularly evident in the contrasting educational experiences between students attending neighborhood schools and those in selective enrollment institutions. This research aims to investigate how these disparate pre-college experiences impact the strategies students use to navigate spaces and construct a sense of belonging upon entering elite institutions like the University of Chicago (UChicago) and Northwestern University.

The Chicago Public School system, characterized by long standing disparities across neighborhoods, is emblematic of the educational inequality prevalent in many urban settings (Noltemeyer et al., 2012). This disparity is illustrated by the tier system implemented in selective enrollment schools, aiming to bridge the resource gap among various parts of the city. Students experience contrasting school environments: homogeneous student bodies are prevalent in neighborhood schools, while selective enrollment schools tend to be more integrated (Parrish & Ikoru, 2022). The transition of students from both contexts to elite institutions designed to foster social mobility is a critical object of analysis. This research holds significance in evaluating whether students admitted to elite institutions can effectively actualize the opportunities presented. Their ability to navigate the challenges within elite institutions, through community building, identity renegotiation, selecting supportive courses or majors, and symbolic boundary setting, significantly influences their capacity to leverage education for future mobility. Understanding how students make sense of the obstacles they encounter is crucial to empower them and enable more effective preparation for their transition into elite academic spaces.

This research seeks to offer an open-ended forum for CPS students to express their perspectives and experiences. It seeks to offer policymakers and educators a deeper

understanding of the nuanced experiences of CPS students regarding their sense of belonging within elite higher education spaces. This study specifically focuses on examining the differences between CPS neighborhood and selective enrollment high schools and their implications for students' sense of belonging, specifically the strategies used to navigate that belonging, at their universities. The research highlighted in the literature review aligns with existing studies portraying how differing pre-college experiences can impact students' sense of belonging, aspirations, and performance within elite institutions (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Jack, 2019; Jack & Black, 2022; Offidani-Bertrand et al., 2022; Walton and Cohen, 2007). In essence, this research aims to shed light on how varying pre-college experiences within the CPS system shape students' navigation of college spaces and the implications of these experiences on their sense of belonging within elite academic institutions.

Background

In Chicago there are a variety of high school options for students. In this paper I will be focusing on Chicago Public Schools (CPS), specifically on neighborhood high schools and selective enrollment high schools. A selective enrollment high school is a Chicago Public High School that provides academically advanced students with a challenging college preparatory experience. The definitions for neighborhood schools and selective enrollment schools, per To & Through Data Definitions (2022a), are as follows:

“Neighborhood schools are defined as “CPS schools that have a defined attendance boundary. All CPS students have an assigned high school based on their residential address. If a student lives within a schools' attendance boundary, it is known as their “assigned neighborhood school”. Some neighborhood schools also accept students who do not live within their attendance boundary. Neighborhood — Assigned: Students who attend a neighborhood school and have a residential address within that school's attendance boundaries. Neighborhood — Other: Students who attend a neighborhood school and who have a residential address outside of that school's attendance boundaries.” (To&Through Project, 2022a).

Selective enrollment schools are defined as:

“CPS schools that admit students from across the city. Students must apply to gain admission; criteria for admission include students’ grades and scores on standardized tests and an entrance exam, and the majority of seats are allocated according to a tiered system based on socioeconomic status. No student is guaranteed a seat based on their home address” (To&Through Project, 2022a).

Chicago has a long history of residential segregation which clearly translates to the education system and opportunities offered to students. This particularly affects low income communities because the schools in those neighborhoods do not offer the same resources as those in higher income communities (Jankov & Caref, 2017). As a result, students’ opportunities in the education and career realm are not as plentiful, and they are penalized because of their socioeconomic status (Jankov & Caref, 2017). By virtue of this structure, students as young as 12 years old (7th grade, when the high school admissions process starts) are made responsible for their educational opportunities. CPS considers several factors when determining students’ eligibility for high school enrollment, including their seventh-grade core course grades, standardized test scores, and high school entrance exam performance. However, it is important to note that low-income families, who may lack the necessary resources to send their children to non-neighborhood high schools, often face limited options within the available choices. The CPS system has enabled a competitive atmosphere through their school choice policy that only promises students the possibility to attend certain schools, often their neighborhood schools (Phillippo, 2019). Hence, students still must compete to be accepted into selective enrollment Chicago high schools. Correspondingly, CPS’s school choice policy should be understood as a competitive school choice policy (Phillippo, 2019). In 2009, CPS recognized the inequality that this system was perpetuating, and they aspired to create equal opportunity for all students aiming to attend a selective enrollment high school (Phillippo, 2019). The competitive choice policy was

framed as a way to enable upward social mobility, especially for students who come from low-income families, but in practice, such a system means that there must be downward social mobility for others (Phillippo, 2019). Unfortunately, the “others” were predominantly individuals who come from low-income families.

To level the playing field, CPS divided the available seats in selective enrollment and magnet schools among four socioeconomic tiers (Leone, n.d.). The issue with this attempt was the structure that it created. In the same way that CPS previously did not take student backgrounds into consideration, they did not sufficiently consider urban inequality, particularly in the context of Chicago’s deeply entrenched residential segregation. Chicago is a city known for its stark divisions along racial and socioeconomic lines, with neighborhoods often segregated based on income levels and racial demographics (The Cost of Segregation, 2017).

This residential segregation directly impacts educational inequality in several ways. Firstly, it results in starkly different quality of schools and resources available to students depending on their neighborhood. High-poverty areas, which are often predominantly populated by minority communities due to historical housing policies and economic disparities, tend to have underfunded schools with limited resources, lower-performing teachers, and fewer extracurricular opportunities (Duncombe, 2017). Conversely, affluent neighborhoods with predominantly white populations typically have well-funded schools, experienced teachers, and a wide array of academic and extracurricular programs (Duncombe, 2017).

CPS’s methodology recognized residential segregation and the lack of resources that it provides low-income communities. However, by relying solely on socioeconomic factors without delving deeper into the root causes of urban inequality and the impact of residential segregation on educational opportunities, CPS’s approach unintentionally legitimizes these

inequalities. For instance, by allocating seats based on socioeconomic tiers, CPS indirectly perpetuates the cycle of unequal access to quality education, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to face barriers to accessing the same level of educational resources and opportunities as their more affluent peers (Phillippo, 2019).

Furthermore, CPS's methodology fails to address the systemic issues that contribute to Chicago's residential segregation and educational inequality, such as discriminatory housing policies, unequal distribution of resources, and persistent racial and economic disparities (Jankov & Caref, 2017). Thus, while CPS's efforts may aim to promote equity (Chicago Public Schools, 2024), the lack of comprehensive solutions to tackle the underlying causes of urban inequality ultimately hinders progress towards truly leveling the playing field for all students.

CPS made an important effort to address the scarcity of resources, but unfortunately, the approach taken inadvertently fostered feelings of isolation and intellectual inferiority. For example, the socioeconomic tiers are numbered 1 through 4, and Tier 1 is considered the "lowest" tier because a student can get a lower score than someone in Tier 4 and get into the same high school. This approach does not take gentrification of neighborhoods into consideration. Hence, it benefits the most advantaged within each tier. Specifically, this phenomenon is most prominent in socioeconomically diverse and gentrifying neighborhoods where lower-income students must compete against affluent students for the limited spots and subsequently the otherwise unattainable resources that these spots offer (Phillippo, 2019). CPS's stratification and sorting of students based on test performance creates a hierarchy among students because they know of the concept of the tier system, what it encompasses, and what it signifies. Students who achieve higher scores are perceived to be at the top of the hierarchy, while those with lower scores are considered to be lower in the hierarchy. This sorting reinforces

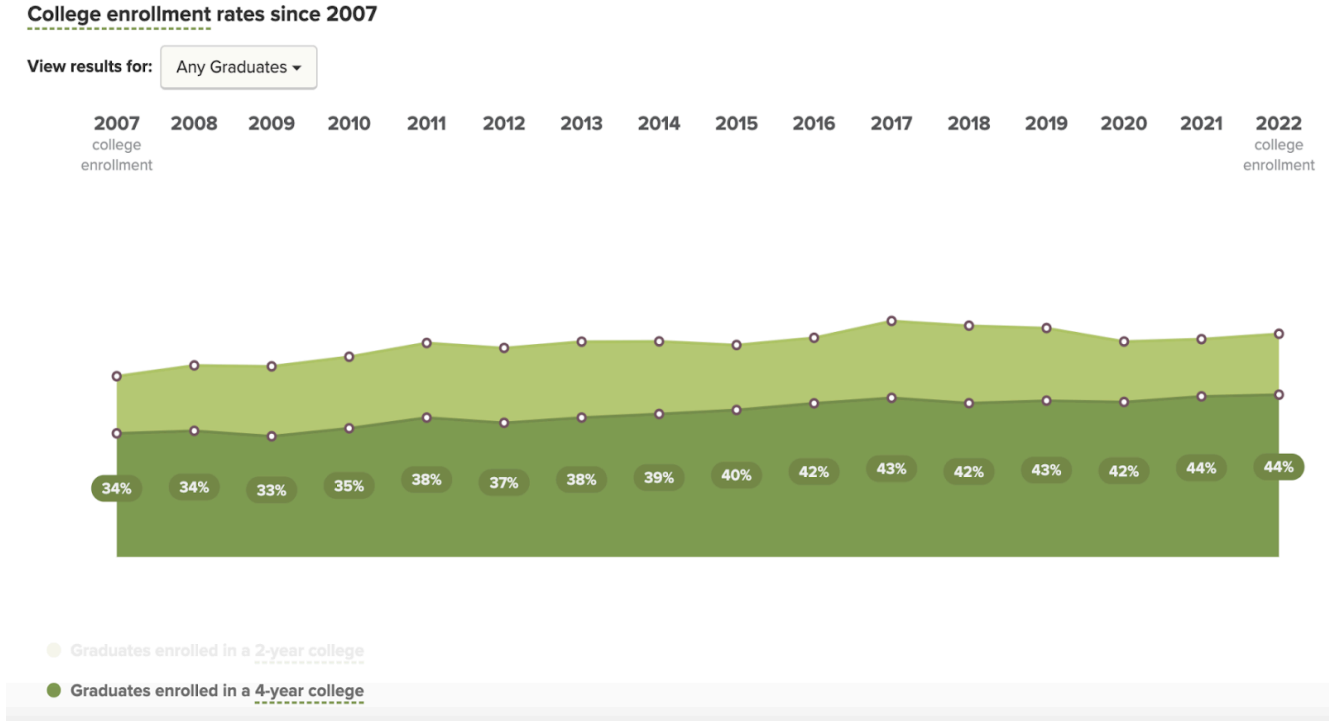
a perceived social and academic status among students (Leone, n.d.). Therefore, the inequalities that exist are perpetuated and legitimized. By sorting students based on test performance, the system reinforces the notion that academic abilities can be accurately measured and that a student's worth is determined by their test scores (Antonovics et al., 2022). This legitimizes the existing inequalities by implying that those who perform well on tests are inherently more deserving of educational opportunities and resources. This awareness further perpetuates the inequalities as students internalize and conform to the expectations and stereotypes associated with their tier. It can create a sense of self-doubt and undermine the confidence of students in lower tiers, while those in higher tiers may develop a sense of entitlement and superiority (Walker-Berry, 2019). Moreover, the categorization based on test scores can reinforce pre-existing social and economic disparities. Students from privileged backgrounds, who have test preparation resources and support, tend to achieve higher scores, whereas students from disadvantaged backgrounds face barriers that impact their performance (Giersch, 2018). This further solidifies the inequalities by linking academic success to socioeconomic advantages.

Additionally, CPS contributes to deficit thinking by categorizing certain communities into the "lower tiers" due to their limited educational resources (Angrist et al., 2019). This can lead students to internalize the belief that they are less intelligent if they are admitted to selective schools with lower test scores than their peers from higher tiers. Consequently, selective enrollment schools can become harmful learning environments, fostering feelings of isolation and intellectual inferiority. Accordingly, this is how CPS's competitive school choice policy became a stratifying agent that establishes hierarchies within selective enrollment high schools.

Considering the potential impact of stereotypes, feelings of isolation and intellectual inferiority within a student's CPS high school experience, it's plausible that these factors may

extend into their college journey. This could result in varying levels of uncertainty regarding belonging, leading students to create symbolic boundaries and rely on other diverse strategies to navigate elite institutions such as community building, identity renegotiation, and selecting supportive courses or majors – as I will discuss in the findings, below.

Moreover, examining a CPS student’s transition from high school to college holds significant interest due to several factors, including graduation rates and the universities they attend. For instance, data from the To&Through Project illustrates the college enrollment rates since 2007 into 4-year institutions for CPS graduates, encompassing a wide range of students categorized as “Any Graduates” which merges “Graduates with Selective College Access,” “Graduates with Somewhat Selective College Access,” and “Graduates with 2-Year College Access” (To&Through Project, 2022a).



Source: To&Through Project, 2022b

This shows that less than half of CPS graduates enroll at 4-year institutions. This information is important in putting into context who the students I will be speaking to are. To&Through further categorizes students based on their graduating GPA and ACT scores (or converted SAT scores) in order to predict their level of college access. Those falling within the “selective access” bracket are more likely to secure admission in selective and highly selective four-year colleges. Conversely, students in the “somewhat selective access” category tend to be accepted into somewhat selective and non-selective four-year colleges, while those in the “two-year access” group are likely to gain admission to two-year colleges. These groupings serve to guide students in identifying potential admission opportunities and aid educational institutions in understanding the enrollment tendencies among students with different levels of access to college.

		Unweighted GPA in Core Courses				
		< 2.0	2.0–2.4	2.5–2.9	3.0–3.4	3.5–4.0
Composite SAT Scores	Missing SAT	Two-year colleges	Non-selective four-year colleges	Somewhat selective colleges	Selective colleges	Selective colleges
	< 960	Two-year colleges	Non-selective four-year colleges	Somewhat selective colleges	Somewhat selective colleges	Selective colleges
	960 – 1050	Non-selective four-year colleges	Somewhat selective colleges	Somewhat selective colleges	Selective colleges	Selective / very selective colleges
	1060 – 1150	Somewhat selective colleges	Somewhat selective colleges	Selective colleges	Selective / very selective colleges	Selective / very selective colleges
	1160+	Somewhat selective colleges	Selective / very selective colleges	Selective / very selective colleges	Very selective colleges	Very selective colleges

	Students with Selective College Access
	Students with Somewhat Selective College Access
	Students with Limited College Access

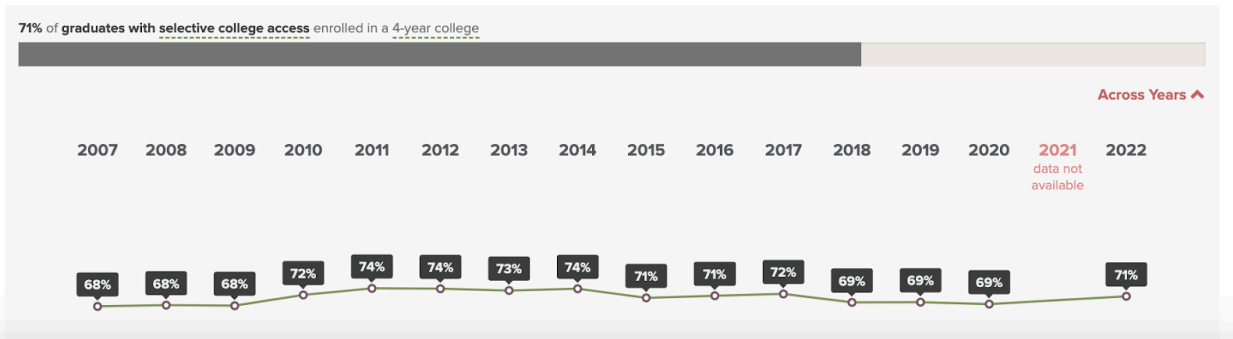
Source: To&Through Project, 2022a

Compare 2022's college enrollment rates of Chicago Public Schools students by college access level who immediately enrolled in:

Any Colleges 4-year Colleges 2-year Colleges

Expand all

College access level data do not include graduates of charter schools, who make up an increasing proportion of enrollees in more recent years.



Source: To&Through Project, 2022b

The relevance of these categories lies in the exploration of UChicago and Northwestern, both falling within the selective and very selective college bracket. Notably, the To&Through Project's data highlights that not all CPS graduates categorized as having selective college access enroll in a 4-year college. For instance, in 2022, only 71% of graduates with selective college access were enrolled in a 4-year institution. This raises important questions about why qualified CPS students may not be accepted or choose not to enroll in selective universities. Studies have presented how structural, institutional, and informational barriers within the college admissions process contribute to the under-matching of academically qualified low-income and urban students, preventing them from accessing the selective colleges that match their academic credentials (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Roderick et al., 2011). These key barriers to college

access and success include a lack of information and guidance on the application process, inadequate support from high schools, challenges in completing financial aid steps like the FAFSA due to family constraints, uncertainty about college costs and financial aid options, systemic biases in standardized tests, and admissions policies favoring wealthier applicants (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Roderick et al., 2011). While my project primarily focuses on those CPS graduates who gained admission and enrolled in highly selective institutions, it's crucial to acknowledge that this scope inherently excludes insights into the experiences of those who didn't enroll. Therefore, I refrain from making assumptions about the reasons behind non-enrollment, as my data does not encompass this particular group. Instead, the emphasis remains on understanding the distinct experiences of students who successfully navigated admission and enrollment into these selective institutions and were able to overcome some of the key barriers mentioned above. Hence, my exploration will focus on discerning pre-college experiences, considering whether students attended selective enrollment or neighborhood high schools, and how these experiences might influence their navigation of these selective institutions. This examination aims to shed light on the potential impact of varied pre-college backgrounds on students' pathways within these selective environments.

To dig further into this, I looked into where the CPS students being accepted into UChicago and Northwestern are coming from, selective enrollment or neighborhood school.

College	Number of Students Enrolled	Underrepresented Minority Graduation Rate	Institutional Graduation Rate	Enrollment by CPS School
University of Chicago	119	93%	96%	View

Source: To&Through Project, 2022b

University of Chicago: Students Enrolled by CPS High School from 2020–2022

School	Number of Students
Lane Tech	19
Whitney Young	17
Jones	16
Northside Prep	16

In order to preserve students’ anonymity, only CPS high schools from which at least 5 students enrolled are included in this table.

Source: To&Through Project, 2022b

College	Number of Students Enrolled	Underrepresented Minority Graduation Rate	Institutional Graduation Rate	Enrollment by CPS School
Northwestern University	321 	91%	95%	View

Source: To&Through Project, 2022b

Northwestern University: Students Enrolled by CPS High School from 2020–2022

School	Number of Students
Payton	61
Northside Prep	52
Lane Tech	44
Whitney Young	40
Jones	29

In order to preserve students' anonymity, only CPS high schools from which at least 5 students enrolled are included in this table.

Source: To&Through Project, 2022b

All the high schools referenced in the charts above are CPS selective enrollment high schools. However, it's important to note that the data doesn't capture students from other selective enrollment schools or neighborhood schools that sent 5 or fewer students to these universities. These figures imply a potential correlation between students labeled with "selective college access" and attendance at selective enrollment schools. This suggests that the type of school might play a role in whether students gain acceptance into and access more selective institutions. It is crucial to acknowledge that students from neighborhood schools also secure acceptance into these highly selective universities—as I am one of them. Hence, I aim to investigate if differing pre-college experiences and exposures, shaped by school type, influence how CPS students navigate these higher education institutions they've enrolled in.

Literature Review

This literature review aims to delve into the existing research concerning the influence of pre-college experiences on a student's sense of belonging in college. It serves as a foundation for understanding how students cultivate a sense of belonging. This exploration will inform the theoretical framework guiding my study, which aims to answer the question: What strategies do CPS students employ to foster a sense of belonging and navigate elite universities?

Pre-College Experience Based on Racial-Ethnic Contexts

A substantial body of literature provides insight into how the diversity of students' high school experiences can influence their perceptions of the college campus. In particular, Offidani-Bertrand, Velez, Benz, and Keels (2022) focus on examining the pre-college phase's varied impact based on different racial and ethnic contexts. As colleges strive for greater diversity, discrepancies between advertised diversity and the actual experiences of minority students often arise (Offidani-Bertrand et al., 2022). This incongruence between expectation and reality during the critical transition to college can generate substantial stress, especially for students seeking diversity, those from first-generation college backgrounds, or those of different socioeconomic status than the majority of the institution's affluent students (Jack, 2014).

The racial and ethnic makeup of high schools influences how students make sense of their college experiences. Black and Latinx students' from predominantly White high schools may attribute discomfort to racial-ethnic inequalities, while those from predominantly Black and Latinx high schools might internalize responsibility for their struggles, feeling a sense of "otherness" and personal accountability (Offidani-Bertrand et al., 2022).

This divergence in interpretation—some attributing tension to institutional inequalities while others internalize responsibility—impacts students' sense of belonging and their responses

to college life. Those critical of institutional racial-ethnic inequalities are less likely to doubt their abilities or sense of belonging (Jack & Black, 2022). Conversely, students who internalize feelings of difference may grapple with uncertainty about belonging and tend to withdraw from college life (Jack & Black, 2022).

Ultimately, these contrasting responses within racial-ethnic groups underscore the diversity of experiences within these cohorts and how varied trajectories can profoundly impact a student's sense of belonging and may cause the establishment of symbolic boundaries which Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki (2015) define as

“lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others. These distinctions can be expressed through normative interdictions (taboos), cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes. They play an important role in the creation of inequality and the exercise of power. The term ‘symbolic boundaries’ also refers to the internal distinctions of classification systems and to temporal, spatial, and visual cognitive distinctions in particular.”

This starkly foregrounds the pivotal role of interpretation—whether blame is attributed to the individual or the institution—in shaping a student's collegiate journey and their sense of belonging. Accordingly, the concept of intergroup differences connects to the diversity of pre-college experiences that CPS students can have, such as the division between neighborhood and selective enrollment schools, and how that may impact their establishment of belonging at the higher education institution due to the differing racial-ethnic and socioeconomic makeup of such schools as a result of residential segregation in Chicago.

The impact of racial climate on a student's college experience extends beyond high school and can significantly influence their sense of belonging in higher education. Research explores this impact through factors like engagement in discussions, participation in community groups, and racial disparities in academic achievement. Studies, such as those by Hurtado and Carter (1997) and Walton and Cohen (2007), delve into how the racial climate in college,

especially over the first few years, affects a student's sense of belonging. Hurtado and Carter (1997) discovered that engaging in discussions beyond class content and participating in social or religious groups were significantly linked to a sense of belonging, serving as strategies to establish that connection.

Walton and Cohen's (2007) concept of "belonging uncertainty" describes the state where individuals question their place in a social or academic setting. This uncertainty can limit possibilities, lead to defensive self-perceptions, and hinder taking on challenges that involve potential failure. Understanding how racial and cultural factors shape students' college experiences is crucial as it can impact academic performance.

Walton and Cohen (2007) conducted two experiments focusing on how socially stigmatized groups, like minorities, face belonging uncertainty, leading to racial disparities in achievement. In Experiment 1, Black students felt reduced belonging and potential when believing they had few friends in an intellectual setting, unlike unaffected White students. Experiment 2's intervention targeting social belonging doubts notably boosted academic performance for Black students. These findings emphasize how students from marginalized groups can feel alienated when their backgrounds clash with academic norms, impacting their motivation and success. The interventions show promise in addressing belonging uncertainty and improving engagement and academic outcomes among minority students, indicating adaptability to diverse experiences with cultural capital and elitism.

While the primary focus of this thesis is not academic achievement, exploring the connection between doubts about belonging and minority students' academic performance sheds light on how students navigate college amidst belonging uncertainties. Understanding how factors related to belonging uncertainty shape a student's college experience is vital. Similarly,

research emphasizing the importance of social belonging for intellectual success reveals the perpetuation of inequality, particularly affecting historically marginalized groups in higher education.

Pre-College and Economic Status

A related body of research distinguishes between students based on economic status, highlighting how differing high school experiences within the same economic background affect college experiences, particularly in terms of integration and belonging (Jack, 2019). This challenges the misconception that students with similar characteristics, be it economic or racial-ethnic status, undergo identical experiences in college and require the same support.

This distinction is evident between the “doubly disadvantaged (DD)” from lower-income backgrounds attending distressed public high schools and the “privileged poor (PP)” who attended more advantaged high schools (Jack, 2019). Within the same college environment, the doubly disadvantaged often feel a heightened sense of difference, establishing moral boundaries and tending to withdraw from campus life. In contrast, the privileged poor adopt a cosmopolitan approach, actively integrating into campus life to broaden their horizons (Jack, 2019). This illustrates that while these students share an economic background, their academic trajectories were shaped differently due to their high school experiences. For these reasons, I suggest that CPS’s selective enrollment students can be equated to previous Jack’s (2019) concept of the “privileged poor” and CPS’s neighborhood students can be equated to the “doubly disadvantaged.” While Jack’s (2019) research focuses on ultra-elite boarding schools and prep schools, the concept of the “privileged poor” refers to students from lower-income backgrounds who gain access to high-quality educational opportunities. In the context of CPS, selective enrollment students can be equated to the “privileged poor” because they often come from

disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds but have the privilege of attending schools that offer advanced coursework, experienced teachers, and resources that contribute to their academic success. Despite the differences in the specific type of schools studied by Jack (2019), the underlying theme of socioeconomic disadvantage coupled with access to beneficial educational environments remains relevant. Selective enrollment students in CPS experience a similar dynamic where they navigate challenges related to poverty while benefiting from the advantages of attending schools that provide a more rigorous and supportive educational experience. Similarly, while Jack's research (2019) focuses on ultra-elite schools, the concept of the "doubly disadvantaged" refers to students who face multiple layers of disadvantage, such as economic challenges and limited access to resources. In CPS, neighborhood students can be equated to the "doubly disadvantaged" because they often come from lower-income families and attend schools with fewer resources, less experienced teachers, and limited opportunities for enrichment compared to selective enrollment schools. The challenges faced by neighborhood students in CPS, including socioeconomic barriers, inadequate resources, and systemic inequalities, parallel the experiences of the "doubly disadvantaged" as described in Jack's research (2019). Despite the differences in the specific type of schools studied, the fundamental dynamics of disadvantage and limited access to educational opportunities align with the concept of the "doubly disadvantaged."

The argument that public schools create different types of educational experiences and make different knowledge available to students from different social classes is known as the "hidden curriculum" (Anyon, 1980), and can be seen in the case of CPS high schools. Jean Anyon's work (1980) focuses on elementary school examples to explore Bowles and Gintis's argument (1976) that "students from different social class backgrounds are rewarded for

classroom behaviors that correspond to personality traits allegedly rewarded in the different occupational strata – the working classes for docility and obedience, and the managerial classes for initiative and personal assertiveness” (Anyon, 1980, p.67). The notion of rewarding distinct behaviors implies varying expectations imposed on students from different social classes. This underlines the influence of neighborhood schools in Chicago, where segregation based on social class, race, and ethnicity is apparent (Parrish & Ikoro, 2022). This segregation manifests in distinct student populations across these schools, reflecting the environments and expectations shaped by neighborhood divisions. The analysis of school work across different social class environments suggests that the way education is structured serves as a covert training ground for specific attitudes towards work and production (Anyon, 1980). Essentially, this training ground sets students up to be funneled into different pathways. Varied teaching methods and evaluation practices in different social settings emphasize distinct cognitive and behavioral skills, shaping children’s attitudes towards capital, authority, and work processes (Anyon, 1980). This disparity in school experiences based on social class not only influences the development of certain economically relevant relationships in children but also contributes to perpetuating unequal social relations in society. Essentially, classroom practices play a crucial role in perpetuating and reproducing societal inequalities.

Exploring universities’ hidden curriculum reveals students’ perceptions of social norms and belonging. Koutsouris, Mountford-Zimdars, and Dingwall (2021) identified an ‘ideal’ university student—often affluent, white, and able-bodied—shaping teaching practices and echoing Anyon’s (1980) observations, since their research revealed hidden practices in universities that impact students’ experiences, particularly in learning environments and curricula. Their research stresses three key points: Firstly, the construction of the ‘ideal’ student

affects learning environments, favoring those of more affluent backgrounds. Secondly, understanding this hidden curriculum is crucial, particularly for non-traditional students. It often triggers feelings of exclusion and anxiety, as they grapple with conforming to these implicit norms, which deeply impacts their confidence and sense of belonging. Lastly, institutions should evolve to embrace diverse student identities, fostering inclusive education rather than expecting students to conform. These findings imply that the background and prior experiences of a student impact the ways in which they navigate or make sense of their place at their university. The sense of not fitting in may stem from a misalignment between the implicit norms ingrained in a student's high school environment and those of the university. This disconnection is particularly pronounced for CPS selective enrollment and neighborhood students entering elite universities, as they would be considered the non-traditional student (Koutsouris, 2021), leading to a perceived lack of fit. However, I propose that the extent of this perception varies based on the type of instruction and training received during their pre-college experience. Understanding this perceived lack of fit with an institution's culture is crucial, as it directly impacts a student's sense of belonging.

Habitus, Strategies, and Symbolic Boundaries

A body of research exists that explores the experiences of first-generation, low-income, or working-class students, particularly in terms of the strategies they employ to navigate higher education. The existing qualitative studies have primarily focused on these student populations and explored their challenges related to social mobility and cultural capital in post-secondary education (Aries & Seider, 2005; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Lamont et al., 2015; Lehmann 2007). These studies shed light on the existence of social class differences in higher education and how they are articulated; they primarily delve into the experiences of these students in negotiating

habitus discontinuity between their pre-higher education and college environments. However, there is a dearth of research specifically examining the experiences of CPS students (who could be first-generation, low-income, or working-class) as they navigate the transition to and through higher education.

A salient concept that underscores the prevalence of pre-college educational experiences in the navigation of elite spaces is Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1977), which is also prevalent in many other works (Aries and Seider, 2005; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Granfield, 1991; Lehmann, 2007; Stuber, 2006). Lehmann writes about Bourdieu's notion of habitus when he states that "Habitus ensures the active presence of past experiences within individuals in the forms of schemes of perception, thought and action...Put simply, habitus creates dispositions to act, interpret experiences, and think in certain ways" (Lehmann, 2007, p. 92). The pre-college experience of CPS high school graduates attending UChicago or Northwestern is one of the past experiences within the individual student that forms these perceptions which make them feel a certain way in college or influence the way that they navigate elite spaces.

Lehmann's research focuses on whether first-generation students, leaving university before completing their degree, articulate their decisions based on feelings of alienation from the institution, its culture, and its expectations (2007). He explores whether this alienation represents a passive response of intimidation and inferiority or a more active form of resistance grounded in the reaffirmation of distinct habitus. In Lehmann's work (2007), the concept of *habitus discontinuities* refers to class-cultural disparities that lead to feelings of not belonging or fitting into the university environment, ultimately influencing the decision to drop out. These discontinuities are characterized by a lack of connection with the university culture, resulting in a sense of not "feeling university" and struggling to integrate due to perceived differences in social

background or cultural norms. In contrast, my work examines students navigating habitus discontinuities and explores whether habitus transformation is a strategy, drawing from concepts like “making it by faking it” where working class law students try to resolve identity ambivalence by ideologically distancing themselves from the elite social class or redefining elite spaces to serve them (Granfield, 1991) or identity affirmation (Aries & Seider, 2005).

Prior research (Granfield, 1991; Aries & Seider, 2005) shows that non-traditional university students, including first-generation, working-class, or low-income individuals, often face significant discontinuity between their social backgrounds and their envisioned educational paths. Working-class students in elite law schools and lower-income students in prestigious private U.S. universities experience challenges in competence, anxieties about academic proficiency, and difficulties in connecting with wealthier peers (Granfield, 1991; Aries & Seider, 2005). This issue is particularly acute for first-generation students, leading to heightened feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, and intimidation (Aries & Seider, 2005).

In Lehmann’s study (2007), first-generation students demonstrated similar experiences of cultural dislocation. Additionally, researchers like Aries and Seider (2005) indicate that lower-income students at elite colleges face challenges due to economic and cultural disparities. At elite colleges, a significant wealth gap intensifies class consciousness, causing lower-income students to feel intimidated, uncomfortable, inadequate, excluded, and powerless compared to state college students. Both groups undergo identity transitions from pre-college to college life, acquiring new cultural capital, but the challenges are more pronounced for elite college students (Aries & Seider, 2005).

Having explored the challenges faced by students in terms of social class and cultural disparities, it is crucial to delve into another way college students strategically navigate their

academic environments. A significant aspect of this navigation involves the creation of symbolic boundaries, playing a pivotal role in shaping both social and material distinctions within society. Stuber's (2006) examination of discursive strategies used by working- and upper-middle-class students in discussing social class sheds light on the cultural foundations of material inequalities. It is essential to understand these symbolic boundaries as they actively influence individuals' actions, contributing to the broader architecture of social class. Despite shared similarities in discussions about social class, Stuber (2006) identifies divergent constructions between working- and upper-middle-class students, accentuating distinct understandings. Upper-middle-class individuals emphasize stronger socioeconomic boundaries, while working-class counterparts focus on moral boundaries, critiquing middle-class values for perceived integrity lapses. Working-class students assert moral superiority, criticizing behaviors like perceived indulgence, misplaced priorities, laziness, and taking privileges for granted. Significantly, both groups tend to draw boundaries between themselves and those positioned above them in the social hierarchy (Stuber, 2006). Despite facing challenges, the students in these studies exhibit agency as they actively manage their higher education experiences through different strategies such as identity affirmation and creating symbolic boundaries.

Building on this understanding of how social class is discursively constructed, it is important to avoid the danger of generalizing all low-income students as navigating higher education uniformly, regardless of income or racial-ethnic differences. This generalization can lead to flawed policies and hinder students' representation and voice in higher education. While it is true that the resources available at CPS schools, whether selective enrollment or neighborhood schools, are generally less than those at private or elite preparatory schools, it is important to recognize that not all CPS students are from low-income families. Accounting for

this diversity in socioeconomic backgrounds is crucial for developing effective support systems and ensuring equitable access to higher education.

Accordingly, the difference in social preparation between CPS neighborhood and selective enrollment schools stems from the divergence in the makeup of these institutions. Selective enrollment schools admit students citywide through an application process that considers factors such as grades, test scores, and socioeconomic tiers, rather than guaranteeing admission based on residential address as neighborhood schools do. As a result of Chicago's persistent segregation, neighborhood high schools tend to be significantly more homogenous in terms of both socioeconomic status and racial/ethnic composition, which can have a profound impact on students' transitions into elite universities. This is also associated with the difference in cultural capital that arises from attending highly homogeneous versus more heterogeneous school environments, a topic that will be explored in greater depth later.

This thesis aims to bridge the gap in understanding the experiential core of college life, a facet that has received limited scholarly attention (Jack, 2014). Understanding undergraduates' lives before and during college is crucial, as differential exposure to inequality significantly influences their social experiences within higher education (Carter, 2012; Massey et al., 2003). By shedding light on these nuanced experiences of CPS students, it challenges the homogenization of student experiences and calls for more nuanced approaches to policy-making and support systems in higher education.

Methodology

As a CPS graduate, particularly from a neighborhood school, my journey at UChicago was inconceivable, especially since I did not know that this institution and its opportunities existed. Recognizing the diversity and complexity among CPS graduates, it is imperative to

avoid broad generalizations, acknowledging the unique identities and challenges each student faces. The feelings of imposter syndrome and other experiences I encountered are not solely attributed to being a CPS student; rather, being part of CPS offers a distinctive lens through which to view higher education.

The primary objective of this paper is to explore how CPS students navigate elite universities post-graduation from their CPS high school. Despite the close proximity of institutions like UChicago and Northwestern University, access for CPS students is often restricted, which is where my primary focus lies. The research question guiding this study is: What strategies do CPS students employ to foster a sense of belonging and navigate elite universities?

To address this research question effectively, this paper will leverage qualitative interviews conducted by the author with CPS High School alumni at UChicago and Northwestern University. A total of 12 interviews were conducted with alumni from CPS high schools attending either UChicago or Northwestern University.

Qualitative Interviews with CPS alumni at UChicago and Northwestern

My interviews with CPS alumni at the University of Chicago and Northwestern University serve as my primary object of analysis as my interest lies in centering the perspectives of communities that have directly been impacted by the educational inequity in Chicago.

I was fortunate enough to be able to mobilize many networks as a former CPS student, Chicago Scholar, and undergraduate student at the University of Chicago, to identify and recruit potential interviewees. Since I have some close friends at Northwestern and at UChicago, I asked them to share my Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn announcement that included my interest flier, requesting our social media friends to also share the participant recruitment post within

their own networks. I asked these friends to share my recruitment flier and interest form among their networks at Northwestern and UChicago. I asked Chicago Scholars, which is a seven year program I am a part of that supports academically ambitious, first-generation college-going students who live and attend high school in Chicago, to distribute my flier and interest form. Additionally, I asked the Wentcher Foundation, which is a scholarship organization that provides resources for Chicago-area students like myself, to distribute my flier and interest form. A key recruitment strategy for UChicago and Northwestern student interviews was snowball sampling, in which I asked participants to identify and potentially connect me with their own friends or acquaintances based in UChicago and Northwestern who may be interested in interviewing with me.

For the 12 interviews I conducted with CPS alumni, the same set of questions was used, although the probes utilized were contingent on the initial responses of the interviewees. The questions in the interview guide delve into various aspects of the participants' educational journeys, including their upbringing, high school experiences, decision-making processes for high school and university choices, perceptions of preparedness for college life, exposure to diversity, imposter syndrome, experiences of belonging uncertainty, interactions within the university community, adaptation strategies, institutional support perceptions, reflections on changes in social connections and sense of belonging over time at university, and suggestions for enhancing inclusivity for students from diverse educational backgrounds (refer to [Appendix A](#)). Overall, the interview guide seeks to explore how CPS students' past educational experiences shape their navigation of social and academic life at elite universities and how these experiences influence their sense of belonging and interactions within the university environment.

Pseudonyms have been assigned to all students and high schools. Interviews ranged in duration, lasting between 45-75 minutes. All interviews were recorded with permission from interviewees and were conducted on Zoom [December 2023 - January 2024]. First, Otter.ai was utilized to transcribe interviews. Next, I coded the transcriptions using Dedoose qualitative coding software. I received IRB approval (Protocol No. IRB23-1728) for this interview process and provided all participants with a description of my project before beginning the interview and provided a verbal waiver of consent. In the script, I emphasize the confidential nature of my study, paying special attention to questions relating to identifying questions and personal experiences. All statements from individuals have been anonymized to safeguard the privacy of participants while examining their individual profiles. I conducted a survey to gather demographic details such as the university they are attending, the type of high school they attended (selective enrollment or neighborhood), gender, race, ethnicity, duration of their enrollment as a CPS student, and their CPS tier classification (refer to [Appendix B](#)). This survey data facilitated the construction of tables to feature the unique characteristics and backgrounds within the interviewee cohort. Additionally, a separate chart was developed to illustrate high school descriptors, providing context for the students' pre-college experiences in relation to the demographic composition of their high schools (refer to [Appendix C](#)). In my final qualitative analysis, I explore these variations to enrich the firsthand narratives shared by the participants.

This paper aims to holistically and critically examine the reality of CPS students' experiences at UChicago and Northwestern, exploring the impacts of educational inequality pervasive within Chicago's education system.

Results

Here, I explore the multifaceted strategies employed by CPS high school alumni at UChicago and Northwestern to navigate their collegiate experiences and establish a sense of belonging within these institutions. These alumni, hailing from both neighborhood and selective enrollment high schools, utilize a range of tactics such as community building, identity renegotiation, selecting supportive courses or majors, and symbolic boundary setting. These strategies are intricately linked to the students' pre-college backgrounds, with distinctions drawn between those from CPS selective enrollment schools and CPS neighborhood schools. Drawing on Anthony Jack's (2019) concepts of the "doubly disadvantaged (DD)" and "privileged poor (PP)," which highlight the impact of economic status and high school environment on college integration, this study suggests that selective enrollment students align more closely with the "privileged poor" category while neighborhood students align with the "doubly disadvantaged." By exploring how these students leverage their cultural capital gained from diverse pre-college experiences, this research sheds light on the nuanced ways in which CPS students navigate elite academic environments despite coming from under-resourced educational backgrounds.

Exploring Cultural Capital

I make the argument that students from these two different types of high schools experience different kinds of training and preparation because of the different socioeconomic makeup of these schools. As Anyon (1980) mentions, there are different types of training between social classes. In the CPS context, I suggest that the "training" that is done at neighborhood schools does not set up nor expect students to end up at elite higher education institutions, which is why there is also a level of exceptionalism that is expressed when a

neighborhood student does end up at one of the elite or Ivy league schools.¹ Therefore, the type of training and exceptionalism that students are exposed to at neighborhood schools may influence their sense of belonging at elite universities because the type of training that the majority of students at these universities have experienced differs dramatically from what one is exposed to in a CPS neighborhood high school. Jay, a neighborhood student from Horizon Heights, attending Northwestern, expands on this notion when he explains that he was “oblivious” as to what was going on when he started college and felt that he “literally went in unprepared.” He was unaware of the academic expectations at the university, as the curriculum and knowledge assumed did not match his prior educational experience. Jay recalls a specific instance in his chemistry class where the professor assumed the students had learned certain material in high school, but he had not been exposed to it. He expresses confusion about the university’s assumptions regarding the high school curriculum and preparation of its incoming students, as it did not align with Jay’s own educational background. He illustrates this as he exclaims, “Whoa, I didn’t learn this in high school. Like, I don’t know what high school they thought everybody went to, what the curriculum was, but definitely [it] was not the same.” Hence, why he expanded to state that [he felt] “the university was definitely not built for the kind of students similar to [his] background.” The stark contrast between Jay’s prior educational experiences and the academic expectations of Northwestern exacerbated his sense of unpreparedness and not belonging in the elite university environment. This features how the difference in pre-college training and preparation can create significant challenges for students transitioning to higher education, fostering feelings of being ill-equipped and out of place.

¹ This was shown through neighborhood students making it on the news because they got into an Ivy League school, like Amado Candelario from Solorio High School getting into Harvard in 2018, as reported in the ABC7 Chicago News article “‘The sky is not the limit’ says West Lawn teen accepted to Harvard” (2018).

It is important to note that there is also a large difference between CPS selective enrollment education and that of students from other private or prestigious high schools. Isi, a selective enrollment student from Silverlake, attending Northwestern, depicts his understanding of these distinct pre-college experiences. He notes that when he compares his educational experience to that of his friends from private schools, he initially feels a “shock” because their classes seem “less” challenging than what they were used to in high school, which is not the case for him. However, he recognizes that he needs to take their different educational backgrounds into account. In the same vein, he thinks about his friends from public schools that seem to be struggling academically and how they can build better study habits together, as he has noticed that “some of my friends who are from those types of schools (private) do not [struggle as much] either because they faced the rigor before or their school taught them how to approach it, maybe better.” Therefore, he emphasizes that the other pre-college educational backgrounds provide a different training ground; hence, students may be able to adjust more seamlessly to the elite college environment.

Below, I divide the aspect of training and preparation into academic and social preparation; as I explain the strategies, the specifics of these two types of training will be expanded upon. In the simplest terms, the difference in academic preparation comes from different academic programs that are offered as selective enrollment high schools often have more academic resources and their programs are deemed to be more challenging and rigorous than neighborhood schools. In general, selective enrollment schools tend to be well-resourced and neighborhood schools tend to have fewer resources. On the other hand, the participants that attended neighborhood schools were part of the most academically rigorous programs that were available at their schools, for example, the international baccalaureate program or an equivalent.

There is also a difference between the academic preparation of CPS students generally and the other students that attend UChicago and Northwestern due to the diverse socioeconomic backgrounds represented at these universities and the varied locations worldwide where students attended high school. This is to say that there is a concentration or a larger percentage of students that are of higher socioeconomic status that attend these elite schools.

Bea, a selective enrollment student from Willowbrook, attending UChicago, shows the similarities in academic preparation between selective enrollment schools and the training of her peers in this elite institution when she explains that the students' mindsets at her selective enrollment school were similar to those of UChicago students' mindset of "let's do our schoolwork;" she framed this by explaining what the opposite experience would have been like "if I went to a more lax high school, where I was like, yeah, like an hour of homework a day, it would have been like a total major shock, that would have been really hard to handle [later attending UChicago]. So those are good similarities." Here, Bea implies that neighborhood schools do not offer that same mindset that would align with the elite institutions.

When asked about how their high school socially prepared students for their college's environment, selective enrollment students attributed their feelings of being socially prepared to the exposure to affluence that they experienced at their selective enrollment school. They mentioned that there were students from all over the city and therefore from different socioeconomic backgrounds, which they felt helped them be more open-minded and deal with a lot of different people. This exposure made the caliber of wealth at these universities less overwhelming for them. Additionally, they felt like they knew how to interact with different groups of people since they were exposed to a lot of economic and cultural diversity at their selective enrollment schools. Bea explained that attending a selective enrollment high school

helped her adapt to being around people from very different backgrounds, compared to the more homogeneous environment of her neighborhood. She was exposed to students from all parts of the city at her high school, which was a positive experience that prepared her for the diversity she would encounter at UChicago. She frames the change from her selective enrollment to UChicago as “not that crazy” of a change and an aspect of her high school that she is very grateful for. Bea believes the diversity of her high school helped her develop a greater appreciation and understanding of different cultures and backgrounds, which she sees as an important preparation for university and beyond. These experiences allowed selective enrollment students to gain more cultural capital.

On the other hand, neighborhood students did not feel ‘socially prepared.’ In fact, they mentioned much more culture shock when attending Northwestern and UChicago due to the homogeneity, both in socioeconomic status and racial/ethnic makeup of their high schools, as a result of Chicago’s segregation. For example, Marcus, a neighborhood student from Crestwood, attending Northwestern, explained that his high school experience was characterized by cliques and groups of students who came from very similar backgrounds. This made it relatively easy to quickly form close friendships, as there were many interconnections between people. In contrast, Marcus finds that the college environment at his elite institution is much more diverse, with students coming from a wide range of backgrounds. He notes that making friends in college is not as straightforward as it was in high school. Developing close friendships often requires more intentional effort, such as having one-on-one conversations and spending time together outside of class. Marcus acknowledges that this social aspect of the transition from high school to college, especially the culture shock, was not necessarily the fault of his high school. However, he explains, “I feel like [the social aspect of college] is something that high school doesn’t really

prepare people for; at least my high school didn't." He felt that his high school experience did not adequately prepare him for the social dynamics he has encountered at the elite university, where it is more difficult to find a defined clique or group to belong to. Overall, Marcus's perspective stresses the significant social challenges he has faced in transitioning from the relatively homogeneous high school environment to the more diverse and complex social landscape of an elite university. Similarly, Caleb, a neighborhood student from Horizon Heights, attending UChicago, makes clear that his neighborhood high school, like many CPS high schools, "for the most part are very segregated; Obviously, reflecting how the city is." Horizon Heights was majority Mexican American, low-income, and first-generation students; therefore, this was the environment he was accustomed to. Consequently, when Caleb arrived at UChicago, he initially tried to seek out a similar community to the one he had in high school. However, he found this challenging, as the Hispanic and Latin American students he encountered came from different backgrounds, making it difficult to connect in the same way he was used to. Caleb states that it was a struggle for him to adapt to the more diverse environment at UChicago, as he had become so accustomed to the homogeneous setting of his high school. It took him time to become more open to making completely new connections with people from different backgrounds. Caleb's experience zeros in on how his segregated high school environment did not adequately prepare him for the social challenges of transitioning to a more diverse, elite university setting. This was a significant adjustment that he had to navigate during his time at UChicago. This is not a strategy but it is a way that their pre-college experience influenced their college transition and, therefore, influenced the formation of their strategies to navigate college.

Rather than exposure to affluence, a neighborhood student expressed her high school's social preparedness in a contrasting way, which was exposure to extreme inequality. Ava, a

neighborhood student from Crestwood, attending Northwestern, stated: “[CPS] does define your character a lot...it makes you open minded and it helped me a lot in choosing my career path... experiencing a lot of the differences between CPS students...”. She went on to further explain how a lot of the individuals she went to middle and high school with were experiencing extreme poverty and violence and she was also exposed a lot to that. She is putting into perspective that being a CPS student at a neighborhood school can also make you more open minded but you might be more exposed to the extreme circumstances of poverty and insecurity instead of the exposure to affluence that may be experienced by the students at a selective enrollment school. Although students from neighborhood schools may not have the same level of exposure to affluence as their peers in selective enrollment schools, this doesn’t diminish the value of their unique cultural capital. Instead, it draws attention to the potential benefits of social preparation provided by selective enrollment schools, which can facilitate smoother transitions into elite spaces such as Northwestern and UChicago. Bea, a selective enrollment student from Willowbrook now attending UChicago, showcased this by commenting on her views on the difference in academic and social preparation between selective enrollment and neighborhood schools by talking about what her life would’ve been like if she went to a neighborhood school instead.

“And if I still had the chance to come to UChicago, after going to my neighborhood high school, I probably would have acted way different. I would have been a different person and not for the better, I think so. I’m very happy that [Willowbrook] showed me the diversity of people and career opportunities. And it’s important to be surrounded by peers that are also very hardworking, because that’s very, very important when you go to a high achieving school and people are already, you know, been trained like that. So I would definitely say selective enrollment will help you learn those skills that are just not academic skills, but the skills you truly need to succeed in a high performance academic environment like UChicago”

This shows that different preparations can allow a student to navigate these environments

differently. Accordingly, Mia, a neighborhood student from Meadowview, mentioned that her main struggle in adjusting to UChicago was not the academic rigor, but rather the lack of social preparation from her high school experience that made the culture shock so jarring. She states “And I think the only reason I have struggled as much as I did is because I wasn’t prepared socially.” She notes that her first year of college was entirely remote due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which further exacerbated the social challenges she faced. Mia illustrates that she was “thrown into this massive environment” at UChicago, where she encountered people who did not look like her, had different experiences, and even different goals and values. This culture shock was a significant adjustment for her. She expands that lack of social integration and balance in her life negatively impacted her academic performance. She struggled with the fast-paced quarter system where she felt her peers were grasping the material more easily. Mia contrasts her high school experience, where she had a social life that revolved around school, with her university experience, where she felt disconnected from her peers and unable to have fun with them. Mia’s position points out how the lack of social preparation from her high school environment made the transition to UChicago’s diverse and fast-paced academic and social culture particularly challenging for her.

Yet, a student being exposed to affluence or exposed to extreme inequality need not be mutually exclusive. A particularly interesting intersection between exposure to affluence and exposure to extreme inequality was with the neighborhood students that got to experience both sides of this exposure. For example, some students in the neighborhood group were a part of a couple of programs that allowed them to get that exposure to affluence but this exposure did not influence these students to the same extent as the ones that were attending selective enrollment schools. Therefore, neighborhood students, who did not have access to the social preparation that

selective enrollment schools offered, could have gotten some of that preparation through other means like college preparation programs – but these programs were offered very early in their high school careers and to a very select group of students. This meant that only the neighborhood students that were exposed to these opportunities and programs had the knowledge about certain processes. Again, like selective enrollment schools, neighborhood schools in CPS have access to a disproportionate amount of resources. Through this, these neighborhood students were able to explicitly mention what they gained from that program and explicitly mentioned the differences they saw between them and their neighborhood peers who did not have access to those programs. This is a prime example of the cultural capital divide and students themselves were realizing it.

Marcus, a neighborhood student from Crestwood, attending Northwestern, depicted this when he explained that he first realized the impact of his ethnic background when he participated in a Dartmouth summer program between his first and sophomore year of high school. Being one of the few Mexicans in a diverse setting was initially shocking but ultimately beneficial. He explained this as being his “first ever experience with like, culture shock, like with absolute vivid culture shock, because the thing about my high school is that it’s not only like a 99.5%, Hispanic, like 90% of those Hispanics are like, you know, Mexican.” While being part of a predominantly Mexican high school was comfortable, stepping out of that environment early helped him break out of his shell and connect with people from various backgrounds. He indicates the benefit of this exposure by making the comparison between him and his classmates that did not have the same opportunities. Marcus says,

“I feel like a lot of people don’t have that. A lot of people didn’t have that opportunity, which wasn’t the best of things, because then it’s kind of like that shell still exists. And I didn’t know of many people that, you know, still would say that they felt like they were in a shell within Solorio, like in their last year, until they reached the real world. And then the real world was like, oh, not everyone was Mexican.”

Without this experience Marcus would not have seen that he was in this shell; this experience of cultural contrast was eye-opening and valuable, as it exposed him to diversity beyond his familiar surroundings.

For Marcus, the juxtaposition of exposure to extreme inequality and exposure to affluence or even the simple distinction between the homogenous neighborhood high school and then a more heterogeneous environment helped him notice that the latter is a more helpful experience for navigating the “real world.” It is important to note that for this student the “real world” is an elite university, which is why this experience was essential for him – to enable him to navigate a completely different world than what he is used to. Yet, it is important to note that the combination of both of the experiences is what informs Marcus’s navigation of the university and how he understands his experiences. He emphasizes that it is important for these students to have an exposure to affluence earlier because it makes the culture shock a bit less intimidating for them when they encounter it again. This supports why the selective enrollment students were less likely to mention extreme culture shock and even mentioned that they were grateful that they had the opportunity to experience so much more diversity in their selective enrollment schools.

Isi, a first-year student at Northwestern from the selective enrollment school, Silverlake, reflects on how his high school experience eased his transition to university. He notes that familiarity with affluence in high school reduced the culture shock at Northwestern. This prior experience helped him feel more prepared and confident, enabling him to seek out supportive peers without the overwhelming self-doubt he initially feared. Isi acknowledges the significant role his high school played in shaping his readiness for the challenges of university life.

“Coming into high school, I felt out of place a little bit, and I think having that in high school helped make Northwestern culture shock a little less. Because I kind of knew what I was expecting. And I could rationalize with myself, like, I do belong here. And sought

out people that made me feel that way. Without as much stress about, oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my god, like, it's me, I don't know if I'm good here, etc. Um, that was definitely something that high school did for me.”

It shows that the student used his prior experience to help him navigate and rationalize with his sense of belonging so he did not feel as much culture shock. This also connects to the next point about internalizing and externalizing responsibility for their own struggles. Being able to rationalize with himself is a prime example of selective enrollment students (the privileged poor) being able to externalize the problem which allows them to navigate these spaces in a different manner (Jack & Black, 2022).

Internal vs. External Accountability: Responses to Varying Preparatory Experiences

The variation in preparation also ties into another theme, specifically the contrast between internalizing and externalizing responsibility for their challenges. Certain students internalized their perceived lack of readiness, whether socially or academically, taking personal accountability and interpreting it as a sign of not fitting in at their university. Conversely, other students externalized this by attributing their difficulties or unease to institutional disparities (Jack & Black, 2022).

The responses of internalizing or externalizing responsibility for their struggles impacts a student's self-perception, leading them to employ various strategies like renegotiating their identity (through affirmation or assimilation), forming communities via cultural groups, academic clubs, or Greek life, establishing symbolic boundaries (often rooted in socioeconomic and/or moral differences), and selecting supportive courses which may involve avoiding STEM or other classes perceived to be unsupportive. Essentially, whether a student unconsciously opts to internalize or externalize responsibility for their difficulties influences the strategies they adopt to navigate college.

Strategy 1: Community Building

One strategy frequently utilized by students is community formation to navigate academic environments (Offidani-Bertrand et al., 2022). Community building takes various forms, with participants highlighting involvement in cultural student organizations, academically focused cultural groups, cultural sororities, and non-academic student organizations that cater to diverse interests. These initiatives aim to address social preparedness gaps and provide students with safe havens within prestigious university settings.

Interestingly, students from neighborhood schools emphasized community building the most. A shared experience among these students was attending homogeneous high schools where many felt they already had a built-in community. This was often due to participation in selective or academically rigorous programs at their neighborhood schools, leading to close-knit groups. Consequently, their academic environments were culturally cohesive and community-centric, fostering extensive collaboration among students.

Mia, a neighborhood student from Meadowview, attending UChicago, called attention to the contrast between the strong sense of community in her high school and the competitive atmosphere she encountered in college coming in as a chemistry major (she later changed her major). She noted a lack of willingness among some peers to foster a community spirit, with individuals showcasing their intelligence subtly but noticeably. She states, “there was a lot of people that knew they were very smart. Very proud of it. And willing to rub it in your face. But not overtly. Yeah. Very casually let you know that they think they’re much smarter than most of the people in the room.” Despite this shift, Mia’s upbringing instilled in her the value of helping others, a principle she carried from her high school where mutual support was prevalent. This background of communal assistance shaped her approach to interactions in college, emphasizing

the importance of offering aid when needed, drawing on the supportive ethos she experienced in high school.

For Mia, the emphasis lies on the pivotal role of her high school's community-oriented environment, shaped by the cultural capital prevalent in neighborhood schools. This emphasis underscores the significance of the preparation and training emphasized in such settings.

Similarly, Caleb, a neighborhood student from Horizon Heights, attending UChicago, points out the social challenges stemming from the segregation often seen among CPS high schools. Caleb reflects on the social dynamics influenced by this segregation where he was accustomed to a predominantly Mexican-American, low-income, first-generation student population.

Transitioning to UChicago, he faced challenges seeking a similar community. Adapting to connect with students from diverse backgrounds proved difficult initially, requiring time to adjust and form new connections outside his familiar social circle. This adjustment highlights the contrast between the homogeneity of neighborhood schools and the need to navigate diverse environments in elite institutions, underscoring the importance of creating community in varied settings. It also calls attention to the challenges stemming from the preparation and environment shaped by the homogeneity of neighborhood schools for students. Given the significance of community-centric settings to students, they actively seek to replicate this environment in elite institutions, aiming to establish safe spaces. While this pursuit can be beneficial for fostering a sense of belonging, adapting to diverse environments and discovering new methods of creating and engaging with communities comes with initial navigation challenges.

Students acknowledged the integral role of community in their educational journey in high school, prompting a search for similar support in their new academic settings. Jay, a neighborhood student from Horizon Heights, attending Northwestern, underlined the importance

of finding a community in this unfamiliar environment, recognizing the disparity between his background and the university's environment. "Going from CPS on the Southside of Chicago and getting into this, like a prestigious university, I feel like the university was definitely not built for the kind of, like, students similar to my background." This disparity led to a need for familiarity. Therefore, students like Sophia, a neighborhood student from Crestwood, sought "a little home away from home" at institutions like Northwestern. Many students echoed this sentiment of creating a supportive community in an environment that may not naturally cater to their backgrounds. This sense of not belonging institutionally and systemically was apparent, reflected in their experiences with academic preparation and classroom dynamics, as will be discussed further in the strategy of selecting supportive classes. To address these challenges, students turned to community building as a key strategy, utilizing various approaches as previously mentioned.

The significance of community formation in navigating university life lies in fostering a sense of belonging for students. Marcus, a neighborhood student from Crestwood, attending Northwestern, shared how these university communities have impacted him; he no longer feels like an outsider in many groups he's part of. Whether playing sports or spending time with friends, he feels at home and valued. While he may still occasionally feel like an outsider overall, within those circles, he truly belongs and finds enjoyment. He explains,

"I no longer feel as if I don't necessarily belong...I feel like in the grand scheme of things, like I do sometimes feel like an outsider. But most of the time, I do also think about how...I don't feel like an outsider in a lot of the groups that I'm in...I feel like just over time, I wouldn't say that necessarily that I feel like I belong completely. But I feel like in the circles that I'm in and with the people that I'm with, like, I feel like I definitely do belong."

Therefore, a sense of belonging is often shaped by the student's ability to create or find familiar and secure spaces. Participants from selective enrollment schools seem to not emphasize the

significance of these spaces as much, possibly due to their exposure to affluence during high school. This lack of emphasis could stem from community-seeking being either a customary practice for them, having already done so in high school, or not a priority given their familiarity with prestigious and diverse environments. Marcus explicitly articulates that his approach to community building was instrumental in navigating his sense of belonging at Northwestern.

Another avenue for community formation among students was through university-sanctioned spaces that allowed them to establish their own communities. Students found social and career-focused cultural organizations vital for connecting with like-minded individuals, aiding in their navigation of university life. Caleb, a neighborhood student from Horizon Heights, attending UChicago, highlighted this by stating, “the more spaces that the university gives to students to create communities... whether cultural, religious, or, you know, whatever interest-based board that you want to build... the more spaces like that, the more spaces that a student can potentially find the community that they’re looking for.” He explains that these spaces not only facilitate social connections but also serve as essential outlets for mental health, enabling students to disconnect from academic pressures and engage more openly with others. These spaces serve as havens for students at elite Predominantly White Institutions (PWI). Especially since the level of affluence at these universities can pose challenges to adaptation. Alongside cultural organizations, students discovered the importance of community building in navigating their college.

Community building, as emphasized by Caleb, plays a crucial role in navigating the academic demands of these institutions and providing a space where students can feel more than ‘just students’ constantly focused on future endeavors. Given the prestige and cultural norms of these institutions, which often prioritize social mobility and a prestigious career path, it becomes

essential for students to pursue diverse interests and navigate college beyond the traditional academic trajectory. Bobbie, a selective enrollment student from Willowbrook, attending UChicago delineated this by stating, “the best decision I made since coming here was to do something that is not supposed to be impressive, that you are not doing to be good at, that you are doing because you love it. And because you want to be around others...completely devoid of career meaning whatsoever.” Bobbie’s high school experience likely reflected Anyon’s “hidden curriculum” (1980) that ingrained the belief that students at her school must become leaders rather than followers in order to achieve impressive life outcomes aligned with the cultural capital developed through their specialized training and preparation.

In addition to cultural organizations, some students mentioned the significance of joining Greek life to establish a sense of community and belonging. However, this form of Greek life was intricately linked to cultural backgrounds, creating a nuanced community dynamic. The involvement in a cultural sorority presented a unique interplay with the strategy of identity renegotiation. This allowed a student to affirm her identity while also engaging in a degree of assimilation, as elaborated in the following section. The cultural sorority not only provided a platform for identity affirmation but also served as a source of mentorship, offering insights into navigating their university while embracing one’s culture and creating a new sense of home.

Ava, a neighborhood student from Crestwood, attending Northwestern, shared how her cultural sorority influenced her university experience: “first time that I feel like I fit in was truly with my sorority sisters...we see a bunch of Latinas, and they’re in their apartments with their flags in their background...they were able to make Evanston their own place, their own environment.” Finding representation and a supportive community played a vital role in students claiming their space at the university, aligning with the concept of identity affirmation.

Representation is a facet of community building that allows students to navigate a space with some guidance and connection, particularly important given that these institutions were not originally designed to cater to Black and brown individuals.

Furthermore, the concept of representation through community building ties into the importance of mentorship at these institutions, as embodied by Jay, a neighborhood student from Horizon Heights, attending Northwestern. When facing challenges at Northwestern, he actively sought a program offering mentorship to guide him through his university experience. Now serving as a mentor himself, Jay emphasizes the value of such programs in exposing individuals to diverse backgrounds. He realized that students from underrepresented and under-resourced communities are not the sole ones facing difficulties, leading him to reevaluate the significance of his own background and fostering a stronger sense of belonging at the university. Jay's narrative indicates the interconnectedness of these strategies in guiding a student's journey. The strategy of community formation is closely intertwined with identity renegotiation, described below.

Strategy 2: Identity Renegotiation

As previously mentioned, the contrasting preparation methods between neighborhood and selective enrollment high schools influenced students' tendencies to internalize or externalize feelings of responsibility. The internalization of responsibility, characterized by feelings of intimidation and inadequacy, shapes students' perspectives, leading to various strategies such as identity renegotiation through assimilation or affirmation.

Engaging with fourth-year students during my research provided unique insights into their evolving experiences at the university. Qualitative research allowed for real-time reflections, particularly evident among fourth-year neighborhood students in my study. These

students reflected on their initial college years, acknowledging their internalization of struggles. However, through community formation strategies, they transitioned from internalizing to externalizing responsibility upon finding supportive communities like cultural organizations or clubs. This shift enabled them to reframe their identities – some found affirmation in speaking up and claiming their space, others felt a need to assimilate to professional norms for success, but often it was a mixture of both.

The internalization or externalization of responsibility for challenges is closely linked to the support students received in high school, shaping their initial perceptions of themselves in a college context. Therefore, the expectations and support provided in high school play a significant role in how students navigate and redefine their identities in college.

A significant aspect of the high school-to-college transition is the decision-making process around college applications. The choices available to students can be heavily influenced by the expectations set by their counselors and potential acceptances. These expectations can create challenges for students seeking comfort and support during this pivotal period. Sophia, a neighborhood student from Crestwood, attending Northwestern, exposed this issue:

“I don’t think my high school was very encouraging of us to apply to big name schools or to schools outside of the state. Most of our counselors encouraged us to apply to UIC and schools that are nearby...so when you decide that you want to apply to other schools, there’s not really much guidance over that. So it’s usually only the students who are in programs like the one that I was, who ended up leaving. And so I guess that was kind of hard because there’s a lot pushing against you. And so it’s really up to you to make those decisions too.”

Bea, a selective enrollment student from Willowbrook, attending UChicago, echoed similar concerns:

“if you’re a student that already doesn’t have the means [grade-wise or financially]...then it’s like, ‘what’s the point?’... and having the college counselors pushing, like, ‘what state do you want to go to?’ Like, it’s kind of too much focus already towards the kids who are already set up for their success.”

These experiences underscore the disparities in guidance and resources that students encounter when pursuing higher education pathways. These two students mutually reinforce the notion that a specific cohort receives encouragement to pursue elite colleges. Bea's experience reveals disparities in the encouragement levels among students pursuing ambitious goals. These disparities are evident in the distinct support systems for students aiming for elite colleges. In neighborhood schools, an emphasis is placed on high-achieving students within specialized programs, while selective enrollment schools tend to focus on those with the financial resources or academic prowess to excel. Further investigation is warranted to understand how these differing expectations and support structures impact students outside high-achieving programs.

Bea emphasizes the need for a balanced approach to support, acknowledging the importance of realistic guidance in college aspirations. She notes a gap in early support within CPS, where counselors may not align with students' aspirations due to various constraints. This delayed support contributes to misinformation and inadequate preparation, hindering students' college readiness. As Sophia alluded to, the lack of encouragement for students at neighborhood schools to explore beyond their immediate environment significantly affects their prospects of accessing elite institutions.

Moreover, many CPS students express unfamiliarity with prestigious universities like Northwestern and UChicago, highlighting disparities in exposure and preparation between resourced schools and neighborhood schools. This disparity reinforces Jay's observation about the mismatch between these institutions and students like him, emphasizing the challenges faced due to intersecting identities. The lack of tailored support for CPS students aiming for elite colleges not only hinders their navigation within these spaces but also influences their self-perception and integration into university life, potentially leading to internalization of

struggles.

On the other hand, a student emphasized the pivotal role of high school support in empowering her to assert her presence and reaffirm her identity in college. This underscores how the lack of initial guidance and support in accessing elite institutions significantly influences students' navigation of these spaces. Ava, a fourth-year student at Northwestern from Crestwood, shared the profound impact of a high school teacher who validated her belonging in environments not originally tailored for her, instilling confidence in her ability to excel in challenging courses in high school and pursue higher education. Such support holds particular significance in communities where college may appear unattainable, especially for first-generation students or those lacking exposure to available opportunities.

Contrastingly, a student highlighted the significance of the support she received in high school, which empowered her to assert her presence in college and reaffirm her identity. This reinforces the notion that the initial absence of support and guidance to access elite schools had a profound impact on how students navigate the elite college environment. Ava explains the impact that a high school teacher had in validating that she belonged in the spaces that were not necessarily made for her, that she could own her space in elite spaces as well. This was done by the teacher's support in helping the students believe that they were capable of taking high level classes and going to college. This support is immensely important in communities where college may seem out of reach or where students are first generation or do not have the exposure to the opportunities that exist. Ava explained her high school teacher's impact when she was taking a college level course in high school. He provided them with high-quality printed materials, including custom-made work packets on thick stock. Although it might seem minor, within their resource-constrained community, this gesture held immense significance. Having personalized

packets on such premium paper made them feel capable and inspired. It signaled that they belonged in a college-level course, instilling confidence and a sense of ownership. These small acts of kindness, such as receiving quality materials at no cost to them, demonstrated his care and dedication. It empowered the students to value their education and resources, encouraging us to excel and utilize what was provided to its fullest potential. Specifically, she quoted her teacher when she said, “He would give us all of our materials, but told us like, ‘this is only the first step into you knowing that you have a lot of these materials at your hands. And you should own the fact that you have these materials and be able to utilize them to the biggest extent.’” The prior support she received in high school from this teacher instructing a college-level course significantly contributed to her sense of belonging in challenging college classes. This preparation not only equipped her for the academic rigors of college but also bolstered her confidence in unfamiliar and daunting environments. It empowered her to advocate for herself, as she felt deserving of the resources she sought, reinforcing her belief in her place within elite academic settings. This was a way that would allow her to externalize the responsibility for her struggles and this experience conceptualized the institutional faults in resources. Students from privileged backgrounds or higher socioeconomic status often have access to and utilize available resources as a norm. In contrast, the doubly disadvantaged students lack exposure to such resources, making it crucial to emphasize their right to access and advocate for the support they require.

Caleb, first-generation neighborhood student from Horizon Heights, attending UChicago, disclosed the challenges of navigating resources and self-advocacy. He explains that coming from CPS to a prestigious university like UChicago, the onus is often on students, especially first-generation ones, to handle many tasks independently. Despite having support from teachers

and counselors, much of the college application process, including FAFSA and scholarship applications, falls on the student. Transitioning to UChicago, he encountered gaps in meeting certain needs and struggled to navigate resources effectively due to the institution's size and complexity. While he developed self-advocacy skills, being a first-gen student at such an institution presents unique challenges in accessing necessary support and information. This underscores the importance of students advocating for themselves and seeking out resources independently, as high school educators prepare them for the realities of higher education. The presence of representation and resources at universities does not guarantee equity if students lack the knowledge or means to access them, further emphasizing the need for proactive self-advocacy in navigating these academic environments. This added difficulty compounds feelings of belonging and navigating university life, making the journey even more challenging. Therefore, when students lack the knowledge to access available resources at universities, the responsibility falls on them to seek out support, potentially leading to internalized feelings of responsibility for their struggles (Weist et al., 2018). Without a robust support system or prior encouragement that fosters a sense of belonging, students may internalize the belief that they alone are accountable for overcoming challenges. This can create a cycle where students feel isolated in their difficulties, attributing their struggles solely to personal shortcomings rather than external factors (Weist et al., 2018). Establishing a supportive environment that emphasizes belonging and provides proactive encouragement is crucial in preventing students from shouldering the burden of their academic and emotional challenges alone (Weist et al., 2018).

Emma, a selective enrollment student from Willowbrook, attending UChicago, emphasized the crucial role of high school teachers in instilling the confidence she needed to thrive at an elite institution. She said, "I really think that my teachers in high school gave me the

confidence that I needed in myself so that I was feeling prepared to go to UChicago.” She credited her teachers for preparing her mentally and academically for the challenges of UChicago, recognizing their belief in her capabilities as a key factor in her success. The collaborative learning environment at her selective enrollment school further equipped her for the rigorous academic setting at UChicago, illustrating how academic preparation from high school can seamlessly transition to elite institutions.

The support students receive is intertwined with the expectations placed upon them, shaping their confidence and ability to navigate university life. Positive expectations can empower students to assert themselves and excel, fostering a sense of belonging and ownership within the university community. Ava, a neighborhood student from Crestwood, attending Northwestern, echoed this sentiment in stating that “I feel like it goes back to the expectation stuff; expecting me to kind of be there and expecting me to kind of conquer it, helped me a lot in navigating it like, ‘I should be able to do this.’ They believe that I can, so why am I not?” This illuminates how high expectations set by both her school and peers propelled her towards success at Northwestern. Conversely, students lacking exposure to elite institutions may benefit greatly from supportive environments that instill confidence and a sense of belonging, enabling them to navigate university life with assurance. Further research should explore how high schools that do not familiarize students with elite institutions, labeling them as “REACH” schools, can impact student belonging. Conversely, investigating how high schools that actively support and foster positive perceptions of these institutions can enhance students’ sense of belonging and their ability to navigate university environments would be beneficial.

Despite potential academic disparities, Ava’s moral confidence stemming from high expectations set by her high school community allowed her to affirm her identity and confidently

claim her space at Northwestern. This gives prominence to the transformative power of supportive environments in shaping students' perceptions of belonging and their ability to navigate complex university settings. The high expectations placed on her had a positive impact as they enabled her to reaffirm her identity by confidently claiming her space at the university. This moral support reinforced her sense of belonging and validated her worthiness to attend an elite institution.

Just as the pre-college expectations impact students' navigation, the composition of institutions does too; the transition for neighborhood students from homogeneous to heterogeneous educational environments can significantly impact how they navigate and redefine their identities. Mia, a neighborhood student from Meadowview, attending UChicago, shared her journey of externalizing responsibility for her challenges and embracing her identity by confidently owning her space at the university, unapologetically acknowledging her socioeconomic background and origins. She states, "if we're in class to discuss something, we're gonna discuss it and I will give a point of view, which will be shaped by the fact that I came from CPS. I'm Hispanic, and I am from the lower middle class. And like, if you have an issue with it, okay." This contrasts insights from law students who felt compelled to assimilate (Granfield, 1991). Mia's shift away from internalizing these pressures allows her to contribute authentically in discussions, drawing on her unique experiences without conforming to societal expectations. She emphasizes the importance of valuing diverse perspectives in heterogeneous settings, challenging the dominance of affluent and white narratives.

Similarly, Caleb, a neighborhood student from Horizon Heights, attending UChicago, indicated how his experience in a homogenous high school environment fostered comfort with his identity and empowered him to navigate a diverse institution where he stands out. Growing

up in a setting where his background was the norm allowed him to develop a strong sense of self-assurance. This foundation of confidence in his identity enabled him to transition smoothly into spaces where his background was not the majority, reinforcing the value of early experiences in shaping one's self-perception and adaptability in varied environments.

The cultural disparity between a student's high school and university can significantly influence their process of identity renegotiation, often leading to assimilation or a sense of conformity. Ava's experience with her cultural sorority exemplifies this struggle, where she found a supportive community but also felt pressured to conform to a more professional, potentially whitewashed image. Describing her experience, Ava explains,

“And being able to interact with people in a way that's professional, but also personal. And a lot of the times it can seem like whitewashing yourself, or kind of changing yourself or diluting yourself a little bit like, white washing. I feel like for people of color and for marginalized communities is like blanding yourself. Because...you are taking away a lot of your character. But I feel like the sorority helped me in terms of maintaining composure, and ...a well-suited attitude going into classrooms, but also presenting myself: 'Yes, I'm a Latina'... 'Yes, I come from this background.' 'Yes, I get paid to go here' – like little things like that – I feel are very important to also make note of, as much as they seem as disadvantages or stuff that you don't want to talk about. It should be something that you're proud of, it should be.”

Despite the need to adapt to these environments, Ava emphasized the importance of maintaining her cultural identity proudly, acknowledging her background and experiences as integral parts of who she is.

Additionally, Ava highlighted the contrast in care and sense of community between her neighborhood high school experience at Crestwood and her university environment at Northwestern. The genuine care and cultural immersion at Crestwood provided a sense of comfort and belonging that was not as readily available at Northwestern, where she felt the need to actively engage with her culture to maintain that connection. Therefore, she actively searched

for a safe space that affirmed her cultural identity.

Caleb, another neighborhood student from Horizon Heights, attending UChicago, discussed the complication of the shift in networking and professionalism from his high school community to the university setting. The emphasis on networking for career advancement posed a new challenge, requiring a different approach to social connections than what he was accustomed to. He describes his experience as, “because like you still are trying to make connections ... but it’s just like a different approach...And sometimes, like, you feel exhausted, but especially in an institution like this.” This adjustment underscores the importance of social preparation in neighborhood schools compared to elite institutions, where learning to navigate professional networks becomes crucial for maximizing opportunities and career growth. This was a way that the cultural capital at the elite university differed from what was taught at the neighborhood schools, therefore, Caleb experienced some assimilation/sense of conformity to be able to professionally progress in this environment.

Strategy 3: Selecting Supportive Courses or Majors

A significant aspect of students’ engagement with their university experience revolves around their choice of classes and majors. Students select majors based on a variety of factors such as personal interests, potential career outcomes, and comfort levels. The disparity in pre-college experiences plays a crucial role in shaping students’ preparedness for university life, particularly in terms of academic readiness. This difference influences how students navigate their college journey.

For some students, a key strategy involves opting for classes or majors where they feel supported and included, leading them to drop courses or majors that do not foster a welcoming environment. An intriguing revelation emerged when both selective enrollment and

neighborhood high school students expressed concerns about the perceived lack of academic preparation they received, particularly in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. While selective enrollment students initially felt prepared due to the rigor of their Advanced Placement (AP) classes, discussions about their actual experiences revealed constant comparisons between themselves (CPS students from both neighborhood and selective enrollment schools) and their peers in STEM courses.

Notably, CPS students in the study delineated the challenging dynamics stemming from the academic preparation gap, which created a sense of alienation and outsider status within STEM classes. This disparity is attributed to insufficient academic preparation and resources within the CPS system, underscoring the need for targeted support to bridge these gaps and ensure equitable opportunities for all students.

The lack of academic preparation should not be attributed to the students themselves, yet it often leads to a sense of self-blame and internalization of their struggles. An illustrative case is Isi, a selective enrollment student from Silverlake, who is at Northwestern pursuing an engineering major. He shared his challenging experience in a STEM class, particularly chemistry. Isi described feeling penalized due to his inadequate preparation compared to his peers in the class. He expressed frustration at the perceived lack of trust in students' abilities to engage and learn, especially since the course was designed for those with limited chemistry background or lower performance in the subject.

Isi's reflections shed light on the systemic issue within the educational system, specifically CPS, where students like him were not adequately prepared for the demands of university-level coursework. While Isi recognized the external factors contributing to his struggles, such as the shortcomings of his prior education, he also grappled with moments of

internalizing responsibility for his academic challenges. His past tendency to tie his self-worth to academic achievements further complicated his journey through university, impacting his sense of belonging and overall experience. He explains this as,

“I’ve tried to let go of any feelings of attaching social worth to academics...that being both what my grades are and what my academic background is... especially [because] I didn’t take the hugest math courses. I wasn’t like a math person in high school. So seeing people who, of course, go into engineering with a ton of background experience because they were really really interested and dedicated to it. It has been like, ‘WOW’... trying to detach from that because it impacted the way I saw myself with my friends...and I didn’t like that. So yeah, just knowing that there’s differences in those things. And that is okay. Not feeling you know... changes in my sense of belonging.”

This narrative indicates the importance of acknowledging external factors in students’ academic journeys while also recognizing the psychological impact of feeling unprepared and navigating unfamiliar academic environments. This shift in mindset aimed to improve his sense of belonging and overall experience at university. By understanding and addressing these complexities, institutions can better support students like Isi in overcoming challenges and fostering a more inclusive and empowering educational experience.

Isi shows the process of understanding that his pre-college experience was different from that of his peers. He is in the process of learning to externalize and find belonging by working through that. This shows that the major that a student picks, in relation to the academic preparation and training that they have been exposed to, can impact the way that a student is navigating the college process and understanding how they belong at their university. This should not and does not mean that students should only pick classes that align with the preparation they have received, rather there is a pressing need for increased support and resources for students from CPS. This disparity perpetuates the underrepresentation of students of color and those from under-resourced backgrounds in STEM fields. Therefore, there is a need to pick classes that feel supportive to students.

Interestingly, during interviews with students, many expressed concerns about the perceived toxicity within STEM fields and feeling academically inadequate compared to their peers, often leading them to academically compare themselves to their peers and to drop their STEM majors. This exposes the impact of differing high school preparation on CPS students as they navigate college. Consequently, the choice of classes and majors can play a pivotal role in reshaping students' academic paths based on their pre-college experiences.

The presence of supportive classes and professors played a pivotal role in mitigating students' experiences of imposter syndrome. Consequently, students actively sought out courses that offered these supportive elements, creating a sense of familiarity and safety for them. Notably, the impact of majors in fostering supportive environments is evident, significant is the role of professors in cultivating such atmospheres, as emphasized by students.

Sophia, a neighborhood student from Crestwood, attending Northwestern, eloquently captured this sentiment by stating, "I feel it's that kind of community-like and sense of belonging that I was fortunate enough to find here because if I hadn't been in the school that I'm in, if I had been in like the liberal arts program, or something else, I feel like my experience would have been a lot different." Additionally, she accentuates the importance of professor-student engagement by expressing that without the professor's genuine interest in her success, she might not have remained at the institution: "And so I think that was very, very important that I had that when I came here. That's probably why I stayed here." Her testimonials heighten the critical role of both supportive classes and dedicated professors in fostering a positive academic environment and combating imposter syndrome among students.

Thus, enrolling in these classes serves as a strategic approach for students to navigate environments that may not have initially catered to their needs. Marcus, another neighborhood

student from Crestwood, attending Northwestern, shared how the encouragement and support from his professors played a crucial role in combating his imposter syndrome. Marcus articulated this transformative experience by recounting that when his professors acknowledged his active participation in class discussions and expressed their confidence in his abilities, suggesting that he pursue a major in history, it was truly affirming. Until then, he had doubts about his performance and felt like an outsider, battling moments of self-doubt and imposter syndrome. Their words of encouragement were a turning point for him, dispelling those uncertainties and reinforcing his path. With this Marcus stresses the profound impact of professorial support in empowering students to overcome self-doubt and imposter syndrome. Marcus's experience exemplifies how such validation from respected educators can significantly influence a student's academic journey and sense of belonging within their chosen field. It stands as a defining moment that shaped Marcus's initial quarter and stresses the importance of mentorship and encouragement in fostering student success.

Conversely, professors and majors can inadvertently foster negative environments that undermine students' confidence. There is a negative stigma surrounding neighborhood schools and the value that they hold in comparison to selective enrollment or other prestigious pre-college institutions. Therefore, when this stigma is shown to students from neighborhood schools it can be damaging to their confidence and feelings of belonging. Caleb, a neighborhood student from Horizon Heights, attending UChicago, describes his first-hand experience with the stigma; regardless, he was able to combat the negative stereotype because the misconceptions shared in his class fueled his determination to prove them wrong through his actions. Caleb states that:

“I feel like there is a stigma ... you come from a neighborhood school, like, you know, your education probably wasn't as rigorous as mine. Type of vibe. Yeah, it's something

that I definitely talked a lot about in my education classes, like, even some, like professors have the mindset of like, ‘oh, an A from a neighborhood school doesn’t mean the same as a from like, a prestigious high school.’ And that boils my blood. It’s definitely not true, you know, it’s not true at all. But, you know, I’m kind of just like, ‘we’re gonna prove them wrong through our actions.’ That’s my approach to that.”

Caleb’s perspective illustrates the detrimental impact of such biases on students from diverse educational backgrounds. It gives prominence to the importance of challenging these stereotypes and advocating for equal recognition of achievements regardless of school origin. Caleb’s resolve to defy these misconceptions through his efforts exemplifies a proactive approach to combating negative perceptions in academic settings. These biases are what can create a toxic or negative environment for students and can be the reason that they drop classes or majors as mentioned above with STEM majors. Hence, the strategy implemented by students is to drop those toxic classes or majors while navigating their time at the university.

Academic preparation is significantly shaped by the socioeconomic status of the high school attended by students. Elite institutions often enroll a substantial number of students from privileged backgrounds, leading to a predominant presence of such students in their classes. This situation can make those from different socioeconomic backgrounds feel like minorities, resulting in their underrepresentation across various majors. To navigate this challenge, students tend to select courses that resonate with them, either in terms of course content or the diversity of classmates.

Ava, a neighborhood student from Crestwood, attending Northwestern, encountered this issue when she decided to drop her STEM classes. She felt disadvantaged compared to peers who had more resources in high school, better preparing them for rigorous college STEM courses and setting high academic standards. Consequently, she switched from the pre-med track to pursue a double major — one in a field with diverse representation and another in a less

diverse discipline.

She articulated her experience by revealing the disparity between her psychology major, which she perceived as catering predominantly to a specific demographic (white women), and her public health major, which embraced diversity due to its focus on marginalized communities. The public health program allowed her to connect with classmates who shared similar backgrounds and experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and understanding.

Ava's narrative underscores the impact of socioeconomic differences on the learning environment, particularly in majors where students from homogeneous high school backgrounds may feel isolated. By contrasting her situation with that of her affluent white peers, she emphasizes the limitations imposed by varying socioeconomic statuses on academic experiences.

The importance of solidarity within classes and majors becomes evident as it promotes community building and fosters connections based on shared experiences and representation. Having such commonalities in educational settings can enhance students' sense of belonging and ease their navigation through academic challenges.

When considering the supportiveness of classes or majors for students, gender remains a significant factor influencing academic decisions. Bea, a selective enrollment student from Willowbrook, attending UChicago, opted to change her major due to the challenges she faced as a woman in STEM classes. She transitioned from molecular engineering as a major to completing it as a minor and switched to an economics major. Her decision stemmed from feeling marginalized by her male peers, who disregarded her presence and competence during a homework assignment.

In recounting her experience, she described feeling belittled and ignored by a male classmate who only engaged with her male friends, exacerbating her sense of inadequacy. This

treatment mirrored the broader dynamics within her STEM classes, where she encountered similar dismissive attitudes. Bea expressed frustration at the additional hurdles faced by women in STEM fields, despite initially believing she could overcome such challenges.

She pointed out the lack of stability in the engineering program, with frequent changes in course structure and predominantly male instructors and teaching assistants contributing to her discomfort. This instability, coupled with the unsupportive environment created by male peers, led her to question her fit in the engineering discipline and ultimately prompted her shift to economics — a field she found more welcoming and inclusive.

By transitioning to economics while retaining a minor in engineering, she sought a balance between her mathematical interests and a more supportive academic environment. The increased representation of women in economics, both among students and faculty, provided her with a sense of belonging and collaboration that was lacking in her previous major. The contrasting dynamics between how men and women interacted in economics versus engineering further reinforced her decision to prioritize a supportive and inclusive academic setting over gender-based challenges.

Bea's experience draws attention to the significance of seeking majors that offer support and representation, especially when navigating the complexities of the college experience as a woman in male-dominated fields like STEM. Therefore, choosing a major that aligns with both academic interests and a supportive community is a way that students choose to navigate their educational journey and foster a sense of belonging and empowerment.

Strategy 4: Symbolic Boundaries

Symbolic boundaries have a lot to do with a student's morals and as a result with the heavy importance of community that a lot of the participants had. This emphasis on community

could be because neighborhood students were in their community and neighborhoods for high school which ingrained the importance of community and certain morals and values that aligned with that. The way that students were drawing symbolic boundaries often had a lot to do with the socioeconomic status of the student. Some aspects that were commonly mentioned when students were drawing boundaries, was the evident affluence that was present at their elite university through the mentioning of differences in travel patterns. Additionally, within the symbolic boundaries that were drawn, boundaries seemed to be based on moral and value standards. These morals could have to do with familial or community based values.

Ava, a neighborhood student from Crestwood, attending Northwestern, points to both economic disparities and values when she shared her perspective on feeling like she didn't fit in with her peers. She was taken aback by their behavior of planning vacations to "third world countries" immediately after being told they could not return to campus because of COVID-19. As Ava explained, "I just did not feel like I fit in." This disconnect was particularly stark for Ava, as she was at home trying to take care of her family during the pandemic, while her peers had the privilege to travel. As she noted, "I feel that was the biggest disconnection." Ava saw this as a clear sign of the privilege her peers possessed, remarking "it does speak a lot towards the privilege that you have." This experience was a turning point for Ava, who began to question whether she truly wanted to continue attending Northwestern. As she put it, "that was like one of the biggest things that I was like, I don't know if I really want to go here anymore... And I feel like it did speak a lot towards like, 'Okay, this is how I am going to act at this school. And this is how they're gonna act at this school.' And that was the first level of distinction for me."

Ava's observations led her to question her sense of belonging at the university. The disparity in responses to the pandemic highlighted differing values and behaviors among

students. This experience prompted Ava to reflect on how she would navigate this new environment compared to her peers. It accentuates the significance of symbolic boundaries that individuals create to define their place within a community or institution.

Her contemplation on potential actions and behaviors at the university reflects a common struggle faced by students when encountering unfamiliar situations and attempting to establish their identity within that context. Ava's introspection on aligning her actions with her values and principles sets her apart from what she perceives as contrasting behaviors among her peers. This thought process showcases the complexity of adapting to new environments and the conscious effort individuals make to define their roles within these spaces.

Ultimately, Ava's experience serves as a poignant example of how external circumstances can prompt individuals to reevaluate their place within a community or institution. Her decision-making process portrays the importance of personal values and ethical considerations in shaping one's interactions and sense of belonging within a larger social context.

Students also made distinctions regarding the privileges of their peers and the value placed on college and the opportunities presented at elite institutions. This raises questions about whether students from CPS attending these prestigious schools can fully access the opportunities offered. Participants demonstrated their awareness of disparities in privilege among their classmates, which was one way that they formed symbolic boundaries. Sophia, a neighborhood student from Crestwood, attending Northwestern, sheds light on this issue by noting, "I think it's very clear in classes, who has privileges who doesn't." Sophia describes situations where she is stressed about completing assignments, while other students in the same class are casually using their computers for non-academic purposes. She observes that the students who can afford to "do nothing" in class throughout the entire quarter likely had access to high-quality education and

resources growing up, such as tutors. This is in contrast to Sophia's own experience, where such privileges were not available to her. She acknowledges the stark financial differences between herself and her classmates who pay \$80,000 per year to attend the university when she says, "And so in settings like that, that's when I realized that there's a big distinction between me and students who pay 80,000 a year to go to school." While she finds it "crazy" that such disparities exist, she also recognizes that it is "cool" that the university brings together students from diverse backgrounds. However, Sophia is keenly aware of the privilege gaps that separate her from her more affluent peers in the classroom setting. Evidently, these symbolic boundaries are not necessarily negative or malicious but rather serve as a means for students to situate themselves within their academic environments. Coming from a more homogeneous school background, Sophia's observation about the diverse student body at elite institutions affirms and emphasizes the exposure to affluence that is prevalent in such settings. In contrast, students from selective enrollment schools may not make these distinctions as prominently due to their earlier exposure to affluence during their academic journey, possibly starting from the transition between middle and high school.

Furthermore, Sophia's insight that she feels that "people just have different priorities here" reflects her attempt to draw symbolic boundaries to navigate her experience at an elite institution and understand varying perspectives on the college experience. Discussions on privilege also emphasized the importance of seizing the numerous opportunities available at these prestigious universities, as shown by Jay, a neighborhood student from Horizon Heights, attending Northwestern. He illustrates that he has been able to secure interviews and internships with prestigious companies, such as Disney and John Deere, that he never thought he would have access to. He attributes this to his background and the struggles he faced in high school. Jay

explains that his interviewers were particularly interested in how he was able to overcome the challenges and lack of preparation from his high school experience. This demonstrated his resilience and adaptability, which were valued by these companies. Jay's outlook underlines the importance of seizing the numerous opportunities available at prestigious universities, even for students who may not have had the same level of preparation as their peers. By featuring his background and how he overcame obstacles, he was able to access these valuable experiences and internships. His experiences emphasize the significance of the opportunities that elite institutions can provide, and the importance of students being able to effectively leverage their unique backgrounds and experiences to access these opportunities. In essence, these reflections by students illuminate the complex interplay between privilege, access to resources, and individual priorities within elite academic settings. By acknowledging and understanding these distinctions, students can better navigate their educational journeys and make informed decisions about leveraging the opportunities presented to them at elite institutions.

The formation of symbolic boundaries intertwines intricately with a student's self-perception, particularly in relation to imposter syndrome or feelings of not belonging. These sentiments can influence how students delineate these boundaries. Mia, a neighborhood student from Meadowview, attending UChicago, shared her experience with imposter syndrome and how she navigated it through the symbolic boundaries she established. She articulated,

“I know definitely coming in, there was a sense of imposter syndrome, there was a sense of like, not belonging...It's weirdly like the smartest people that people that like are always raising their hands, lack the most common sense. And you're just shocked. And I think that's what really cemented the idea that, like individuality and how everyone has their strong suits. Because yeah, I could give you an insane math problem. And you could solve it. But you can't figure out what bus to take... It's really learning to be yourself in different environments.”

Mia consciously drew boundaries between herself and her academically proficient peers who

lacked practical street smarts. This distinction is closely linked to both academic and social preparedness. The students she referred to likely received a more privileged academic upbringing aligned with higher socioeconomic status, contrasting with Mia's experience at an under-resourced high school that lacked similar educational opportunities. However, students from neighborhood schools often embody what is known as the "doubly disadvantaged" concept, having encountered extreme inequality that may have equipped them with a different form of cultural capital or "street smarts," which Mia perceives as essential "common sense."

This contrast in experiences underscores the multifaceted nature of intelligence and preparation. While some students excel academically due to privileged backgrounds and resources, others like Mia bring unique perspectives and skills shaped by their exposure to adversity and inequality, emphasizing that these aspects are not mutually exclusive. By recognizing and embracing these differences, students can cultivate a deeper understanding of their own strengths and identities within academic environments. Mia's journey exemplifies the complexity of navigating academic spaces while staying true to oneself and valuing diverse forms of intelligence and preparation.

Mia also establishes boundaries rooted in her morals and values inherited from her high school days, where she thrived in a community-oriented learning environment that fostered comfort and camaraderie with peers and instructors. Transitioning to the academic landscape at UChicago, she encountered a stark contrast due to demographic shifts and a divergence in goals among her peers. Reflecting on this shift, she expressed,

"I was then thrown into this massive environment: now people don't look like me, people don't have the same experiences, people are very different. And now we don't have the same goals either. There's a lot of people [who's] genuine goal is to make as much money and they're perfectly fine with destroying the environment, stepping on other people's backs and doing whatever they can to get that and that's very different to what my goal is which I want to go to law school and help people because I'm very upset with the

injustice that I see in the world...I think that was the most difficult thing for me to get used to.”

In navigating her experience at UChicago and distinguishing herself from peers with conflicting values, Mia establishes symbolic boundaries between herself and those who prioritize personal gain at the expense of others — a stance she views as superficial. This process of differentiation aided her in reconciling differences with her peers and solidifying her identity, ultimately helping her combat feelings of imposter syndrome by externalizing accountability for her challenges.

When describing her sense of belonging at UChicago, Mia remarked that this feeling has become so familiar that it has “blended into the background.” She can no longer pinpoint specific moments when she felt this way, as the feeling is no longer overbearing or all-consuming. Mia likens this sense of belonging to “a big bucket of cold water” that momentarily snaps her out of her routine, making her realize that she and her peers may be quite different. However, this realization does not make her feel terrible, but rather helps her recognize and accept the differences between herself and others.

By delineating these symbolic boundaries, Mia coped with the disparities between herself and her peers, recognizing that the perpetual sense of difference had become normalized within the elite academic setting. Her journey embodies the impact of varied training and preparation in neighborhood schools, emphasizing the community-focused learning environment that shaped her perspective. The significant cultural contrast at UChicago, characterized by limited representation and social connections, prompted Mia to draw moral-based symbolic boundaries as a means of understanding and navigating the profound diversity and wealth prevalent in elite educational institutions.

Caleb, a neighborhood student from Horizon Heights, attending UChicago emphasizes the significance of community and reflects on how his high school, characterized by

homogeneity and distinct cultural values, shaped his approach to life—a stark contrast to the environment at his elite institution where these values are less prominent. This sentiment resonated with all participants in my study who discussed establishing symbolic boundaries.

Caleb articulates,

“And, you know, just coming from a culture where...how you go about life, like making a lot of connections within your community. That helps me a lot. Obviously, the major difference is the exposure to affluence...for example, obviously, it’s a lot more diverse here (UChicago) than it was, racially/culturally speaking, at my high school. But specifically being a predominantly white institution, that’s been an interesting experience, just like seeing how people act.”

Caleb’s perspective encapsulates the sentiments shared by students in my research. Interestingly, students from neighborhood schools were the primary participants who demonstrated the creation of symbolic boundaries during our discussions. This trend may stem from the pronounced disparity in exposure to affluence experienced during their high school years, prompting them to seek a sense of belonging and understanding within the university setting. This process is closely intertwined with how students redefine their identities within the university context.

As indicated in the literature review, while the formation of symbolic boundaries can be empowering for students seeking to navigate their new academic environments, there is also recognition of potential negative implications associated with this practice as they “establish a hierarchy of worth among people and practices” (Jack & Black, 2022, p.3).

Networking holds significant importance in elite institutions, where the creation of symbolic boundaries can potentially impact students’ opportunities if they fail to engage with individuals possessing connections to the cultural capital associated with these institutions and future career paths. This concept aligns with Ava’s observation regarding the professional skills instilled in her through her sorority, disclosing the delicate balance between affirming one’s

identity and participating in the networking culture prevalent in elite academic settings.

Elite institutions serve as breeding grounds for specific desired outcomes linked to higher socioeconomic status, emphasizing the cultivation of cultural capital. Consequently, students already equipped with this cultural capital or who have been exposed to it through their high school experiences, often referred to as the “privileged poor,” may be less inclined to establish or acknowledge symbolic boundaries. It is worth noting that while symbolic boundaries are not exclusive to neighborhood school students, those in my research from such backgrounds tended to articulate and uphold them more prominently, suggesting a stronger emphasis on this practice among this group.

Policy Recommendations

The transition from a CPS high school to an elite university can be a strenuous experience for many students. In addition to adjusting to a whole new system, which may offer more stability than their high school experience, the participants in this study report utilizing various strategies to navigate this transition and feel a sense of belonging after the significant environmental change.

The pre-college experience of CPS high school graduates is marked by the difference in preparation between the selective enrollment and neighborhood schools. This research shows that this difference can be related to the way students then utilize strategies to navigate their sense of belonging. One of the main factors is the disparity in affluence and exposure to it during high school. If we can work to mitigate this exposure gap, there may be more CPS students who may be admitted and enroll in elite institutions, particularly those in their own city, Chicago.

An important aspect of this research is that it allows CPS students to voice their opinions on initiatives that could be helpful for their transition to elite universities. Many CPS students,

like Isi, Mia, and Bea, were not aware of the existence of these elite institutions in their city and learned about them very late. If they had known the necessary steps to get into these specific schools, such as Bea's experience of learning the importance of participating in various clubs, they may have been able to better prepare for the transition.

The exposure to affluence is closely connected to the challenges faced by CPS students. If students did not attend selective enrollment schools, they should be provided with programs that inform them about the possibilities of these elite institutions or expose them to affluence, as Marcus mentioned. He described how the "bubble" of Crestwood was holding him and his classmates back until he was able to be a part of a college readiness program that served as his exposure.

To ensure that all CPS students are adequately prepared for the transition to elite universities such as Northwestern and UChicago, it is imperative to enhance high school preparation across the board. This enhancement should extend beyond selective enrollment schools, encompassing all CPS high schools. These efforts should include providing students with exposure to the academic rigor and social norms prevalent in elite universities. This can be achieved by offering college-level courses, providing high-quality learning materials, and fostering a culture of high expectations among students. Ava's, a neighborhood student from Crestwood, attending Northwestern, experience with supportive teachers in high school illustrates the positive impact of such initiatives. For example, her experience with her teacher helping her feel deserving of high-quality printed materials for a college-level course instilled confidence and a sense of ownership, signaling that she belonged in such an academic setting.

Effective career and college counseling are vital components in helping CPS students identify best-fit universities, navigate the application process successfully, and feel encouraged

and capable of applying to elite institutions. This includes accessing financial aid and scholarships, especially crucial for first-generation students. Many first-generation participants, including Caleb, faced challenges in navigating resources effectively due to the complexity of the college application process. Strengthening career and college counseling services can mitigate these challenges and empower students to make informed decisions about their higher education paths.

Universities should implement proactive outreach and awareness initiatives to engage with CPS high schools effectively. This includes organizing information sessions, campus tours, and interactive workshops to promote awareness of opportunities available at these institutions. Collaborating with CPS administrators and educators can enhance the efficacy of these efforts and ensure comprehensive coverage across different CPS schools. Targeted outreach efforts should prioritize CPS schools that are historically underrepresented in higher education pathways. This approach can bridge the information gap and create equitable opportunities for all CPS students, regardless of their high school background. Involving university leadership, including deans and other high-ranking officials, in the outreach process is essential as Jay mentioned. This engagement can provide a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences and challenges faced by CPS students, leading to the development of tailored support initiatives and improved communication channels between universities and CPS communities.

Implementing mentorship programs that connect CPS high school students with current university students from similar backgrounds can significantly benefit students transitioning to elite universities. Mentorship provides invaluable guidance and support, offering insights into navigating university life and accessing resources. Participants emphasized the importance of representation and resources at universities to help CPS students feel a sense of belonging. As it

did for Jay, mentorship programs can play a crucial role in fostering this sense of belonging and easing the transition to college for CPS students.

Tailored transition programs should be established for admitted CPS students, drawing inspiration from successful models like the College Achievement Assistance Program (CAAP) but tailored to the needs of CPS students (UChicago, 2024). These programs should address academic, social, and cultural aspects of transitioning to a rigorous academic environment, offering mentorship, counseling, and academic support services as needed.

Encouraging stronger partnerships between CPS high schools and elite universities is essential to align curriculum, share best practices, and facilitate smoother transitions for students. Collaborative efforts can enhance student preparedness and ease the adjustment to college life. I suggest that further research should explore how high schools that actively support and foster positive perceptions of elite institutions can enhance students' sense of belonging and their ability to navigate university environments.

Collaborative efforts between universities and CPS schools should focus on enhancing high school-college readiness programs. These programs should encompass academic preparation, financial literacy, and college application processes to ensure that CPS students are well-equipped for success in elite academic environments.

Marcus's personal experience with the Thrive Scholars program highlights the significant benefits of offering pre-college experiences to CPS students. As Marcus mentions, the program provided him with a "college light" experience, allowing him to acclimate to the academic, social, and cultural aspects of college life before officially enrolling. This type of immersive program can be instrumental in helping students develop the necessary skills and confidence to succeed in a rigorous academic environment. Marcus suggests that these types of programs

should be more widely advertised and accessible to all CPS students, not just the “top” students. He emphasizes the importance of making students aware of the available resources and opportunities, as many may not know about them. This aligns with the recommendation to establish these college readiness programs and ensure they are accessible to a diverse range of CPS students.

These policy recommendations can serve as a way to mitigate some of the challenges in navigating the transition into college. It is essential that CPS students’ experiences are validated and heard, as they are underrepresented at the elite institutions surrounding their communities, which can provide opportunities for upward mobility. Further research, practice, and policy should be undergirded by the perspectives of those with lived-experiences.

By implementing these policy recommendations, educational institutions can profoundly impact the trajectory of CPS students, empowering them to navigate the academic and social intricacies of elite university environments. As Mia astutely depicted, the prevailing sentiment that “The system was built for only a few of us to get in” underscores the urgent need for change. She reveals that the existing system often feels exclusionary, designed to limit rather than empower. These efforts are not just about access; they are about equity, inclusion, and fundamentally reshaping the narrative of who belongs in prestigious academic spaces.

Empowering CPS students with the tools, support, and recognition they deserve isn’t merely a moral imperative; it’s a strategic investment in our collective future. It’s about fostering a sense of belonging that transcends mere admission statistics, ensuring that every student, regardless of their background, feels valued and capable within these elite settings. This inclusivity isn’t just a nicety or about increasing diversity numbers; it’s about embracing the

diverse perspectives and talents that CPS students bring, enriching the academic discourse and community as a whole.

Ultimately, by centering student input and actively dismantling barriers, we not only level the playing field but also enrich the educational landscape with diverse perspectives and talents. To effectively target public policy, evaluate its impact, and promote inclusivity, it is essential to comprehend the intricate nature of the resources available to students, their navigation within the resulting environment, and the individuals who benefit the most from them. This isn't just about CPS students joining elite universities; it's about transforming these institutions into spaces where every student, regardless of their origins, can thrive, contribute, and lead. It's clear that the time for change is ripe, and the positive impacts of these efforts are bound to be far-reaching and profound.

Conclusion

This thesis explored how CPS students navigate the transition to elite universities like UChicago and Northwestern, focusing on the differences in preparation between selective enrollment and neighborhood high schools. The study examined the strategies students use to foster a sense of belonging and navigate these elite universities, particularly regarding affluence and exposure differences.

The findings align with existing literature highlighting how differing pre-college experiences can impact students' sense of belonging, aspirations, and performance within elite institutions (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Jack, 2019; Jack & Black, 2022; Offidani-Bertrand et al., 2022; Walton and Cohen, 2007). The qualitative interviews revealed four key strategies used by CPS students to navigate belonging: community building, identity renegotiation, selecting supportive courses or majors, and symbolic boundary setting.

Despite the valuable insights gained, it's essential to acknowledge the limitations of the study, particularly the relatively small sample size of 12 CPS alumni. Further research with a larger and more diverse participant pool could provide additional insights. Moreover, exploring the experiences of CPS students at other elite institutions beyond UChicago and Northwestern would help validate the generalizability of these findings.

While this study focused specifically on CPS students, the strategies identified are likely applicable to students from other under-resourced backgrounds navigating elite academic spaces. Regardless of geographic context, students from disadvantaged communities often face similar challenges in cultivating a sense of belonging and leveraging educational opportunities for social mobility. By understanding these nuanced experiences, policymakers and educators can develop more effective support systems to empower all students, regardless of their pre-college preparation, to thrive in elite academic environments. As such, further research, practice, and policy should be undergirded by the perspectives of those with lived-experiences. On this note, it is apt to conclude with the powerful words of Mia, a neighborhood student from Meadowview, attending UChicago, who eloquently captures the sentiment of their public school peers: "We're not supposed to be here...So we managed to game the system."

This poignant quote underscores the resilience and determination of CPS students who have defied the odds to gain access to these elite academic spaces, which were not designed with them in mind. By centering these firsthand narratives, we can better understand the unique challenges and triumphs that CPS students face in navigating institutions that have historically excluded them.

It is this sense of not belonging, yet refusing to be deterred, that exemplifies the transformative potential of empowering CPS students within these elite settings. Rather than

viewing their presence as an anomaly, we must recognize it as a testament to their brilliance and the urgent need to reshape these institutions to be truly inclusive. Only by elevating the perspectives of CPS students can we chart a path forward rooted in equity, ensuring that the doors of opportunity remain open for students from all backgrounds. It is time to move beyond tokenistic gestures and instead embrace the diverse talents and invaluable insights that CPS students bring, transforming these ivory towers into true beacons of hope and possibility.

Appendix A: Interview Guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE:

First of all, thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. My name is Valentina and I am here to talk to you about your experience as a CPS high school (neighborhood/selective enrollment) graduate attending the University of Chicago/Northwestern.

Let me give you a brief overview of what's going to happen. I am going to ask you a series of questions. I want to understand things from your perspective so there are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions.

I want to reiterate that you will be de-identified in transcripts of this interview. You can withdraw consent for any or all sharing of this interview, at any time.

Do you have any questions about this study?

I have sent you a document titled "Information Consent Sheet," have you gotten the chance to read through that?

(If no): Please take a few minutes to read the form. I'll be happy to answer any additional questions.)

Do you have any questions for me?

Great, would you be able to provide verbal consent that you agree to participate in this study?

Do I have your permission to record this interview?

(if no): Thank you. There will be no audio recording, so I will make notes while we are speaking together.

(if yes): Thank you. I'll verify the recorder is working before we start. I will also take notes, to serve as a backup.

Perfect, just as a reminder as well: you do not need to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable responding to. Additionally, if there are any responses that you choose to redact or if at any point you need to take a break or stop the interview please let me know.

Any questions before we begin?

Let's get started!

[RECORD]

Biographical Questions:

1. Just to make it easier when listening back on this: could you please state your name, high school you attended, university you attend, your year in college and major please?
 - a. If you would like to give yourself a pseudonym for this study?
2. Tell me about how you felt about school growing up.
 - a. *Probes: Traits, interests, how do your parents/guardians feel about your school? Education in general?*
3. What was your high school like?
 - a. *Probes: School environment, community/peers, classes, teachers and their support, etc.*
4. How do you think that your upbringing or cultural background influenced your experiences at school?
 - a. *Probes: first or second generation, student was part of the majority demographic at school, religion, language, cultural holidays/traditions*
5. What was your experience in deciding what high school to go to (i.e. either Selective Enrollment or neighborhood school)?
 - a. *Probes: What motivated you to apply? If you attend a neighborhood school, what motivated you to not apply to an S.E.?*
6. What was your experience in deciding what university to go to?
 - a. *Probes: What motivated you to apply? Why did you decide on UChicago/Northwestern and not another university? Did the location have anything to do with it?*

Pre-College Experiences:

1. Thinking back to your earlier educational experiences, what aspects of your high school environment do you think have had a lasting impact on the way you approach or view your current university experience?
 - a. *Probes: were there any particular thoughts or perspectives that you brought with you from your earlier schooling that you found influencing the way you approach this new chapter in your academic journey?*
2. What expectations were placed on you during high school?
 - a. *Probes: by your school, by your family, by yourself, by your friends*
3. Do you feel that your high school prepared you for the social and academic life of your university? Why or why not? And how?
4. What aspects of your high school are similar to those of your university and which ones are different?
 - a. *Probes: exposure to affluence, academic expectations set on students*
5. In what ways do you believe attending CPS shapes or informs the methods you use to navigate through your experience at university?

Belonging Uncertainty:

1. Can you share some experiences or moments from your first few months at the university that felt particularly significant or impactful in shaping your overall sense of connection or comfort here?
 - a. *Probes: How did you feel when you first started at the university?*
2. As you reflect on your time here, are there aspects of your earlier educational experiences that you feel might have played a role in shaping how you navigate social connections or interactions within the university setting?

Symbolic Boundaries and Interactions:

1. As you've navigated through your time at UChicago/Northwestern, have you come across any interesting patterns or variations in how different groups of students seem to connect or interact within the university community?
2. In your experience at your university, have you ever felt a sense of division or difference between yourself and others in academic or social settings? Can you describe any specific instances where you might have felt excluded or faced challenges in feeling like you belonged within a particular group or environment?

Social Groups and Adaptations:

1. When engaging with different groups of students at UChicago/Northwestern, could you share some insights into how you've found common ground?
2. Similarly, Could you share some insights into how you've connected with peers who bring diverse perspectives or experiences? Are there any specific strategies you use?
3. How do your university peers' educational backgrounds shape how you interact with them? If at all?

Institutional Support and Perceptions:

1. From your experiences here, what aspects of university life do you think contribute most to fostering a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from diverse educational backgrounds?
 - a. What has made you feel most welcome and what hasn't?
2. What aspects of your high school experience do you think most influence your feelings of belonging at this university? (whether + or -)
3. As you reflect on your time here, are there any ideas or initiatives you believe could further enhance the overall inclusivity of the university community for students coming from a wide range of pre-college/educational experiences?
4. Do you feel as though there is a stigma around individuals that went to certain high schools or have certain high school experiences? What is that stigma?

Changes and Reflections:

As you've progressed through your time at the university, have you noticed any shifts or changes in the way you connect with others or perceive your sense of belonging in the campus community?

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me. I appreciate your insights and openness. Before we end the interview, is there anything else that you think might be helpful for me to understand about you or experiences?

Appendix B: Participant Information

Name	University	High School Type*	High School	Gender	Race**	Ethnicity** *	Tier	Length of time in CPS system
Marcus	Northwestern	N	Crestwood	Male	N/A	Mexican American	1	K-12
Ava	Northwestern	N	Crestwood	Female	White	Hispanic	2	K-12
Sophia	Northwestern	N	Crestwood	Female	N/A	Latinx	N/A	K-12
Emma	UChicago	SE	Willowbrook	Female	White	Hispanic/ Mexican	4	6-12
Bobbie	UChicago	SE	Willowbrook	Female	White	Irish/Italian	3	K-12
Bea	UChicago	SE	Willowbrook	Female	White	Polish/ Irish	4	K-12
Mia	UChicago	N	Meadowview	Female	White	Hispanic/ Latina	N/A	K-12
Caleb	UChicago	N	Horizon Heights	Male	N/A	Hispanic/ Latine	N/A	9-12
Jay	Northwestern	N	Horizon Heights	Male	N/A	Latino	3	K-12
Lucas	UChicago	SE	Summit Valley	Male	White	Hispanic/ Latino	4	7-12
Isi	Northwestern	SE	Silverlake	Male	White/ African American	White/ African American	4	K-12
Aiden	Northwestern	N	Evergreen	Non-binary /Male	White	Latino	4	K-12

*N = CPS Neighborhood High School ; SE = CPS Selective Enrollment High School

**Race: Participants self-identified their race using the descriptions they felt were most accurate and appropriate for them.

**Ethnicity: Participants self-identified their ethnicity using the descriptions they felt were most accurate and appropriate for them.

Appendix C: CPS High School Descriptors*

High School	High School Type**	Total Enrollment	Racial/Ethnic Diversity of students at this school by percentage				% of Low Income
			Hispanic	Black	White	Asian	
Crestwood	N	1,224	97.2%	1%	0.9%	Redacted	91.6%
Meadowview	N	2,916	86.4%	10%	1.1%	2.1%	84.2%
Horizon Heights	N	1,003	95.6%	1.7%	Redacted	1.7%	92.6%
Evergreen	N	1,635	81.3%	3.7%	13.9%	Redacted	64.3%
Summit Valley	SE	1,040	28.8%	5.6%	38.3%	21%	35%
Silverlake	SE	1,231	24.4%	9%	37.6%	24.4%	30.3%
Willowbrook	SE	1,930	31.5%	12.4%	35%	17.4%	37.9%

*Please note that all information presented in this chart was sourced from the Illinois Report Card for the academic year 2022-2023.

**N = CPS Neighborhood High School ; SE = CPS Selective Enrollment High School

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