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More Than A Scholarship: College And Career Outcomes Of Mitchell Institute Promise Scholars

Loren Bowley Dow
University of Vermont

MORE THAN A SCHOLARSHIP: COLLEGE AND CAREER OUTCOMES OF MITCHELL INSTITUTE PROMISE SCHOLARS

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Loren Bowley Dow

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Dissertation Examination Committee:

Jason Garvey, Ph.D., Advisor
Shelly Rayback, Ph.D., Chairperson
Tracy Arámbula Ballysingh, Ph.D.
Susan Comerford, Ph.D.
Cynthia J. Forehand, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

ABSTRACT

The transition into and out of higher education is challenging for first-generation college students from limited income backgrounds. Though educational attainment gaps between low- and high-income students exist, students from low-income households can and do earn college degrees with access to appropriate resources. Increasing socioeconomic diversity in higher education is necessary to address societal needs and to reduce educational and income inequality. The purpose of this study is to examine how economic, social, and cultural capital influences the transition of low-income, first-generation students into college and into the workforce. Through the stories of nine "at-promise" students who received a Mitchell Institute Promise Scholarship that provides tuition support, leadership development experiences, and personalized mentoring, an understanding of how these students approach and move through college is gained. This longitudinal qualitative study uses an asset-based approach to examine the outcomes of the scholarship recipients who were selected as Promise Scholars based on experiencing traumatic circumstances prior to college enrollment such as homelessness, emancipation, and physical abuse. The results of this study identify the programmatic efforts of the Mitchell Institute that are most effective in supporting the Promise Scholars' transitions and offer recommendations for the resources at-promise students require from institutions to navigate their college to career transitions. The Mitchell Institute is a non-profit organization whose mission is to increase post-secondary degree attainment for all Maine students.

Keywords: first-generation, low-income, college outcomes, transition, and social capital

DEDICATION

To the Promise Scholars who shared their stories, never give up.

To Mitchell Scholars past, present, and future, always give back.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

A college education is a large financial burden for students in the United States, yet earning a college degree is life changing. College graduates generally earn more than those with only a high school diploma (Selingo, 2013). In the United States, those who attain a bachelor's degree have median earnings that are about 55% more than those who only hold a high school diploma ("Young Adults and Higher Education," 2019). The lifetime difference in earnings between bachelor's degree and high school degree earners is an often-cited reason to go to college, but there are also social advantages to degree attainment. A college degree often results in better employment benefits, health outcomes and increased community involvement (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016).

A college education is an investment in a better future, but this future is not accessible to all. College costs are increasing at rates higher than the financial resources available to students, especially those from low-income backgrounds. Although the amount of money students can borrow from the federal government is limited, the public and private money loaned to students has more than doubled since 2000 (Selingo, 2013). Students with the lowest incomes often contribute more than $10,000 per year out of pocket to complete a four-year degree at a public university (Burd, 2018). More recently, private colleges are reducing tuition and fees to compete with public colleges (Bernard, 2019). However, public colleges remain the best financial choice for lower income families. Twelve percent of families whose income level was $35,000 or less were still paying $20,000 or more at private colleges compared to almost 60% of similar income level families having grant aid cover all of their tuition fees at public colleges ("Trends in

College Pricing," 2018). For students whose families earn small incomes, funding either private or public university attendance is a challenge.

Financial aid is not keeping up with tuition increases, so nonprofit organizations and private scholarship programs have become more important than ever to help the lowest income families pay for college. Between 2008 and 2018, tuition and fees increased by just under $3,000 per year at public institutions and by approximately $7,000 per year at private institutions ("Trends in College Pricing," 2018). Grants and merit awards can close the gap between financial aid and the cost of college attendance, but this gap widens as the sticker price often increases each year (Goldrick-Rab & Kendall, 2016). The net price of college for four-year public institutions, which is determined after deducting the total value of grants from the sticker price, has increased at 71% of public universities from 2010 to 2015 for the lowest-income in-state students (Burd, 2018). More than half of the public universities examined increased their net price by at least $1,000 and others increased by as much as $5,000 (Burd, 2018).

Although the costs are rising, it is not slowing college enrollment from students of all socioeconomic backgrounds. College attendance is a necessity for a stable social and financial future. As poverty rates in 1996 are similar to those in 2016 (Pew Research Center, 2019), the number of low-income students enrolling in college has increased over the same amount of time. Cost may not prevent low-income students from enrolling in post-secondary education, yet cost is often a factor in actual degree completion. A student whose family is in the top income quintile is five times more likely to earn a bachelor's degree by the age of 24 (Lederman, 2017). Students from the lowest income levels are more likely to pursue an associate's degree, with only 32% enrolling in bachelor degree

programs (Fain, 2019). Once enrolled in either two- or four-year programs, low-income and first-generation students face challenges to completion that extend beyond finances.

As students from low socioeconomic backgrounds enter college for the first time, lack of institutional knowledge and occupational role models can hinder their academic and personal achievement. Over the last 20 years, socioeconomic inequality has led to disparities in educational outcomes for students in the lowest income quartiles (Broer, Bai, & Fonseca, 2019). Yet this is not a new problem. Bourdieu and Passerson (1979) conducted a large-scale review of French students and their educational attainment based on their parent's background. They found students whose parents had executive backgrounds were 80 times more likely to attend university than students of parents from the working class.

Bourdieu and Passerson (1979) believed it is not merely economic obstacles that cause differences in educational attainment rates, but that "social origin exerts its influence throughout the whole duration of schooling, particularly at the great turning points of a school career" (p. 13). Although this enrollment gap has improved from 40 years ago, those with a higher income and education level more often obtain college degrees (Cahalan, Perna, Yamashita, Ruiz, & Franklin, 2016). Students whose parents did not attend college may have a limited understanding of the cultural norms and have fewer social networks to support them through their college experience (Kersh, Flynn, & Palmer, 2019). In addition, the transition from a familiar environment to an unfamiliar one may cause additional stress than what higher-income continuing generation students face (Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Albert, 2011). Helping students from lower income

backgrounds achieve in college takes more than money; it also requires building of personal characteristics and knowledge of this unfamiliar territory.

Clearly, both economic and social backgrounds have a role in determining whether or not students who enter college ultimately graduate; however, socioeconomic disadvantage is not the only identity that puts students at-risk for non-completion. Students who hold minoritized identities based on race, ethnicity, language, sexuality, ability status, and religion also do not fare as well on college campuses as students from non-minoritized backgrounds (Ballysingh, 2016; Garvey, Squire, Stachler & Rankin, 2018; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Saunders & Serna, 2004; Walpole, 2008). In addition, students who have experienced family disruption, trauma, homelessness, addiction, or who have other emotional or behavioral conditions are all less likely to persist (Horton, 2015). Although students of color and Latinx students have increased their college enrollment rates, their degree attainment rates continue to fall behind White and Asian students (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008). In addition, students who live in rural areas also face challenges when it comes to degree completion (Lewine et al., 2019). For this study, the focus will be on socioeconomic status (SES), yet acknowledging the influence of multiple identities on a student's experience in higher education is imperative. Personalized emotional, social, and financial support from resources both on and off campus can help students from minoritized backgrounds succeed in achieving their degree attainment goals.

The Mitchell Institute

One non-profit scholarship program that aims to help Maine students with the qualifications and ambition to pursue a college education and reduce financial barriers

while doing so is the Mitchell Institute. The Mitchell Scholarship is awarded to students from every Maine community who demonstrate academic promise, financial need, and community impact. Founded in 1995 by Senator George Mitchell, one student from every public high school in the state is selected. Currently, scholars are awarded $10,000 to be distributed in $2,500 increments over their four years of college. While serving as a U.S. Senator for the state of Maine, George Mitchell had a goal of speaking at every high school graduation in the state at least once. It was this experience of interacting with so many promising Maine students that he realized, "I had a duty to use whatever ability I possess to see that no child in Maine who wants to go to college is without a helping hand." Senator Mitchell left his position as Senate Majority Leader in 1995, a position he held since 1989, and worked as the chairperson of peace negotiations in Northern Ireland while establishing strong donor support for his new scholarship program. In 1999, the Mitchell Scholarship became what is now known as the Mitchell Institute with a foundation grant that allowed the program to expand by adding personal and career support programs in addition to financial support to attend college.

More recently, Mitchell Scholars who are perceived as at-risk for non-completion of postsecondary education due to destabilizing family factors such as poverty, homelessness, foster care, or other traumatic experiences, are recognized by the Mitchell Institute as "Promise Scholars." These scholarship recipients are considered Mitchell Scholars, but they are internally designated as Promise Scholars by the Mitchell Institute. Since its inception in 2014, the Promise Scholars are able to access more robust financial and personal support through funding secured by the John T. Gorman Foundation whose mission is to improve the lives of disadvantaged people in Maine. One of the

foundations' priorities is to help vulnerable Maine youth successfully transition to adulthood. This grant provides resources that extend beyond the traditional Mitchell Scholarship, which include access to an emergency fund, guaranteed fellowship funding, enhanced leadership development opportunities, mentorship, and increased staff interaction.

The Promise Scholars receive the same scholarship award that Mitchell Scholars do in addition to the resources mentioned above. However, this is not a traditional promise program, which is defined as a place-based scholarship eligible to all graduating students who meet minimum academic requirements (Swanson, Watson, Ritter, & Nichols, 2017). Unlike other promise programs, students are not limited to institutions they can attend. They can attend two- or four-year colleges both in and out of the state of Maine. The Mitchell Institute believes that their interventions of financial, social, and personal support will effectively help Promise Scholars to succeed in college despite their backgrounds. For the 2014 and 2015 cohorts of Promise Scholars, 93% have annual family incomes below $35,000 and 70% identify as first-generation college students. Students from first-generation backgrounds have lower rates of college persistence, degree completion, and are more often from lower income households (Cabrera, Burkum, La Nasa, & Bibo, 2012; Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018; Redford & Hoyer, 2017).

To date, approximately 3,000 Mitchell scholarships have been awarded totaling more than $17.5 million in student support. Mitchell Scholars represent a diverse group of students who come from rural, suburban, and urban communities across Maine. Sixty-six percent of current Mitchell Scholars are from families whose income is below the state median of $68,000 and 44% are the first in their families to attend college

("Mitchell Scholars," 2017). Many scholars have working class and first-generation backgrounds, yet 85% of Mitchell Scholars achieve a post-secondary degree, compared to 55% of their U.S. peers ("Mitchell Institute Research," 2019). Mitchell Scholars also graduate from college at higher levels than do Maine students ("Mitchell Institute Research," 2019). Clearly, the program is successful for many Maine students, yet the effectiveness of the more recent Promise Scholars program has not been closely examined. The economic and demographic landscape of Maine may further exacerbate Promise Scholars' ability to earn a post-secondary credential.

Maine Demographic and Economic Trends

Maine is a rural, White state. It has the nation's largest percentage of White, non-Hispanic residents, at 94.6% ("U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts," 2018). The most Northern and Eastern counties (Aroostook, Piscataquis, and Washington) had their highest populations 40 or more years ago (Rector, 2019). The population growth in the state is lagging and the workforce is aging. The greatest number of Mainers live in the Southern part of the state where there is more economic opportunity. Cumberland, York, and Sagadahoc counties have the highest median household incomes of around $60,000 (Rector, 2019). The median income of the more rural counties is $40,000 or lower (Rector, 2019). Approximately, 30% of Mainers earn less than $35,000 per year, which is a higher percentage of lower incomes than the rest of New England and the United States as a whole (Rector, 2019). The economic capital available to support students from Maine lags behind the rest of New England.

Maine high school graduates from rural counties have limited opportunities for higher paying jobs unless they go to college. Even the students from the wealthier

counties do not always have the economic means to make college attendance a reality. Furthermore, even with a college degree, the income levels in the state are not on par with the rest of New England. In Maine, the median income level of a person with a bachelor's degree is only $14,000 more than someone with a high school diploma; whereas, in Massachusetts there is just over a $23,000 difference in median earnings ("Young Adults and Higher Education," 2019). When there are limited economic opportunities, a college degree is not always a priority because earning the degree does not necessarily guarantee a better financial future.

The Mitchell Institute hopes to address the problem of lagging postsecondary degree attainment among Maine's youth that reduces their ability to fulfill personal potential and contribute to the economic well-being of the state. Currently, Maine has the lowest degree completion rate in New England ("Common Data Project," 2018). Maine's individual undergraduate degree attainment rate is 43.6%, which is lower than the national rate of 46.9% ("A Stronger Nation," 2018). In 2017, 30% of Mainers over the age of 25 had a Bachelor's degree and only 12% had a graduate or professional degree (Rector, 2019). Only 40% of economically-disadvantaged Maine students graduate from college compared to 62% of their non-economically-disadvantaged Maine peers ("Common Data Project," 2018). The Maine State Legislature has set a degree attainment goal of 60% by 2025. Increasing the number of degrees earned from socioeconomically disadvantaged students will help the state achieve its goal.

The state prioritizes degree attainment because Maine's economy is losing business opportunities due to the lack of a skilled workforce. Maine is one of only two states that had more deaths than births in 2016, thus growing the workforce with higher

numbers of skilled young people in the state is critical for improving economic growth (Baillargeon, Neal, O'Hara, & Hart, 2018). The median age of Maine's population is 44.7 years, which in 2017 was the oldest in the United States (Rector, 2019). Since almost half of Maine's school-aged children are eligible for free and reduced lunch, and this demographic typically has lower educational attainment ("Common Data Project," 2018), improving the educational attainment of this population would promote equity and increase the state's skilled labor force (Baillargeon et al., 2018). Non-profit scholarship programs like the Mitchell Institute can do their part in supporting low-income students, but they cannot reach everyone. The state cannot solely rely on philanthropic efforts to solve the degree attainment gap and must consider the systemic challenges that face children living in poverty. Through this study, I inform future policy recommendations regarding what improves degree completion for socioeconomically underserved groups and provide insight regarding where to target investments in the state higher education system and thereby, improve social and economic prosperity state-wide.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to identify how resources provided by the Mitchell Institute influence students' transition into college and the workforce. By analyzing student interviews during college and post-graduation, I contribute to the ongoing interest in ways to increase degree attainment for all students, specifically those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This study aids in evaluation of the programmatic supports provided by the Mitchell Institute and provides generalizations for future Promise Scholar cohorts. The knowledge gained aids in understanding what is most effective in supporting students from low SES backgrounds to overcome degree completion barriers.

Limited research tracks student retention over time and typically focuses on first year persistence rather than degree completion (Cabrera et al., 2012; Nora & Crisp, 2012). Furthermore, higher education research on transition focuses primarily on college entry and completion with little discussion of college outcomes (Goldrick-Rab, Carter, & Wagner, 2007). This study seeks to understand the experiences of the 2014, 2015, and 2016 cohorts of Promise Scholars and how their transitions to college and the workforce influenced not only their eventual degree completion, but also their college and career outcomes. The two phases of interviews illuminate college experiences and completion and career trajectories.

In this qualitative study, I examine how the degree attainment of Promise Scholars from socioeconomically diverse backgrounds is influenced by the personal, professional, and financial support networks provided by the scholarship program. Annual Mitchell Scholar survey responses and scholarship application data will confirm college outcomes and expand upon background characteristics that are not discussed during the interviews. Through two interviews with Promise Scholars, I explored how the scholarship program and the students' backgrounds influenced their college and post-college outcomes. The reason for collecting qualitative data is to bring greater insight into how Promise Scholars experience college than what is gathered by examining their degree completion rates and career outcomes in isolation. The factors that make the difference for them to persist and graduate are typically defined through quantitative measures that lack the depth and richness of the Promise Scholars' lived social experience.

Theoretical Lens and Conceptual Framework

Two theories that are utilized in higher education research to further understanding of how students' access to personal, psychological, and social support influence their transition into college are: social reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 2002; Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990) and adult transition theory (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). These theories help researchers understand the impact of having knowledge and resources through the transition into and out of higher education. The experience of higher education may be challenging to those who do not come equipped with the capital that is expected to navigate college environments.

Social Reproduction Theory

A popular construct in student retention and persistence literature about students from low SES backgrounds is Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (Bergerson, 2007; Hannon, Faas, & O'Sullivan, 2017; Perna & Titus, 2005; Walpole, 2003; Walpole, 2008; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Grounded in practice theory, Bourdieu argued that the only way to understand a social phenomenon is through examining societal structures and individual experiences. He advocated for leaving grand theory, a macro-level perspective used to explain large-scale concepts, behind in place of an active synthesis of theory ("Practice Theory", 2008). One overarching theory is not complex enough to capture the many interactions between society and an individual on a micro-level. Although individuals adapt differently given the circumstances, they are also part of a social world that is influenced by family, friends, and the conditions of their lives (Hoskins & Barker, 2019). For Bourdieu and Passerson (1990), it is "…the system of factors that exert the

indivisible action of *structural causality* on behavior and attitudes and hence, on success and elimination" (p. 87). They believed that a theoretical model must provide an examination of all the potential influences and experiences throughout students' educational careers that contribute their successes or failures in a school environment.

Thus, Bourdieu created three conceptual categories of social reproduction: habitus, capital, and field (2002). Habitus is explained as norms or perceptions of one's place in the social world. Capital refers to economic, social, and cultural ways that class positions and power are manifested in society. Field is the space of social interaction and competition. "Each field is dynamic and has its own logic and its own structure and forces, which are organized around specific capitals over which individuals and groups struggle as they attempt to maintain or change their position in a field" ("Practice Theory", 2008). Higher education is a field with a competitive arena in which the accumulation of students with greater amounts of capital is reinforced. In Bourdieu's framework, higher education institutions serve the ruling class (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Students with ruling class capital are rewarded in the educational system not merely for academic merit but for having the type of capital that is valued by the institution.

Schools exist not only to educate students, but also to aid in socialization and social class mobility. Educational experiences should enhance social networks; however, many urban and working-class schools are not able to do this because of their focus on White middle-class socialization for lower income and minoritized students (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). In the field of higher education, White middle-class culture is prized, and as a result, students that do not have experience with White middle-class culture are viewed as deficient. Yosso (2005) argued that White middle-class culture is norm in the

U.S. educational system. For example, students who have the resources to have a computer at home gain knowledge and training that is valued in the school system before entering school. Whereas, a student from a multilingual home may have the skills to translate documents from one language to the other, but this does not have a high value in a school that prioritizes reading and writing in English (Yosso, 2005). There are forms of capital that marginalized students have more exposure to, yet those are not likely to be recognized if a deficit perspective is applied to the amount of capital they possess when they enter the school system. Students placed at-risk by social, political, and economic factors have forms of capital that were overlooked by Bourdieu's original conceptualization of social reproduction that focuses on White middle-class society (Ballysingh, 2019b; Yosso, 2005).

Social capital is defined by Bourdieu (2002) as, "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance of recognition" (p. 248). Obtaining social capital requires an investment of both economic and cultural resources, so the transaction of gaining more social capital is not always a clear market exchange (Portes, 1998). Social capital is not a tangible good or service that can be measured and given a specific value. For this reason, it poses a challenge for researchers to understand which resources lead to the greatest attainment of social capital. Overall, social capital is a concept that helps explain how certain populations have access to benefits by virtue of membership in a social network or group (Portes, 2008). If a person does not have access to the social capital valued by society, one has the potential to acquire it through schooling (Yosso, 2005). The educational outcomes of groups placed in the minority are

not as strong as White middle or upper class groups due to the accumulation of social resources occurring more easily for one group than the other (Yosso, 2005). This approach does not acknowledge the institutional barriers and political contexts that often result in unequal school funding, racial segregation, and less experienced educators with limited resources teaching students placed in marginalized groups that may impede the acquirement of social capital (Luna & Martinez, 2013). Furthermore, access to social networks varies depending on a students' class, race, gender, and ethnicity, which influences the evaluation of a student's potential and ability along with their willingness to engage in the cultural norms of the dominant group (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Social capital is one factor in educational and personal achievement. When examining one's place in a social system, accumulation of cultural capital is also important.

Cultural capital refers to specialized knowledge that is not taught but learned through interactions with people who have similar habits, manners, and lifestyle choices (Berger, 2000; Bourdieu, 2002; Walpole, 2003). Berger (2000) believed that higher education is one of the primary means in which individuals hope to increase access to economic and cultural capital. Bourdieu's original construct of cultural capital added other forms of capital including symbolic, intellectual, and artistic; however, economic and cultural capital are the primary resources in the social reproduction process (Berger, 2000). Cultural capital is the missing link to understanding why access to economic capital alone does not account for social classes in society. More nuanced understandings of cultural capital were developed to account for the reductionist model that centers on White middle-class culture. Yosso's (2005) concept of Community Cultural Wealth recognized forms of cultural capital that often go unnoticed and are assets to students

from marginalized backgrounds. Cultural capital is not only exclusive to what middle-class White culture values, but also includes aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant wealth that communities of color rely upon (Yosso, 2005). More specifically, familial capital, cultural knowledge nurtured by your family, and aspirational capital, maintaining hopes and dreams in the face of barriers, are prominent themes for researchers who seek to understand what aids Latino students in pursuit of a college degree (Ballysingh, 2019b; Luna & Martinez, 2013).

Higher education scholarship related to theory. Many limited income and first-generation students do not have access to the social, cultural, and economic capital that would help them persist in a college setting (Walpole, 2003). Researchers argue that the ability of students from lower socioeconomic status to succeed in higher education is based on whether or not they have learned the social and cultural capital of higher education (Berger, 2000; Putnam, 2015). Stanton-Salazar (1997) believed that access to social capital for low-income and African American and Latino youth is thwarted by the value placed on these children depending on social class, gender, and race and level of institutional support that children from minoritized groups have access to. The result of students' being less valued in educational systems is a deficit of the social and cultural capital needed to function in the context of higher education. Yosso (2005) acknowledged that this deficit perspective is problematic in schools and that people of color have the capital and skills needed for social mobility, but the forms of capital valuable to students placed at-risk often go unrecognized by the institution. The sub-environments of institutions are academic, social, and organizational and a student's ability to persist is affected by the extent to which their habitus is congruent with the

campus' dominant habitus (Berger, 2000). For many students from low-income households their understanding of higher education is different from socioeconomically privileged students based on their previous familial and educational experiences.

Individuals with access to similar levels of economic and cultural capital typically share the same habitus. As low-income students enter the "field" of college it is not only the individual's actions that influence their experience, it is also the cultural capital they have access to which varies greatly depending on their family background and their understanding of the norms of higher education, which they often have a limited cumulative experience with (Bloom, 2008). The cultural capital that is recognized and valued in higher education is one that is reproduced through interacting with the institution (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). For students with diverse cultural capital this interaction with the institution will influence the level of privileges and rights earned by attending college. Thus, one student with more valued cultural capital will have a different experience interacting with college than a student with less valued cultural capital. For example, universities value participation in social and cultural activities that higher income students are more likely to have exposure to and therefore, are more likely to engage in these activities. Upper middle-class students are more likely to participate in internships, off-campus study, and fraternity and sorority life than working class students (Stuber, 2009). Activities such as internships, study abroad, and volunteer work are encouraged and positively reinforced through stronger connections with faculty, deeper understandings of concepts, and enhanced social networks. On the other hand, lower income students tend to focus on academics and working while in college because these activities are rewarded in their households and are more essential to their survival. Lower

income students are less likely to reap the social and cultural benefits of attending university due to social class reproduction (Walpole, 2003).

Hannon and colleagues (2017) cautioned against assuming Bourdieu's theory will produce adequate capital for low socioeconomic status students without acknowledging the context and structures in place that prevent students from converting this capital into success in higher education and beyond. "College going capital is very rarely built through direct instruction; instead, it is deeply rooted in a series of personal experiences of college campuses built over long periods of time" (Bloom, 2008). Through 60 interviews with working class and upper class students, Stuber (2009) found that students who have more resources at the start of college are going to gain more during college even if similar opportunities are available to all students. Social capital is not easy to develop or acquire for students from low-income backgrounds, and even if it is provided, it does not guarantee success.

External and internal conflicts may lead to frustration and difficulty for first-generation students attempting to achieve their educational and career goals. Habitus and social norms may transform in college, which requires integrating new values into their lives. Thus, the accumulation of new forms of capital may be positive for some students in navigating higher education, but may be problematic in re-entering their community after college. Alfred Lubrano, in his (2004) autobiographical investigation of a new social class of white-collar adults from blue-collar backgrounds, wrote:

> Practically any journey home for a Straddler is going to inspire pain, nostalgia, guilt, and ambivalence….the neighborhood you rejected and quit is still there, as

> are many of the people...whom you told at one time or another, 'There must be something more than this' (p. 109).

For many first-generation and limited-income students, these struggles do not end once they graduate from college. In fact, the difficulties may increase as they forge new paths that challenge their families' previous experiences and beliefs. The importance of student's developing a sense of autonomy to make choices in their educational and career paths must not be forgotten in current educational discourse that recognizes postsecondary attainment as success (Hannon et al., 2017). Success is a concept shaped by your class, culture, and environment. The definition of success is likely to change for students during and after college.

Bourdieu's social reproduction theory is applied widely in higher education studies to aid in understanding why certain groups achieve more than others in an educational setting or in the job market. Cultural capital is viewed as both a "currency" (Jehangir, 2010) and an "invisible resource" (Stuber, 2009) that provides students opportunities for exchange into certain social networks and enables students to understand an institution's academic culture. Jehangir (2010) explained that while university institutional practices are slow to change, curriculum and teaching may be able to "reframe" the cultural capital of students from low-income backgrounds as strengths (p. 542). Low-SES and first-generation students do have the capacity to graduate and understanding their experiences will lead to the development of more effective strategies (Demetriou, Meece, Eaker-Rich, & Powell, 2017). The success of low-income and first-generation students is connected to general economic welfare, social capital, and individual engagement with the environment (Demetriou et al., 2017; Jehangir, Stebleton

& Dennanath, 2015). Networks are often more important in obtaining a job than academic skills. Martin and Frenette (2015) studied arts alumni and determined that students with opportunities for career skill development who had experienced greater community engagement were more predictive of a shorter job search than those with higher academic skill. Increasing access to networks and community may improve outcomes in higher education for students like the Promise Scholars.

Relevance to Promise Scholars. The Promise Scholars who are the focus of this study are provided with increased social, economic, cultural capital from the Mitchell Institute's connections and resources. The scholarship serves as a bridge to access the capital that is required to navigate the complex field of higher education. The economic capital is short-term, with scholarship money being provided to them through their college years; however, the social connections and cultural capital acquired by earning their degree are accessible into their adulthood. The Mitchell Institute serves as a builder of forms of capital that the Promise Scholars may not have had access to in their home environment. The program has the potential to influence multiple levels of capital. The Mitchell Institute strives to offer customized support based on individual student needs. Will this capital be enough to substitute for other important networks that lead to graduation and successful job placement?

Although social capital is largely viewed as something that is positive for most individuals, it also has its limitations. Portes (1998) explained that exclusion of outsiders, excess claims on group members, restriction of freedom, and downward leveling norms are problematic effects. Organizations like the Mitchell Institute are only available to some students, thus excluding other deserving individuals from the network benefits.

There are also concerns with conformity and whether or not the goals established by the organization are desirable for all members of the community. However, applying for the scholarship is a choice, so likely the goals of the scholars align with those of the program. Some Promise Scholars might interpret the values of the program as conflicting with those of their family values and may have to negotiate the norms from the home environment with the expectations of the program. Learning how to approach the transition into college through utilizing personal characteristics, psychological resources, and strategies to cope with change are critical skills, in addition to building capital, that may affect the Promise Scholar's educational and career outcomes.

Transition Theory

Times of transition are hard for most adults. Yet it is often not the transition itself, but how the change is viewed by the person experiencing it that determines the impact the transition will have on an individual (Schlossberg et al., 1995). In a transition to a new educational environment it is recommended that institutions spend time helping individuals know what is expected of them and familiarize their students with the norms of the new system (Schlossberg et al.,1995). The Mitchell Institute aims to support students through their transition from high school to college and then to the workforce through access to various resources and direct strategy instruction. Therefore, in this study, I incorporate Schlossberg's integrative model of transition process: moving in, moving through, and moving out (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Moving through a transition like going to college requires letting go of former roles, learning new roles, and negotiating the roles to adjust to the new environment (Anderson et al., 2012). In Schlossberg's transition theory, four major phases occur when

an individual is experiencing a transition. The first is the transition approaching, the second is taking stock of coping resources, the third is taking charge and strengthening resources, and the final component is the context. Context is critical for those with little exposure or cultural knowledge of the environment prior to the transition who may not have a clear framework of the expectations upon starting college and access to resources that would help them understand the norms in this setting.

Schlossberg's (1995) theory also takes into consideration the type of transition (expected, unexpected, or never occurring). For students who were always expected to attend college, their transition is likely to be easier. Schlossberg's (1995) individual in transition model values the personal resources available to the individual experiencing the transition, which can be connected to the social, economic, and cultural capital that an individual has access to. The assets of individuals are important when considering how they will navigate a transition, which is important for students from underrepresented backgrounds who often have their strengths overlooked (Rall, 2016). The variables of situation, self, support, and strategy are the "4 Ss" that are examined to determine how one will cope with a change.

Higher education scholarship related to theory. Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory is most widely applied to counsel adults in transition during various stages of their lives. Yet, there are few studies empirically testing theories of transition to college (Goldrick-Rab, 2007). The majority of higher education transition research is concerned with college preparation, access, and outcomes not how the students move from high school to college and then to the workforce and the strategies they utilize to do so. Research supports that students from low SES backgrounds will have a more challenging

transition to college life for a variety of reasons and the limited support they receive from higher education institutions is often problematic (Bloom, 2008; Hinz, 2016; Rall, 2016). For students with little exposure to higher education the adjustment to college can challenge their assumptions, relationships, and worldviews making their transition more challenging than what young adults from higher income backgrounds may experience (Lubrano, 2004).

Varieties of programs are created on campuses each year to ease the transition into college for students. However, there is little work comparing the different types of college programs and how the programs influence eventual degree completion (Hallett, Kezar, Perez, & Kitchen, 2019). Schlossberg and colleagues' (1995) transition framework aids in understanding what students rely upon for support in choosing majors and careers, how veterans transition from military service to academia, how Chinese international students can be supported at U.S. universities, and how older adults transition into higher education for the first time (Karmelita, 2018; Montgomery, 2017; Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris, 2011; Workman, 2015). The framework is also utilized to examine why students from minority and low-income backgrounds delay their transition to college (Rall, 2016), yet it has not been applied to research on transitioning out of college (Musamali, 2019). Given the above applications in higher education research and that the populations studied are adults facing a transition to a new stage or phase of their life, this theory has potential to explain the forces and skills needed to successfully earn a college degree.

Relevance to Promise Scholars. The transition in question for Promise Scholars is attending college for the first time or leaving college to enter the workforce or graduate

school. Every individual's transition varies according to the trigger, timing, control, role change, duration, previous experience, current stress, and assessment of the situation (Schlossberg et al., 1995). For Promise Scholars with previous experience in a college environment, the transition may be easier. An individual's personal characteristics and psychological resources that are utilized to approach the transition represent the "self" in the theory. These characteristics include socioeconomic status, age, gender, ethnicity, outlook, and personal values (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The Promise Scholars in this study are both male and female and likely have different values that may influence their transition. In the case of the Promise Scholars, their family backgrounds often include trauma and instability, which may affect how they approach the college transition and where they look to for support. Although family is a resource many college students rely on, this may not be the case for Promise Scholars (Workman, 2015). Support from networks that do not have first-hand knowledge of higher education can be both an asset and a liability. If students do not have the support of their family, it could make a transition more difficult if the expectation is that a family should support you as in the case of attending college (Smith & Zhang, 2010; Sy et al., 2011). However, Promise Scholars have experience with setbacks and overcoming obstacles that can be viewed as an asset to the transition.

To cope with a transition, support from intimate partners, family, friend networks, and institutions works in concert with strategies such as action, education, and information seeking. Even though institutional support is in place for first-generation or low-SES students across many college campuses, it may not be accessible to these students (Ballysingh, 2016). Internal resources are similar among social classes, but

external resources, which include social and financial support, differ across culture and class with the lower social class having less access (Blustein, Kenna, Gill, & DeVoy, 2008). Willingness to access and utilize resources also varies across backgrounds and cultures. Although the Mitchell Institute cannot influence the scholar's personal characteristics and context, it can offer strategies and support that enable scholars to move through the transition into college and out of college with more confidence.

Conceptual Framework

This study explores the connections between availability of capital and how it influences the transition into and out of college. Bourdieu's social reproduction theory is cited in educational research because educational attainment is related to the amount of capital an individual possesses (Bloom, 2008; Lareau, 2011; Nora, 2004; Rogosic & Baranovic, 2016; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Likewise, Schlossberg's popularity is due to the non-linear approach of the transition. A successful response to a transition requires individual understanding that depends on the situation, context, and level of disruption experienced (Bridges, 2017; Musamali, 2019; Rall, 2016). Although there are few studies using both frameworks in concert, separately social capital and transition theory have been well-utilized in the fields of sociology, psychology, counseling, and higher education. The combination of both Schlossberg's transition theory and Bourdieu's social reproduction theory serve as a framework for a developing theory of rural students moving to college (Kearney, 2019). Examining what students from underserved backgrounds use for supports to cope with their transition to college and how access to economic and social capital influences their college success provides insight into their experience (Kearney, 2019). By employing this novel approach to integrating the two

theories, I examine how the social, cultural, and economic capital provided by the Mitchell Institute may or may not aid in their transition into and out of college. This framework is a unique contribution to understanding how personal development, institutional resources, and social support can work in concert to improve the experience of transitioning into higher education for low-income and first-generation students.

The conceptual framework for this study (Figure 1) represents the three main types of capital in Bourdieu's social reproduction theory: economic, social, and cultural. Economic capital is the foundation of the theory as it influences the amount of social and cultural capital available (Rogosic & Baranovic, 2016). However, each form of capital may influence a student's persistence in college and post college outcomes. The specific types of capital that the Mitchell Scholarship provides the Promise Scholars is examined in this study. Economically, the scholarship provides money each semester and access to an emergency fund. Socially, the scholarship connects other Mitchell scholars through campus socials and events. It also provides scholars with access to the Mitchell Institute donor and alumni network. The Mitchell Institute staff serve as a bridge to resources outside of the scholarship program that may help the students succeed. The Mitchell Institute also provides cultural support through a leadership experience the summer prior to college and professional development experiences during college to prepare the scholars for the workforce or graduate school. Finally, the cultural capital that comes with being selected as a Promise Scholar and the encouragement to attain a degree may play a role in how each student approaches their college experience and eventually their experiences after college.

Schlossberg's 4 Ss are represented in this framework by the arrow approaching the transition that is college attendance; the arrows in the middle represent the process of moving through the transition which is a cycle of using self-generated resources, support from others, and strategies to overcome the obstacles one may face. The final arrow is moving out of higher education and into the next phase of their life. The support in the framework is a product of the economic and social capital they receive from the Promise Scholarship and outside resources. Self as a resource is reflected in the cultural capital and knowledge of higher education gained in their upbringing or from other educational experiences. The strategies are symbolic ways in which students motivate themselves to move through the transitions. The coping resources are a continuous loop as students use what resource they identify as needed to move through the college experience.

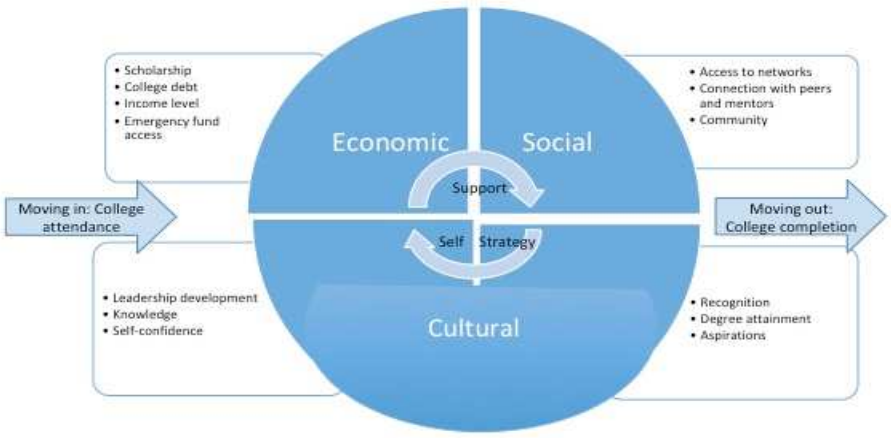

Figure 1

Conceptual framework of social capital and transition theory

Research Questions

In this study, I explore how the resources provided by the Promise Scholarship influence the scholars' outcomes during and after college. The following research questions incorporate the previously explained conceptual framework and consider how forms of capital influence the Promise Scholars' transition experiences. The two research questions that guide this study are:

1. How do social, economic, and cultural capital provided by the Mitchell Institute influence Promise Scholars' transition from high school to college?

2. How do social, economic, and cultural capital provided by the Mitchell Institute influence Promise Scholars' transition from college to the workforce or graduate school?

Positionality Statement

I am a White woman from a working-class family. Neither of my parents completed a bachelor's degree, although both did some training post high school. I was my high school's recipient of the Senator George Mitchell Scholarship in 2000. At the time, it was a newer scholarship program in the state of Maine. One student from each public high school who planned to attend a Maine-based college received the scholarship. When I learned at my high school graduation that I was my school's recipient, I was honored and surprised that the award was $1,000 a year for four years. This was one of the larger scholarships awarded in my community. A few weeks later, I was invited to a welcome brunch on the campus of the University of Maine where I would be attending college in the fall. At the brunch, we had the opportunity to meet Senator Mitchell.

When Senator Mitchell took the podium to speak, the packed room was silent and the respect he commanded from the audience of scholars and their families was clear. He

told us his story. He was a janitor's son from Waterville, Maine, who worked alongside his father cleaning to pay his way through Bowdoin College. He explained he had a few people who believed in him along the way and without those people he would not have made it to where he is today. He told us that he believed in us, as did the many donors who have invested in this scholarship program. He left the room full of inspired scholars believing they could be as successful as he is. The only thing the Senator asked of us was to remember to give others a helping hand when they need it as he did for us. The research that follows is one way I am able to give back to the Mitchell Institute and all the program has done for Mitchell Scholars past, present, and future.

Given my close connection to the Mitchell Institute as an alumna of the program, I am aware of my potential bias towards seeing the positives of program and how that could influence my analysis of the findings. However, my connection to the program and personal experience as a Mitchell Scholar can also provide insight that a researcher not as familiar with the scholarship may not be able to achieve. I also understand that my experience as a Mitchell Scholar from 2000-2004 is different than that of Promise Scholars from 2014-2020. Though I can relate to the scholars, I have not personally experienced the same amount of challenges that many of them have. However, I feel my experience as a Mitchell Scholar provides a unique connection to the participants who may perceive my background to be more relatable. In qualitative research, trustworthiness and building rapport with your participants is critical. Collaborating with the participants is necessary and researchers need to be reflective of how their own stories and political background that shape how their analysis of the participant's stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In keeping with the tradition of Senator Mitchell, I conducted

this study to give back to the organization, so thoroughly analyzing both the strengths and challenges in the program will further the mission and goals of the organization that I value.

In sum, this chapter began with the problem of affordability in higher education, specifically for students from limited income backgrounds. Although more low-income and first-generation students are enrolling despite rising costs, inequities still persist in degree completion and debt accumulated. The purpose of the study is to address the influence of the Mitchell Institute on college and career outcomes of the Promise Scholars and what resources make a difference as the students transition into and out of college. The conceptual framework, based on Bourdieu and Schlossberg's theories that guides the study, is explained along with my personal connections to the Mitchell Institute.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Since the Promise Scholars in this study are all first-generation students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, the purpose of this literature review is to understand how low SES and first-generation students are typically defined in higher education research. In addition, this review explores the current research on the experiences of first-generation and low-income students in higher education, organized by the transitions of moving in, moving through, and moving out of college. This exploration also examines how economic, social, and cultural capital influences each stage of students' transition into and out of college. In addition, existing programming that promotes success before, during, and after college for first-generation and limited-income students is incorporated to further understanding of resources that aid in degree attainment for this underserved population in higher education.

Defining First-Generation and Low-Income

First-generation status for this study is defined as students of typical college-going age from families in which neither parent earned a baccalaureate degree (Rondini, Richards, & Simons, 2018). However, the definition in the literature varies and may exclude students whose parents who have attended some college or earned an associate's degree as first-generation. The classification of first-generation students did not occur until the early-2000s, and it is unclear if this classification is helpful for students or if it continues to breed inequality (Wildhagen, 2015). Wildhagen (2015) was critical of the "common strategy of conflating first-generation status with social class" (p. 301) because

it could potentially lessen student awareness of social class and group commonalities. Assuming that all first-generation students hail from the same social class overlooks the complexity of social class and its influence on how dominant class and culture reproduce in a university setting. Socioeconomic status is a measure that includes family income, but also educational attainment, financial security, and perceptions of social status (American Psychological Association, 2019). Thus, being a first-generation student is often included in socioeconomic status measures.

Clearly, it is problematic to assume that students from low-income backgrounds are also first-generation college students and vice versa. However, for the purposes of this study the participants selected are in fact members of both groups. I am using the term socioeconomically diverse to define the population in my study because it encompasses students who are low income, first-generation, and/or from a social class that is less than middle class without devaluing their individual experiences or putting them in a place of disadvantage. The concept of social class is not strictly based on one specific income measure and is defined in a variety of different ways in the literature that follows. Even though the Promise Scholars in this study have similar parental education backgrounds and income levels, they also have widely different lived experiences. Understanding the experiences of college degree completion for students from both first-generation and socioeconomically diverse backgrounds is more pertinent to the study than how those concepts are operationalized in the literature.

First-Generation and Low-Income College Completion

College completion is federally defined as six years to complete a four-year degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Approximately 4.5 million students are both first-

generation and low-income and they are more likely to start at two-year public colleges than four-year universities (Engle & Tinto, 2008). They are also four times more likely to leave in the first year. For those who persist into their later years, 43% do not earn degrees or have left after six years (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Numerous studies have shown that background and demographic characteristics including gender, race, ethnicity, parent's educational attainment, family income level, and socioeconomic status influence student persistence in college (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Cabrera et al., 2012; Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018; Ishitani, 2003; Ishitani, 2006; Kinzie et al., 2008; Nora & Crisp, 2012; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Although first-generation students are not always students from a low socioeconomic background, there is often a relationship between the two. The studies are mixed on whether social class is a more influential factor than first-generation status. For example, Somers, Woodhouse, and Cofer (2004) found first-generation low-income students were less likely to persist than middle-income first-generation students, yet high income was not positively associated with persistence for first-generation students. More than half of first-generation college students cite not being able to afford continuing college as the biggest reason for leaving college compared to 45% of continuing generation students (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Ten years after leaving high school only 20% of first-generation students attained a Bachelor's degree compared to 47% of continuing generation college students (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Identifying as both low-income and first-generation, socioeconomically diverse college students face degree completion challenges.

Both first-generation students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are often considered "at-risk" for degree completion. Horton (2015) defined at-risk as

being more likely for academic failure and dropping out of school. Low socioeconomic status and being a first-generation college student are two of the many background characteristics that are likely to impede college persistence and success. I acknowledge that it is problematic to write that these students are "at-risk" because "this perspective does not consider the complex role of external sociopolitical forces at play….within these students' lives" (Clark/Keefe, 2006). The student is not deficient, but the systems in place that often hold these students back, at no fault of their own, is what needs to be more critically examined. In fact, many first-generation and low socioeconomic status students are successful in college regardless of the perceived odds stacked against them. For this reason, I am using the term "at-promise" to describe students from first-generation and low-income backgrounds. Recently, the state of California removed the term at-risk from all state codes replacing it with at-promise. Though researchers are unsure if at-promise provides an accurate description of the students' circumstances that hinder academic success, it is more hopeful and asset-based (Samuels, 2020). The Promise Scholars in this study come from families who earn less than $35,000 per year, have no parent who earned a four-year college degree, and experienced childhood instability. Despite these characteristics, these students were able to apply for college, get accepted, earn various scholarships, and finally attend college, which is an incredible feat given the systematic barriers they face. Given that these students are placed at-risk by the income and educational inequality that currently plagues the United States, the term "at-promise" is utilized throughout this research to identify first-generation students from low socioeconomic households.

Much of the extant literature uses regression analyses to correlate demographic factors and entry background characteristics with college retention and completion. These studies increase researchers and educators' understanding of the student populations most likely to not complete their degree, which aids in awareness, but does not help solve the problem. This line of inquiry offers a plethora of implications, but few solutions of this population's underperformance when compared to non-first-generation students are offered (Stebleton & Soria, 2013). Broadening our understanding of what helps at-promise students once in college and aids in their adjustment to the demands of higher education is a more effective approach to solve the problem. By conducting a qualitative investigation of the transition from high school to college for students from socioeconomically diverse backgrounds, researchers can gain insights into understanding what aspects of their new environment and changing identity are important during this critical point in their life (Tierney, 2013). The following sections posit Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory with Bourdieu's (2002) social reproduction theory to examine the existing literature regarding how economic, social, and cultural capital have influenced socioeconomically diverse students' outcomes through the various stages of their college experience.

Moving In: Transition from High School to College

Students who identify as first generation, like many of the Promise Scholars, often find that transitioning from high school to college is more challenging than what their peers experience (Hinz, 2017). Hinz (2017) recognized that first-generation working-class students may experience emotional and psychological difficulties as they transition from one social class to another because of college attendance. Researchers have found

both academic and non-academic reasons for the challenges first-generation students experience (Eliott, 2014). From lower academic preparation in high school to lack of college knowledge, there is a range of explanations as to why first-generation students are more likely to leave after their first year of college. Clemens (2016) argued that while there is scholarship on college preparation, remediation, and retention, there are few studies that closely examine the experiences of first-year low-income, first-generation students and the sources of capital they rely on as they transition into college.

Smith and Zhang (2010) focused on how first-generation students perceive their transition to college and found that high school GPA, receiving a scholarship, and academic ethic make the most difference in the transition to college. First-generation students were more likely to possess an academic ethic and spent less time socializing than second-generation college students, but had slightly lower GPAs than the second-generation students (Smith & Zhang, 2010). The less time socializing was likely due to more time spent working. The researchers suggested that universities supply first-generation students with more financial aid in the form of grants and scholarships so that these students can spend more time on their studies and building a social network. However, academic success is only one part of the college transition. There are also social, cultural, and financial pressures faced by this population of students that are critical to understanding their experience.

Influence of Economic Capital

The amount of money a family has contributes to the likelihood that a student will initially enroll in college. Students from families in the highest socioeconomic levels are 50% more likely to enroll in college than their peers from the lowest income quartiles

(Fain, 2019). Socioeconomic status is also a factor in the type of degree program enrolled in with lower income students more likely to enroll in a two-year degree program than a four-year degree program (Fain, 2019). Although low-income students are eligible for increased financial aid and grants, as the costs of higher education rise, the gap between that aid and what students need to pay out of pocket burdens low-income students even more than middle- or upper-class students. Burd's (2018) examination of U.S. Department of Education data showed the net average price for students whose families make less than $30,000 per year at four-year public universities is $10,000 per year. This is a significant difference that low-income students often have to make up through working or loans. The trend of public universities awarding merit aid to wealthy out-of-state students is detrimental to the low-income in-state student population. Specifically, the University of Maine, one of the public colleges featured in Burd's (2018) research, is capitalizing on this trend. This has the potential to influence Promise Scholars as many attend the University of Maine, the state's public flagship university. Ballysingh (2019a) acknowledged the importance of the public flagship university for the most vulnerable populations given their excellence, affordability, and proximity to home. Promise Scholars in this study may have not received as much financial aid from Maine's flagship university, and as a result may have had to take on more loans to cover the cost of attendance.

The Mitchell Institute may help students bridge their financial aid gap, but the amount of economic capital students need to attend college continues to rise as the annual rate of increase of college tuition and fees from 2008 to 2018 has been about 3% at four-year public institutions ("Trends in College Pricing", 2018). Ten years ago, the average

four-year public university tuition and fees were around $7,500 and they are now a little over $10,000. When comparing with private colleges the tuition and fees have increased from $28,000 in 2008 to $35,000 in 2018. The rising costs may influence whether a student ultimately decides to transition from high school to college or move into the workforce to save more money for college expenses. Although the financial and economic influence on degree attainment is an important factor to consider, it is not the sole reason why students from socioeconomically diverse backgrounds have difficulty transitioning from high school to college.

Influence of Social Capital

Students who come from backgrounds with social networks that are embedded into schools and colleges typically do better in higher education (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). If neither parent attended college, the amount of social capital a student has access to in college is likely to be limited. However, that is not to say that at-promise students have no social capital. Even non-college educated families play a role in the student's college experience. Non-dominant social capital such as resilience, guidance, aspirations, and belonging can play a critical role in college access and readiness (Clemens, 2016). First-generation students' transition to college is influenced by parental support both emotionally and informationally (Mayger, Hochbein, & Dever, 2017; Sy et al., 2012). Mayger and colleagues (2017) identified that parental expectation of college completion during childhood is one of the most important factors in postsecondary educational attainment. Typically, first generation students have lower academic preparation, aspirations, and social integration into higher education. Social interactions and academic integration are part of the degree completion formula that should not be forgotten (Tinto,

2007). Students who are first-generation college students do not feel as confident academically entering higher education than their second or even third generation peers, and they are often lacking the social connections and institutional knowledge from family and peers. Confidence may be improved if socioeconomically-diverse students have a network to rely upon when transitioning to college. Thus, the transition to college may be even more difficult for students without a stable family unit.

Awareness of social networks and institutional support for first-generation students may help bridge the information gap of not attending college. Sy and others (2012) found that first-generation women relied on their parents less for support than non-first generation. Overall, first-generation students did not experience more stress than their non-first-generation counterparts. However, having less emotional support from their family was predictive of an increase in stress for first generation students (Sy et al., 2012). Jury and colleagues (2017) explored specific psychological interventions that could help build the social capital needed to thrive in the institutional context for higher education where the norms of the upper class are valued. For the Promise Scholars, many of whom who have severed relationships with their biological parents, this support network is extremely limited even more so than a more typical first-generation student. However, their ability to succeed independently and through utilization of other resources has yet to be explored.

Students from minoritized backgrounds, similar to students from at-promise backgrounds, develop social capital from their community that may or may not help them navigate the field of higher education. Reframing the capital from an individual to community focus and from independent to interdependent framework may aid in

reducing the barriers to opportunity in university contexts (Jury et al., 2017). Institutional support is often limited for children from minoritized groups and schools operate in ways that reinforce the accumulation of capital for the children at the top of the social hierarchy (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990). Educational decisions are made for students to gain capital and students from lower income backgrounds are expected to be able to learn it in the same way as others despite the fact that they have unique patterns for conversion of that capital and are exposed to it less often (Walpole, 2008). Scholars have recognized the uphill battle students from at-promise backgrounds may face when they are entering post-secondary education and as such, have developed programs to improve their access to networks and people with experience in higher education, which may increase their college knowledge.

Influence of Cultural Capital

Cultural capital plays an integral role in the literature on social and economic inequality and educational outcomes (Tierney, 2013; Winkle-Wanger, 2010). Cultural capital is defined in a variety of ways by researchers who are interested in how more or less exposure to cultural activities and specific environments influences educational achievement. The definitions in current literature have included: the richness of an individual's culture, culture that is valued in specific contexts, dominant and non-dominant forms of culture, and as part of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Cultural capital tends to be measured using family income level, parental education, and parent's occupation as a proxy in the individual culture model. However, Winkle-Wagner (2010) argued that parent educational attainment may not be considered a good proxy for individual cultural capital because it does not take into

account students' personal cultural exposure or past experiences. An individual may not have attended college but may have gained cultural capital through other experiences. Cultural capital and social capital should be "disentangled in research because one could potentially have a great deal of cultural capital valued in a particular field but not have the social capital to be able to appropriate it" (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 89). Cultural capital differs along social class lines and individually, but both lower and upper classes have cultural capital that is developed in their community, yet typically higher education institutions value only the dominant classes forms of cultural capital.

Instead of viewing cultural capital as something one does or does not possess, cultural capital should be viewed as the knowledge, skills, and abilities that provide access to a certain institution or environment. Lareau (2011) , in an ethnographic study of students from elementary school through college clearly demonstrated that parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are able to provide educational opportunities for their children yet they do not always get the intended results. Despite the advantages that working-class children may have due to more autonomy and being more respectful towards adults "these valuable skills do not translate into the same advantages as the reasoning skills emphasized" (Lareau, 2011, p. 159) in middle- and upper-class homes, that foster success in school. First-generation students often lack the sense of belonging and confidence that students from upper class backgrounds have instilled in them from an early age (Lareau, 2011). Whether or not children from lower-income backgrounds are able to acquire and translate the cultural capital gained in K-12 education into higher education largely depends on the value placed on their knowledge by the college environment (Musoba & Baez, 2009). Saunders and Serna (2004), in their research on the

college experiences of Latinx students, demonstrated the importance of college access programs to help students gain the cultural capital needed to navigate the resources of higher education. Many researchers advocate for the development of programs to build social and cultural capital for socioeconomically diverse students as they transition to college (Ballysingh, 2016; Saunders & Serna, 2004).

Influence of Programs

There are wide varieties of federal and state programs available to students from socioeconomically diverse backgrounds to increase college attendance and access. Although these programs are often evaluated, many studies such as those relating to Upward Bound or other federal programs are limited to a specific set of students who meet strict definitions regarding income levels being below 150% of the poverty level established by the U.S. Department of Human Services. Most of these programs also prioritize U.S. citizens with both low-income and first-generation status. The Mitchell Institute is independently funded which casts a boarder net in identifying their recipients. Students from any public high school in Maine regardless of income level, first-generation, and citizenship status can apply.

The research on intervention programs largely focuses on increasing access and enrollment to postsecondary education rather than graduation outcomes (Renbarger & Long, 2019). Renbarger and Long (2019) conducted a systematic review of postsecondary interventions programs for high-potential low-income students and found summer interventions, advanced coursework, early college, dual credit, and college information programs to be the most common types of programs. Their findings suggest that many of these programs can improve students' college access and success, but

quality is critical. Similarly, Hallett and colleagues (2019) uncovered that how a program is implemented is more important than the specific elements for low socioeconomic status and minoritized students. They recommended that the implementation should include opportunities for reassurance and academically validating experiences (Hallett, Reason, Toccoli, Kitchen, & Perez, 2019). These studies, like many others, are more concerned with access and persistence than with outcomes post-college.

One study by Knaggs and colleagues (2015) investigated long-term outcomes of GEAR UP, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, which is a federally funded grant that encourages students to complete high school and enroll in higher education. This mixed methods study found that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to persist to graduation than students who did not complete the program (Knaggs, Sondergeld, & Schardt, 2015). In addition, they were more likely to enroll in four-year postsecondary institutions, that are more likely to have better graduation outcomes than two-year colleges (Knaggs et al., 2015). Finally, the students reported that personal growth and self-confidence fostered in the program and the ability to set realistic goals helped them persist. There was also a financial incentive through scholarship money if they completed activities in the program successfully. These researchers were unable to capture the specific aspects of the GEAR UP program that helped students persist because the qualitative data was taken from the 2011 cohort not the 2007 cohort that showed a significant increase in college persistence. However, this study provides an example of how building confidence, knowledge, and providing financial support for at-promise student populations improves college persistence and success in achieving their life goals.

The accumulation of cultural capital and knowledge through programming can ease the transition into an unknown environment like higher education (Kersh, Flynn, & Palmer, 2019). Research on McNair Scholars and Meyeroff Scholars supports that initiatives that provide social support for underrepresented groups as they enter college have also been effective (Kersh et al., 2019). However, the strategies employed by each program vary and the social context of each program is different. What works for one institution and group of students may not be successful for others given a different context. A qualitative study of four schools in Ireland participating in the TA21-CFES program that included the practices of mentoring students from a similar background, pathways to college activities, and participation in a student-led community service project resulted in increased development of capital and a sense of autonomy in their ability to make choices about future career options (Hannon et. al, 2017). However, this research was limited to pre-college students and did not articulate how the students utilize their increased capacity once they attend college. Overall, these programs, like that of the Mitchell Institute, aim to support students' transition into higher education. However, the focus of such studies has been on experiences prior to college not the support the students receive as they are acclimating to their new college environment.

Moving Through: Transition through College

Once at-promise students reach college, with or without supports from federal, state, or personal resources, the challenges do not disappear. A continued exploration of the transition experiences of first-generation and low-income students during college is recommended (Hannon et al., 2017). Yet, few studies acknowledge and explore the assets at-promise students use to succeed in a college environment (Demetriou et. al, 2017).

Cabrera and colleagues (2012) found that low socioeconomic status students with limited academic resources who enrolled in a four-year institution were 11% more likely to earn a degree than their peers with a similar level of academic resources but who were better off financially, so clearly it is not only access to economic resources that led to college success. In the following sections, I examine how economic, social, and cultural capital are utilized in higher education literature and influence college persistence.

Influence of Economic Capital

College is a large time and financial commitment for at-promise students who have limited financial support from their families to rely upon. For many limited-income students who are financing their own education, taking more than four years to complete their degree is not feasible. Living in a low-income household reduces student persistence. Ishitani (2003) found that students from incomes of lower than $25,000 per year were 49% more likely to leave college after the first year and this trend continues, though slightly less, through the remaining years of college. In addition, students who are low-income and first-generation are generally at greater risk for departure than other students and are significantly more at risk in years one and three of college. Where a more typical student's probability for departure decreases incrementally from year one to four, an at-promise student has increases and decreases in the likelihood they will depart throughout their four years of college (Ishitani, 2003). In another longitudinal quantitative study, Ishitani (2006) examined pre-college characteristics and determined that first-generation status and family income were also significantly associated with college departure, yet interventions that would mitigate departure risks were not examined in this study.

Financial needs while in college may influence the student experience especially for lower income students. Not surprisingly, unmet financial need, hours worked, and lack of resources influences the college experience and whether or not students persist (Britt, Ammerman, Barrett, & Jones, 2017; Burd, 2018; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Hornack, Farrell, & Jackson, 2010; Somers et al., 2004). Students who receive loans and grants are more likely to finish their college degree, and low SES students who receive loans and grants increase degree completion by 8 to 10% (Cabrera et al., 2012). Britt and colleagues (2017) found students were more likely to discontinue college when they had increased financial stress. Financial need has been documented as a barrier to completion and impacts the college experience, yet has been overemphasized in the literature as one of many degree completion factors (Cabrera et al., 2012). Coming from a low-income background "by itself does not condemn incoming college students to failure" (Lewine et al., 2019, p. 8) as drop-out rates of students coming from poverty who received a fully-funded college education for four years had lower drop-out rates and higher GPAs than the rest of the student body. Clearly, at-promise students can make it in higher education if they are supported socially, emotionally, and financially.

The role of working in at-promise students' experience has also been shown to have an impact on their college outcomes. Although working less than 20 hours per week is considered beneficial in some studies, many low-income students often have to work 20 or more hours per week to make attending college a reality, and it has been shown to have a negative effect (Pike, Kuh, & Massa-McKinley, 2009; Perna & Olde, 2020). The influence of student employment on degree attainment is mixed in the literature ("College Outcomes," 2007). Many students who receive grants or work-study in their first year

were less likely to depart and work-study continued to have a positive effect on retention in the second year (Ishanti, 2006). Privately-funded scholarships and grants like those provided by Mitchell Institute may decrease the amount of hours scholars need to work to pay for their education and provide the support needed to continue enrollment from semester to semester. In a mixed methods study, Hornak, Farrell, and Jackson (2010) captured the experiences of students with unmet financial need and found that an overwhelming majority were satisfied or very satisfied with their college experience. However, the students also reported that a college degree was the only way to secure a good future so they needed to sacrifice financially now to get the reward after they earned a college degree. This sacrificing led to working part-time jobs, which impeded their academic and social integration on campus. They concluded "financial hardship in college can impact engagement, well-being, relationships, return rates, and ultimately graduation…" (Hornack et al., 2010, p. 491). A case study of one low-income Hispanic college student emphasized how working decreased the student's social integration, which ultimately led to the student's transferring to a less selective institution:

> I'm just too busy. I'm working, but I'm thinking about quitting. I can't handle it. I know I'm missing something. Because people go to activities while I'm at work, and I'm missing out on gaining friends and knowing other people. And they're like, 'we did this and everyone did that', and I'm like, 'I didn't'. And it's just kind of hard to get to know people. (Bergerson, 2007, p. 107).

Some view working as a way to build economic capital, but there is a clear loss of social and academic time as a result.

Influence of Social Capital

There is a need for students to have opportunities for personal growth and development throughout their higher education experience. Social networks help students feel connected to campus and influence the decision to remain in college (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012). For students from at-promise backgrounds these networks can be harder to establish. Walpole (2003), in a quantitative analysis of socioeconomic status and college outcomes, described how students from low socioeconomic statuses spend less time studying, participating in groups or clubs, and spend more time working. In addition, Walpole (2003) found that students from low SES backgrounds have different cultural capital and *habiti* than their higher SES peers, which disadvantages them in college and beyond. Walpole advocated for more research on the effects of social class in the college setting and the understanding of the meaning students attach to choosing a certain path during and after college, which a survey alone cannot capture.

In addition, many low-income and first-generation students have limited connections to college-knowledgeable adults, which makes their college experience isolating without having close family or friends to turn to for advice. Many students from at-promise backgrounds do not have access to the first-hand experience of an adult who has successfully completed college, so support from other networks may be more important as they move through college and into a professional career (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012). Building a network of college-educated individuals to rely on could make a difference in degree completion, as recent studies have shown that less educated Americans have more limited social networks and tend to be more socially isolated (Putnam, 2015). “When adjusting to college, choosing college majors, and making career plans, kids from more affluent, educated homes engage a wider array of informal

advisors--family members, faculty, and outsiders…" (Putnam, 2015, p. 210). Students from poorer families are more likely to interact with family and neighbors with limited advisors from outside of the home (Lareau, 2011). Social capital is one facet of the larger environmental and psychological forces at play, which may influence student retention and post college outcomes.

Influence of Cultural Capital

As discussed previously, cultural and social capital are often combined in research studies, with only a few studies that examine how cultural capital alone influences the college experience for at-promise students. Most researchers analyze how both social and cultural capital influences the choices students make as they enter college for the first time (Tierney, 2013; Walpole, 2003). During college, there are many ways for lower income students to gain social and cultural capital, which they hope convert to economic capital post college (Walpole, 2003). Walpole's longitudinal study investigates student activities in college and how the cultural and social capital gained in college is converted into income and aspirations after they graduate. Low SES students are less likely to be involved in leadership-building clubs and activities and are more likely to be involved in working which builds economic capital (Walpole, 2003). In this research, Walpole was clear that given the choice between social, cultural, and economic capital, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are going to invest more in building economic capital than their higher income peers. This may leave a gap in the amount of cultural capital they acquire during college.

The cultural assets low SES students possess should be valued in addition to the cultural capital of academia (Hannon et al., 2017). Following a capability-based approach

allows researchers to understand the interaction between a student's capital and the capital being provided by the participation widening activities and allows for the individual freedom of the student to be at the center (Hannon et al., 2017). Building cultural capital can facilitate an effective 'transition' into the culture higher education for at-promise students. On the other hand, Hinz (2016) found that working class students may have social and psychological problems related to the cultural differences between classes, but that the experience at a highly-selective versus non-selective institution may influence how greatly social class affects students. Many programs aim to reduce barriers for admission to students from at-promise backgrounds, yet this access is often socially stratified with students from lower SES backgrounds going to less selective institutions (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2007).

Experiencing hardship at some point in life is better for college outcomes than those who have not had any difficulties (Lewine et al., 2019). Psychological factors such as resilience in academic performance are somewhat higher for students who come from extreme poverty than those from moderate poverty (Lewine et al., 2019). Thus, the persistence at-promise students need to apply in their upbringing may be transferred to their college experience. Kinzie and colleagues (2008) explored educational practices that aid in persistence for historically underrepresented groups while in college. Finding that high impact practices, such as internships, study aboard, and undergraduate research, are less likely to be participated in by minoritized groups. As a result, they are less likely foster the cultural capital that college students need to succeed, so it is the authors' recommendation to build these practices into the first-year experience and curriculum (Kinzie et al., 2008). However, transitioning into a "culturally rich" environment like a

university is often a cause of uncertainty and anxiety for students trying to disrupt their identity and enter into a higher social class through college completion (Tierney, 2013). Thus, programs on campuses that can facilitate the building of social and cultural capital for students from at-promise backgrounds have the potential to make a large impact.

Influence of Programs

There are a variety of programs in place nationwide to help students from underrepresented backgrounds persist, yet few studies on actual degree attainment for students involved in such programs have been done because of the time lapse in waiting four or six years to have access to graduating outcome data (Kersh et al., 2019). Many of the studies center on college enrollment or first-year persistence and do not follow their students to the finish line that is degree completion. Federally funded programs such as TRIO were formed as a result of the *Higher Education Act of 1965*. The name TRIO comes from the three programs that increase educational opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds: Upward Bound, Talent Search and Student Support Services. The program that primarily interacts with students during their college enrollment is Student Support Services. This program is available at most federally-funded universities for students from underrepresented backgrounds.

Stuber (2011) examined factors that influenced adjustment for White, working-class first-generation students and found that involvement in a TRIO program was a positive part of their college experience largely due to the social connections made. Through her 28 in-depth interviews, Stuber (2011) found that more than half of the at-promise students were integrated into college life and not reporting any negative impacts on their achievement. The other quarter reported not being well adjusted and the final

quarter started their college experience not well adjusted, but improved by increasing their social integration and personal motivation. The terms, integrated persisters, alienated persisters, and resilient and motivated persisters, categorized the students' experiences. For the alienated persisters, financial obligations such as working 35 hours or more per week inhibited their ability to become socially involved on campus. The resilient persisters gained social support and a reference group from the 200 plus students in a TRIO program, which increased their sense of belonging and connection to campus. Students reported that sharing narratives and learning that they were not the only ones with unstable backgrounds helped them feel more included and enhanced their sense of belonging. This research furthers understanding of how to support at-promise students once they are in a campus environment and what prevents them from feeling like they belong. Yet this study is limited in that it does not explore if the students from each group go on to complete their degree programs.

Though there are a many studies of more traditional Promise programs, which guarantee payment of a large percentage of college tuition within a certain geographic regions, these studies typically focus on how cognitive factors influence enrollment not academic performance or persistence while enrolled in college (Collier, Parnther, Fitzpatrick, Brehm, & Beach, 2019; Perna & Smith, 2020). Rarely, do these studies examine how personal support, strategies, and social capital may influence persistence and completion. In addition, recent studies have shown that merely providing full tuition is not enough to get their scholars to succeed as only 45% of the Kalamazoo Promise Scholar's from 2006-2011 cohorts have earned a degree (Collier et al., 2019). Although there is some increase in bachelor's degree attainment for Kalamzoo scholars (Bartik,

Hershbein, & Lachowska, 2017), there is still work to be done on determining how programs that provide only financial support can increase degree attainment for students from underserved areas. These programs are helping some students move through college and complete their degree; however, current studies are largely quantitative and researchers are only beginning to scratch the surface as to why this is the case.

Moving Out: Transition from College to Work or Further Education

Career counselors and researchers are beginning to examine the college to career transition, as young adults are more likely to delay decisions about career and family until later in their lives (Murphy, Blustein, Bohlig, & Platt, 2010). In a qualitative study of 10 students' transition to the workforce within three years of graduation, social support, expectations, and optimism were the major themes (Murphy et al., 2010). However, little research on this transition to the workforce for students from at-promise backgrounds is available. Completing college and earning a degree is often where the research ends in regards to outcomes for students from underrepresented populations. Holden and Hamblett (2007) described the process of transition into the workforce for recent college graduates in three parts: learning about the job, the organization, and the self. The career development process is a bumpy journey for most students and especially those from at-promise backgrounds. Goldrick-Rab and colleagues (2007) extensively reviewed the literature in the transition to higher education and found examinations of the return on higher education beyond economic outcome are "scarce" (p. 2445). An examination of social returns on college completion or on college dropout is also lacking in current research (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2007). To understand if a college degree is enhancing social mobility of students from limited socioeconomic backgrounds;

researchers must consider experiences beyond college access and degree completion.

Influence of Economic Capital

First-generation students have to negotiate the politics of an unfamiliar work environment along with the pressure to achieve the outcomes that the college degree offers them, yet success is not guaranteed. Career choices and decision making relate to family capital and influences in their pre-college environment continue to spill over into their life after college (Hoskins & Barker, 2019). Scholarship programs like the Mitchell Institute may be able to substitute for the economic capital needed to leverage a career that will improve at-promise students' social status by offering fellowships that pay students during unpaid internships or for graduate school examination fees. For first generation students', tensions regarding their transition into a setting that is less familiar to them may influence their work experience (Olson, 2016). The themes in Olson's (2016) study of first-generation students who were adjusting to workplaces that were different from their parents were, starting in the job, being in the job, and releasing the past. As first-generation graduates moved through their early years in the workforce, their ability to pursue a career they were passionate about feels limited due to the financial strain of having to pay back loans or support their family (Olson, 2016). Yet, they also hoped to find fulfillment in a career they were passionate about which is something their parents may not have had the opportunity to do in their work life. Earning a college degree may not have the economic outcomes socioeconomically diverse students are promised.

In a longitudinal study of African American college students nine years after their college entry, Walpole (2008) found that students from lower socioeconomic

backgrounds have higher aspirations for bachelor's and master's degrees, yet attend graduate school at a lower rate than their peers. The students in the study had, for the most part, converted their degree attainment into full-time work, but the low SES students were more likely to earn under $30,000 per year. This study is based on data from 1994 so the income measures would not be transferable to current income levels. A continued strain on financial resources is not something that is always alleviated for at-promise students as the transition into their professional life or into graduate school.

Influence of Social Capital

Students with similar academic outcomes in higher education do not have equal employment opportunities given the advantages of social capital in our markets (Hannon et al., 2017). Programs, like the Mitchell Institute, that focus on building social capital and may attempt to remedy social injustices, may cover up inequalities experienced if outcomes beyond college are not carefully examined. Studies have shown that students from minoritized backgrounds have unacknowledged forms of social capital and difficulty accessing networks necessary to successfully apply to graduate school or leverage their degree into a professional career (Ramirez, 2011; Winkle-Wanger & Mcoy, 2016).

Post-college career outcomes for at-promise students are an area with a limited research base. Hirudayarj and McLean's (2018) phenomenological investigation of 14 first-generation college graduates working in the corporate sector found that all but one student had an entry-level position that did not require a college degree. The authors noted lack of networks, social capital, and awareness of the job searching process hindered these graduates' ability to secure a professional level position. Students from at-

promise backgrounds are not achieving success post-college as quickly as their higher-income peers. The literature is clear that at-promise students do not have the same college outcomes as middle- and upper-class students, yet the extant research is limited on how to help these students build the social connections needed to propel them into career success.

Influence of Cultural Capital

The influx of cultural capital is often strongest during at-promise students' college years and may or may not be enough to substitute for other important skills and professional habits that lead to graduation and successful job or graduate school placement. "Following college, students from high SES backgrounds are converting the capital accumulated in college into graduate school attendance, degree attainment, and attainment of the most prestigious degrees at higher rates than students from low SES backgrounds" (Walpole, 2003, p. 58). Although many low-income and first-generation students have the same aspirations for graduate school, only 21% earn a graduate degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). An absence of knowledge of next steps post-graduation and lack of understanding of the field of work or graduate school places at-promise students at a disadvantage.

Cultural capital can be developed to prepare students for graduate school during and after college. For example, exposure to theory and practice with writing styles increased the confidence of underrepresented students as they embarked on graduate school as one study that offered summer institutes discovered (Winkle-Wanger & Mcoy, 2016). Ovink and Veazey's (2011) case study of students in the sciences, many of whom where first-generation, examined how augmenting cultural capital for their

underrepresented students influenced their career paths and degree completion in a positive way. They found that enhanced academic and personal advising in the sciences, undergraduate research experiences, and peer mentorship built cultural capital, which led to graduation of more underrepresented students. Knowledge and skills required to be in a science-related career were transferred through the advising program, which they were not able to get from their parents or communities. Although the graduation rates were improved and alumni spoke to career preparation in the interviews, there was no specific analysis on how the program effectively supported the post college transition.

Influence of Programs

There are few programs that specifically address at-promise students' transition into a career. Many students rely on their parents for assistance and feedback choosing their major and eventual vocation (Workman, 2015). This critical transition into the workforce as a college graduate can be a challenging one for students whose families do not have work experience beyond a working class setting. Studies have highlighted that first-generation students have external factors such as lack of social capital and internal factors such as perception of knowledge that influence their career development (Tate et al., 2015). In Tate and colleagues (2015) qualitative study the external influences on first-generation students' career development were family, lack of a professional network, and support programs. Most of the programs referenced in the study were participated in before or during college not after. Career services, which are available at most universities, often fill the gap for low-SES students, yet they may lack specific programming for this population of students. A study of a TRIO Student Support Services that offered a specific intervention course to support their students' career

development through exploring identity, cultural capital, and supportive relationships found significant improvement in all the domains for career decision-making (Grier-Reed & Ganuza, 2012). However, similar programs are not available at all institutions with Student Support Services. It seems that at-promise students are often overlooked in the transition out of college into the workforce.

One program that is actively engaging in this work is America Needs You (ANY). ANY is a non-profit organization that started in New York City and has expanded to other locations since its inception in 2009. Although there is yet to be any empirical research on this program, ANY is a two-year intensive program that connects "high-achieving, first-generation, low-income college students" with intensive career-development, one-one mentorship, robust social networks and holistic support in their junior and senior years of college ("America Needs You," 2019). ANY continues to be a resource for students post-graduation. They report their success rates as 90% of students gaining employment in the industry of their choice and 87% securing employment or going to graduate school within six months of graduation ("America Needs You", 2019). It is not surprising given the level of both internal and external resources that first-generation and low-income students have found success in this program.

An example of a local program with a focus on post-college outcomes is Jobs for Maine's graduates (JMG). JMG is a non-profit organization that extends from high school to college and beyond for more than 9,000 Maine students in all 16 counties. JMG offers a continuum of support through transitions from middle school, high school, and college to help students through degree attainment and into a career pathway. The JMG high school graduation rate is over 90%, which is higher than the Maine state average and

85% of JMG students are engaged in continuing their education or are employed after high school graduation ("JMG Program Results," 2016). To be eligible, students must face a minimum of four barriers to education. The most common barriers in the program are: economic disadvantage (62% of JMG students); serious family or social issues (45% of JMG students); high absenteeism due to an articulated disinterest in school (41% of JMG students); and, under-performing academically (40% of JMG students) ("Jobs for Maine Graduates GuideStar Profile," n.d.). The program is site based at high schools around the state and is led by JMG specialists who are educators and mentors. "JMG increases high school graduation rates, college retention, and degree attainment. It prepares students for successful careers after graduation by helping them overcome academic, financial, and social barriers" ("Jobs for Maine Graduates GuideStar Profile," n.d.). The majority of the JMG program supports at-promise students through high school. There are some JMG sites at Maine colleges now, which would aid in the transition through college. However, the work they do to support their graduates post-college has not been as well documented as their high school and college graduation rates.

Summary

This review of literature has established the definitions of low-income and first-generation students for the purposes of this study and the importance of not viewing these at-promise scholars from a deficit perspective. At-promise students clearly have the potential to achieve in college, and many have. Yet parts of their background and experiences in a higher education system that values the norms of the upper class may prevent them reaching the levels of success that their higher socioeconomic status peers

do. I continue the review examining how economic, social, and cultural capital along with programming tailored for this population have influenced at-promise students' college transitions into and out of postsecondary education. Clearly, the existing literature focuses on this population's enrollment and initial transition to college and largely ignores the transition out of college. In the next chapter, the research methods used in the study are explained.

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

To gain an in-depth understanding of how students from at-promise backgrounds transition to college and career while utilizing the capital available to them, a qualitative study is most appropriate. There is limited research on the experiences of first-generation college students past their initial transition to college in the first-year (Demetriou et al., 2017). The narrative tradition grounded my research method. This method aims to understand the experience and stories of a specific group of students. Focusing on a particular group or experience signals value in understanding that experience (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Narratives are stories that tell of individual experiences and shed light on the identities of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). They also contain tensions or transitions that serve as organizing structures. Glesne (2011) argued that something is learned about cultural patterns by talking with members of a similar social group. To explore the identities and experiences of the Promise Scholars, a narrative analysis provides insight into the students' perspectives in their current context. Creswell and Poth (2018) valued a narrative approach because it occurs within specific places and these settings help uncover the meaning in the story. The experiences of Promise Scholars can only be told using the context of their current institution and life situation, which is best revealed through narrative inquiry. Creswell and Poth (2018) also supported the situation of stories within personal experiences, culture, and history. Through the personal stories of the Promise Scholars, I developed an understanding of what factors influenced their degree completion and career outcomes.

Research Paradigm

A narrative analysis of student interviews fits into the interpretivism paradigm, which reveals patterns in behavior (Glesne, 2011). This paradigm utilizes a relativist ontology in which a phenomenon may have multiple interpretations and not one truth determined by a specific measurement (Pham, 2018). Glesne (2011) explained that constructed realities are not just in the mind of one person, but also are social constructions that interact with society. A social constructivist approach within a narrative methodology enables researchers to take into account the participants' own evaluations of the program and their experiences (Sechelski & Onwuegbuzie, 2019). It is not only the researcher's interpretation of the narrative that matters, but also the participants' interpretations as well. Narrative inquiry recognizes that relationship between the researcher and the participants and that we learn from each other (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). As a Mitchell Scholar alumna, I have personally experienced aspects of the program that created a deeper connection with the participants and a more nuanced lens for analysis.

Participants

There were a total of 30 Promise Scholars in the 2014, 2015, and 2016 cohorts who could speak to how being selected as a Promise Scholar provided opportunities which may have influenced their college completion and career outcomes. Of this group, 27 were interviewed while they were attending college in 2016 as part of an evaluation of the grant received from John T. Gorman Foundation to support the program. A Mitchell Scholar as part of a research internship conducted the first interviews. I recruited the 17 Promise Scholars who participated in the first interview who identified as both first-

generation and were from family income levels of below $35,000 to participate in my study. After receiving IRB approval, I sent a letter introducing myself and the topic of study to the Mitchell Institute. The Mitchell Institute forwarded the letter on my behalf to all 17 of the Promise Scholars. Nine Promise Scholars consented to participate in this study and, I interviewed them in-person or using Zoom video conferencing. Three of the Promise Scholars were female and six were male. When utilizing a purposive sampling technique, Guest and colleagues (2006) recommended between 10-12 participants to reach saturation. This sample size represented three of the seven public colleges in Maine with the greatest number of participants attending the flagship land grant institution, University of Maine, and two of the 14 private colleges in Maine were represented. These Promise Scholars were all between 18 and 25 years old and represented a variety of towns across the state of Maine. Seven of the Promise Scholars were White, one identified as American Indian, and one was Hispanic.

Sampling

A criterion-based purposive sampling scheme is utilized in this study. This type of sampling is appropriate because the researcher selects from strategically important cases that demonstrate a new understanding of the phenomenon (Collins, 2010). These contexts account for income level, first generation status, type of institution attended, family hardships experienced, gender, and race and ethnicity. This type of sampling reflected the Promise Scholar population who comes from various locations and backgrounds, but have experiencing personal hardship in common. This sampling method reflects the difference of views and provide a complex picture of the topic of study as the focus of the

study is on how students from at-promise backgrounds experience their college transition (Creswell and Clark, 2018).

Data Collection

I analyzed two interviews for this qualitative research, but conducted only one interview myself. A Mitchell Institute researcher conducted the first interview while the Promise Scholars were attending college in 2016. The second interview, which I conducted, occurred in the early Spring of 2020 when the Promise Scholars were graduated or about to graduate. This method allowed for further exploration of emergent themes in the second phase of the interviews. The first semi-structured interview explored how the Promise scholarship influenced persistence and their transition into college. The second semi-structured interview explored how the Promise scholarship influences degree completion and career success. Tinto (2007) stated researchers need to know more about the nature of low-income students' persistence and the way their college experiences influence their success in higher education. Creswell and Clark (2018) recommended this design "to obtain a more complete understanding of the problem" (p. 65). The college persistence and completion rates of the Promise Scholars alone will not explain what helps them persist and graduate as these scholars have complex social, cultural, and economic backgrounds, which were explored in both phases of interviews.

Interview Procedure

The interviews of the Promise Scholars from phase one had previously been collected as part of a program evaluation for the John T. Gorman Foundation grant. Each Promise Scholar in the 2014-2016 cohort was contacted during or after their first year of

college to participate in an interview with a student staff member who was also a Mitchell Scholar to help the program understand their experiences in college. These interviews were 30 minutes to two hours in length, recorded with permission, and transcribed. A semi-structured protocol (Appendix A) guided the interviews. The Mitchell Institute granted me permission to access these interview transcripts for this study. The Mitchell Institute developed the first interview protocol using a social capital framework in conjunction with feedback from the John T. Gorman foundation. I coded the first interviews from the nine Promise scholars who agreed to participate in the current study prior to conducting the second phase of interviews, which occurred in February of 2020. I interviewed the 2014 and 2015 cohort of Promise Scholars when they had been out of college for at least one year and the 2016 cohort was in their final semester of college.

I derived the second round of interview questions from my conceptual framework and the first interview protocol (Appendix B). I focused on how the Promise Scholars leveraged capital from the Mitchell Institute Promise Scholarship to their transition experience into the workforce or graduate school. I used a semi-structured interview protocol, which allowed for follow-up questions that more deeply explored the individual participant's experience, but also had consistent questions between phase one and two, allowing for comparisons between participants' answers and to capture change over time. This strategy improves trustworthiness (Glesne, 2011). The second set of interviews addressed the second research question and aimed to uncover the experiences that influenced the Promise Scholars' degree completion and career choices that could not be captured in their interviews during college.

Data Analysis

I coded and analyzed the first and second round of interviews using constant comparison analysis (Sechelski & Onwuegbuzie, 2019). This involves reducing the data to codes, grouping the codes, and then developing themes from the codes. A priori themes informed the analysis of both sets of interviews. I uploaded the transcripts to *Nvivo* and coded them based on my conceptual framework. I also coded for emerging themes and connected the themes to the Promise Scholars' narratives, which helped explain the phenomenon being studied. During the second round of interviews, I wrote memos to myself before my interview, after each interview, and after coding the transcript. Glesne (2011) advised that by getting your thoughts down no matter how preliminary they are you begin the analysis process. I also wrote a memo after the data were transcribed from an audio recording in the second interview phase and wrote notes to myself about any patterns emerged. Writing memos throughout the research process helps researchers think about their work and can generate new questions and connections (Glesne, 2011). My memos served as links across the data that identified analytic files and themes (Glesne, 2011). Glesne (2011) found that memoing in different stages of the research process improved the organization of the findings. I also used a construct table (Appendix C) to aid in the organization of reoccurring themes and findings.

Coding

Nvivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, aided in coding both sets of interviews. The codes, based on my literature review and conceptual framework, were: social capital, economic capital, cultural capital, Mitchell Institute support, general support, self, and strategy. I began using the a priori codes to initially

code my data. After the first round of coding, new codes emerged. For the second round of coding, the additional codes of struggle, peers, teachers, acceptance, mentors, aspiration, leadership, recognition, and family were added to the codebook. I conducted a reliability test to ensure that I applied the codes to the correct ideas consistently by coding one transcript by hand a week after I had initially coded it in the Nvivo software. Finally, I examined the occurrence of each code for each participant and selected the three most frequent codes from each participant to develop my themes. Qualitative researchers code to determine themes, patterns, and processes, and to build theoretical explanations (Glesne, 2011).

Themes

After coding, I created a construct table (Appendix C) to extract the most prominent themes for each participant and to examine how those ideas were connected. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) found that displaying data in a systematic way improves your understanding and helps focus and organize your information. Creswell and Poth (2018) believed when "researchers locate evidence to document a code or theme in different sources of data…they are providing validity to their findings" (p. 260). I compared these themes to my conceptual framework and interpreted my findings through this framework. Reviewing how each theme linked to various forms of capital and coping resources helped me understand what influenced a student's transition in and out of college.

Trustworthiness

The conceptualization of social capital between the two phases of interviews is similar, but the questions were not parallel. In the second phase of the interviews, I kept

the “financial,” “transitions and supports,” and “looking ahead” sections similar, but revised some questions to reflect the post-college situation. This increased the reliability of the data because similar questions were asked and answers could be compared over time (Creswell & Clark, 2018). The sample sizes for both rounds of interviews were unequal because I could analyze the interviews of only those who participated in the second round of the interviews. I examined divergent findings, which confirmed the accuracy of the data because researchers expect evidence that does not always align (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Understanding the disconfirming evidence advanced my interpretations on why evidence is different. This led to greater understanding of the research problem and the research questions. My findings were shared with each participant in the study so they had an opportunity to evaluate the accuracy and credibility of the research themselves (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I also shared the results with the stakeholders at the Mitchell Institute to refine, confirm, or expand upon the findings further. Member checking is a way to increase validity of qualitative data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I also examined my analysis of the findings and considered my purpose, belonging, and meaning in conducting this research (Saldaña, 2018). As Saldaña (2018) explained that qualitative research is an act of devotion, I considered my personal commitment to this program and the Promise Scholars who shared their stories as I wrote their narratives and shared their outcomes.

The research is specific to the Mitchell Institute Promise Scholars program and application of these findings to other populations should be done with care. Due to the small sample size, the specificity of this scholarship program, and the resources provided it is difficult to generalize the participants’ experiences to other contexts. Future cohorts

of Promise Scholars may have different program elements that could influence the findings in how they transition to college and the workforce. However, the college to career transition for at-promise students has not been well studied up to this point. This study offered insight into how this growing population of college graduates approaches their career and if they achieve personal and professional success through analysis of their personal stories.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

In this chapter, I outline the objectives and goals of the Mitchell Institute's Promise Scholars program along with the resources that the scholarship provides to the Promise Scholars. I also review the methods of participant selection, the participants' demographics, and interview procedures. I share in depth narratives of three of the Promise Scholars and an overview of the stories of the remaining six Promise Scholars. Lastly, I present an analysis of the findings that integrate all of the participants' responses.

Overview of the Mitchell Institute's Promise Scholars Program

Since 1998, every high school in Maine has awarded one Mitchell Scholarship. Today, each Mitchell Scholar receives a $10,000 scholarship to be divided over four years of college, which has increased as the cost of higher educations has risen and state appropriations have declined. Currently, the Mitchell Institute funds 134 scholarships. Recipients of the Mitchell Scholarship not only receive the scholarship money, but also have access to events and networking facilitated by the Mitchell Institute during college and once they graduate. These events and resources include a welcome brunch, leadership experiences (MILE I and II), campus receptions, a fundraising gala, fellowship award program, no-agenda coffee meetings, and an emergency fund. Through grant funding provided by the John T. Gorman foundation, an additional 10 Mitchell Scholars are selected based on need and experiencing vulnerable circumstances. These Mitchell Scholars are designated as Promise Scholars and are often from families with limited

incomes. In addition to receiving the same scholarship and programming as the Mitchell Scholars, the Promise Scholars have guaranteed access to the emergency fund and automatic fellowship funding. The Promise Scholars also have a pre-matriculation leadership retreat that is highly encouraged called "MILE III." During this retreat, the new cohort of Promise Scholars participate in team-building activities and are placed in mentor groups with one returning Promise Scholar serving as a facilitator for their group. Transportation, housing, and meals are included as part of these experiences. In addition, students receive a check for missed work hours during the time of the retreats, if requested. MILE I, a fall leadership retreat, and MILE II, a professional development seminar, are offered to all Mitchell Scholars, but Promise Scholars are always given priority to attend even if the experiences are full. The Mitchell Institute believes that access to resources and a high level of scholar engagement leads to post-secondary success.

The Mitchell Institute aims to support recipients through college completion. The goal of the organization is to increase post-secondary degree attainment in Maine. In 2018, 44% of Maine adults had a post-secondary credential (Education Indicators for Maine, 2019). The program hopes that all Mitchell Scholarship recipients earn a post-secondary credential. As of November 2019, 92% of scholarship recipients were on track to graduate with a degree (Patefield, 2019). By November of 2021, the organization hopes to increase their scholars' degree attainment to 95% and by 2023 to have 100% of Mitchell Scholars graduating. The Promise Scholars are vulnerable to setbacks and challenges given their family circumstances and economic backgrounds. The current graduation rate for all Mitchell Scholars is 85% compared to the 60% graduation rate in

the state of Maine (Shapiro et al., 2019). By most estimates, the program is highly successful, yet the Mitchell Institute desires to continue improving their outcomes by customizing support strategies and resources. The populations they hope to improve outcomes for are students from at-risk circumstances, economic disadvantage, first-generation, students of color, and students from Franklin, Hancock, Knox, and Somerset counties. The Mitchell Institute is particularly interested in how the newer Promise Scholars program influences the college and career outcomes of their at-promise students.

Review of Method and Participants

I recruited the Promise Scholars in this study from the 2014, 2015, and 2016 cohorts. The scholars also had to identify as first-generation and come from a limited income household, specifically below $35,000. Of the 30 Promise Scholars in the 2014-2016 cohorts, 18 met these criteria and after outreach from both Mitchell Institute staff and me, I interviewed nine scholars in the spring of 2020. The demographic information of the nine Promise Scholars at the time of the interview is shared in the table below:

Table 1

Promise Scholar demographics

Name	Parental Education	High School County	Institution Type	Years in college	Occupation	Sex	Race
Elaine	High school diploma	Piscataquis	Private 4-year, in-state	2016-2020	Student	F	White
Eugene	High school diploma	Waldo	Public 4-year, in-state*	2014-2018	Legal Consultant	M	White

Jack	Associates degree	Knox	Public 4-year, in-state*	2016-2020	Grocery store supervisor	M	White
Jim	General Education Diploma	Penobscot	Public 4-year, in-state*	2015-2020	Student	M	Native
Julie	High school diploma	Hancock	Public 4-year, in-state	2014-2018	Logistics Supervisor	F	Hispanic
Karmen	High school diploma	York	Private 4-year, in-state	2014-2018	Marine Research Fellow	F	White
Ken	General Education Diploma	York	Public 4-year, in-state	2016-2021	Student	M	White
Nick	High school diploma	Waldo	Public 4-year, in-state*	2016-2020	Student	M	White
Zane	High school diploma	Hancock	Public 4-year, in-state*	2016-2020	Mechanical engineer	M	White

Note: Names are pseudonyms *University of Maine

Guided by two semi-structured interviews over the course of each Promise Scholar's college experience, I present data that enables the Mitchell Institute to gain greater insight into their Promise Scholars' experiences. The Mitchell Institute can also evaluate the current programming and resources that are most effective in their Promise Scholars' transitions into and out of college. A Mitchell Institute research intern conducted the first set of interviews in the fall of 2016. The Promise Scholars were first-years, sophomores, or juniors at the time of the interview. The Mitchell Institute shared this previously collected data with me, and I obtained verbal consent to use the scholars' first interviews in the current study. I also obtained verbal consent from the participants

before the second interview in the spring of 2020. The Promise Scholars were seniors in college or in the workforce at the time of the second interview. Interviews occurred on their college campus or using Zoom video conferencing. I recorded and transcribed the interviews with permission. I coded and analyzed the first set of interviews prior to the second interviews. After I transcribed and coded the second interviews, I compared the themes from each set of interviews to develop an outline of my themes, which Mitchell Institute staff members reviewed. The participants had an opportunity to review my initial findings, their interview transcript, and their demographic information. I am naming the public research land grant institution the University of Maine, UMaine, in the scholars' narratives because five of the nine Promise Scholars attended this university (Table 1). By sharing the name of the institution that a majority of the Promise Scholars attend, I hope that this research will better serve the University of Maine and the at-promise students who are a part of their student body. It is notable that all of Promise Scholars interviewed attended in-state institutions.

The research findings begin with a thorough examination of the narratives of three Promise Scholars to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges the scholars faced during their transitions. After I present those three stories, an overview of the stories of the remaining six Promise Scholars builds upon the previously shared narratives. I organize each narrative by their family background, early college experience, and late or post-college experiences to provide a glimpse into their college trajectories. All nine Promise Scholars' stories reveal the forms of capital that influence their transition experiences and the role of the Mitchell Institute in supporting their outcomes. Finally, I

utilize Schlossberg and colleagues' (1995) adults in transition theory to examine the strategies that aid the Promise Scholars' transitions.

Narratives

In this section, I highlight the personal stories of all nine Promise Scholars. Each Promise Scholar faced difficult personal and economic circumstances yet despite these hardships, they all enrolled in a four-year college and are on track to graduate or have graduated. Everyone in this study is inspirational and deserves to have his or her story heard. Although each story is unique, there are universal aspects about the college experience of students from limited income and first-generation backgrounds that we can learn from and celebrate. The Promise Scholars overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles using their intelligence, determination, and available resources to attend and graduate from college. The narratives are summaries of each Promise Scholar's upbringing with special attention paid to how they reached college and moved through their college transition. The first three narratives are in-depth histories of the scholars' college experiences. These narratives are featured more prominently based on my personal reaction to their stories.

In my view, the stories of these three participants, Julie, Jack, and Nick, highlight the tremendous challenges Promise Scholars faced to persist in college. I selected Julie, who identifies as Hispanic, to explore the college experience and transition to the workforce for a student underrepresented in higher education and in the state as whole, which has the potential to create more barriers. The other two featured Promise Scholars, Jack and Nick, highlight how Promise Scholars approach their transition out of college. In addition, their contrasting college experiences, though they both attended the same

institution, highlight how social and economic capital influenced their individual outcomes.

Julie

Julie was raised in small fishing community on the coast of Maine. She moved to Maine from Hawaii as a toddler when her parents separated, and her mom moved back to her childhood home. Julie's mother had two other children while in Maine. During Julie's childhood, her mother battled alcohol dependence and would often leave Julie at home alone with her siblings for days at a time. The father of Julie's youngest sibling was abusive to her mother. As the oldest child, Julie attempted to protect her two younger siblings from witnessing the abuse. At nine years old, Julie had to call the police from her neighbor's house to stop her sister's father from abuse that she believed would have killed her mother if she had not intervened. She moved many times throughout her childhood and lived in a tent with her siblings one summer. When Julie was getting ready to leave for college, her mother experienced suicidal ideation and Julie had to intervene. Julie reported she has had to stop her mother from taking her own life multiple times.

Even with the trauma Julie experienced at home, she was in the top 20% of her graduating class and was involved in the National Honor Society and athletics. She attended a very small high school with about 50 students in each class. She enjoyed school and spent a lot of time there once her siblings were older. She stated, "I didn't have much to worry about while in school, so I enjoyed my life for a little bit." She logged over 150 hours of community service and was president of her class. She was selected as a Promise Scholar because of the resilience and determination she demonstrated throughout high school.

The only family role model she had growing up was her grandfather. She did not have a strong relationship with him until she was older. Her mother and grandfather were estranged due her mother's alcoholism. She wanted to go to college because:

> No one in my family has ever been to college, and I decided that I didn't want to be like the people in my family. I decided I wanted to be my own person. And I was going to go to school, and I was going to be successful and start my own life that I wanted to live.

Julie achieved this goal. She attended a small public college about an hour from home that specializes in engineering, science, and business. She majored in international business and logistics.

Moving through. Julie's transition into college, especially her first year, was the most difficult part of her college experience. Julie was interviewed at the start of her junior year in college. She recalled that being away from her family, specifically her younger brother and sister, was particularly hard for her. She had essentially raised her siblings and cared for them while her mother struggled with addiction and mental health. Julie witnessed her mother's physical and verbal abuse on many occasions and was worried that her siblings would now have to manage that without her. She stated:

> I went to school [college] and I was really scared, because I didn't want my brother and sister to have to do the things I had to do. And that's why my first year here was really hard, because I really wanted to be with them, but she [her mother] didn't want me to come home.

Although it was hard at first, Julie remained in college and went home on the weekends. She called home every night for the first few months, but at the time of the interview, she rarely called home and went home only on school breaks.

Julie eventually immersed herself in college life and continued to be as involved as she was in high school. She had a job on campus, was the president of a business club, and took advantage of meeting with professors and tutors. She also had increased moral support from her grandfather whom she formed a strong relationship with during college. Her grandfather owned a local business and helped her with her car maintenance so she could get to work and home when necessary. He supported Julie and believed that Julie's making it through college was important. Her strong will and motivation in addition to support from her grandfather and from the Mitchell Institute was important to her growth in being able to ask for help and for her to be able to afford to stay in college.

Julie described how the Mitchell Institute was there for her financially when she needed a new car. Being on a geographically isolated campus that was 30 to 40 minutes from a major store, made a car critical to getting to and from her job, her apartment, and classes. She also reflected on the experiences she gained on the Mitchell Institute leadership retreats that she attended before college. She went white water rafting and participated in a ropes course. From this she stated, "I've learned that sometimes it's good to get out of your comfort zone. Sometimes you need to take risks and do things you would never do before." She also noted the importance of the social connection with other scholars and getting needed time away from a stressful home environment. "We just forgot about everything going on at home, and you were just with people you've never met before when you first got there, but then when you went home, they felt like

you've known them forever." She hoped to remain connected to other scholars and the Mitchell Institute staff in the future. She mentioned that she was working with the Mitchell Institute to apply for a summer internship at a research laboratory not far from her home.

Julie was hopeful about graduating and felt prepared for that next step. Independence was expected of her from a young age. Julie explained, "I didn't really have someone there telling me, you have to do this you have to do that. It was more of, it's your life; once you graduate, you're on your own." Although the Mitchell Institute and her grandfather provided support to make her not feel completely on her own, she felt it was up to her to change her station in life. She has gained confidence in her abilities to face challenges. She reported that being away from home had actually made life easier, "Getting through everything. Getting through life. They say that it gets harder from here, but so far I've felt it get easier." Her experience in college overall had been a relief in many ways, yet it was difficult to take the initial leap away from her siblings and her mother.

Moving out. In the second interview, approximately two years after she graduated, Julie once again described the first year completely on her own as more difficult than she had expected. It was important to her that she remain close to her family, so she accepted a job as a ground logistics supervisor at a Maine-based seafood company. She moved back in with her mother for two weeks and quickly realized that she could not be in that environment again. She found an apartment on her own and started her full-time job. She said:

> When you move out on your own, you are on your own, no matter what basically and things like bills, they add up very quickly. And when I first started my job, I wasn't making as much money as I am now. So, that was a hard transition for me, going from having scholarships at school that helped me do that…. So with my job, I work 24-7 I'm always on call. And it's just me in that department. So that has been hard. I work 80 to 90 hours a week.

She felt lucky that she had found a job in her field so close to home even though the hours were brutal leaving her with little time to herself. Julie eventually learned what the down times were in her schedule and capitalized on that time to relax. It seemed unlikely that Julie would leave her job anytime soon. She explained:

> I have been offered to move to Boston and run the trucking company from there with a raise. I turned it down because Maine is my home. And I know a lot of people say you shouldn't do that but my whole family is here. Everyone that I love is here. It's too much I'm willing to give up especially when I'm already happy with the job.

Julie felt confident in her abilities. The skills that she learned in college prepared her for this role. She worked on the logistics crew in a marine laboratory during a college internship that was required by her program. The Mitchell Institute facilitated this internship experience. She believed the lab held a number of spots specifically for Mitchell Scholars. Although this internship was not as busy as her current job, sending a few trucks out a week versus multiple trucks every day, she was thankful for that opportunity. She went on to discuss the impact the scholarship had on her personal growth. She stated, "No other scholarship that I got has paid for me to come out for a

weekend, and basically just hanging out with all the other Mitchell Scholars....They [the Mitchell Institute] were a huge part of my life."

Even though her busy work schedule precluded Julie from staying as involved in the Mitchell Institute as she would have liked, she still appreciated invitations to events and knew she could reach out to staff if she needed anything. Recently engaged, Julie was not worried about her economic circumstances in the future. She explained, "I've always learned to adapt and overcome. If I'm ever faced with a problem, I learned how to fix it real quick." In the future, she hopes to run the entire logistics operations of the company land, air, and sea. She is considering going back to school for a Master's degree in marine logistics at her alma mater. The program is online so she will be able to work and take classes. Because of how hectic things are at work, she has not yet made the time to apply, but hopes to in the next year or so. Her college debt, about $34,000, also holds her back from continuing her education. She reflected on why she had not gone back for her Master's, "I don't know why I'm waiting but I think it's a little scary taking that next step, especially when I already have a lot of debt. I'd like to get that paid off before going into more." Overall, Julie felt proud of where she was in her life.

Julie was the first person in her family to graduate from college and loved the work she was doing. She realized that without financial support from the Mitchell Institute her college experience might not have been possible. She stated:

> I don't think I would have been able to get through school. My family…didn't contribute at all towards my financial situation in school, so it was just me and what I could get for scholarships and grants, so they helped tremendously.

Julie's self-determination, support from the Mitchell Institute, and her strategies such as getting involved and asking for help were a winning combination for post-graduate success. She was financially stable, enjoyed her job, and was happy living close to her family in Maine. She meets with her grandfather every Wednesday for coffee before managing the 10 truck drivers on the route she oversaw that transports lobsters from the coast of Maine to international airports that deliver the fresh seafood all over the world. Although Julie faced challenges transitioning into and out of college, she utilized her personal qualities along with resources from the Mitchell Institute and her family to overcome them.

Jack

Jack moved to Maine when his father lost his job at a bank in Massachusetts. He had other relatives on the mid-coast and his family moved into a home close to them. Both of his parents worked; however, they changed jobs often for a variety of reasons. Jack's parents were Jehovah's Witnesses and as a result, he felt isolated. "I had to follow their rules and their religion, and I don't know. I guess I shut down so much at home that I didn't know that I was depressed and had social anxiety." He went to a small high school where the majority of students were not college bound, but he took Honors and AP classes and enjoyed science. During his sophomore year, he decided he needed to figure out a way to get out of his house to be able to go to college and live the life he wanted to live. Jack explained, "Throughout high school I always knew that I was going to move out, because I just, I was so unhappy with my family, and I couldn't feel like I could be myself around them." Jack became close with a classmate whose mother suggested he live with her until he finished high school. They met with a social worker at

school to discuss what Jack's options were. His senior year he was able to emancipate himself. Prior to this, his parents refused to sign a FAFSA form because they did not want him to attend college. His parents told Jack that "[he] should take the time to focus on spiritual activities, and by living on campus... [he] would lose spirituality." His parents did not want him to go college; despite this, he applied to three colleges and was accepted to all three. He decided on UMaine, a four-year public research institution, because it was the most financially feasible. He was not able to attend a smaller private college that was his first choice because it cost about $6,000 more. Had Jack known about scholarships like the Promise Scholarship prior to graduation, his decision may have been different. Jack had to be independent of his parents prior to college to make attending college possible.

Moving through. The first semester of college was difficult for Jack. He was interviewed in the fall of his first year. The friend from high school who became his girlfriend and helped make it possible for him to emancipate himself broke up with him. Jack was concerned this would impact his housing situation since he had moved in with her family. He thought her mother would let him keep his belongings there for a little while, but he was unsure if her mom would let him stay there during the winter break. Jack had come to rely on his girlfriend's family for support. He had to borrow money from her mother to start his first semester. When he reported his scholarships to UMaine, they reduced his financial aid package and he needed to come up with more money than expected to pay his college bills. Jack found it hard to adjust to a bigger campus and classes with 200 or more students. His social anxiety was a frequent challenge and he

sought support from the counseling center and student accessibility services. He found taking 17 credits with labs, working, and managing social anxiety to be difficult:

> I just don't know how to balance. I'm struggling as it is, and I have a lot of work study, and I need the work study because I need all the help I can get, and the work study was fairly decent. But I just don't have the time or the sanity to devote time to being able to balance homework, work, and everything else.

He focused on getting through the semester academically because that was all he could manage. He reported being overwhelmed by college life and living on his own.

Jack relied on his academic advisor and the Mitchell Institute to support him during this time. His advisor provided referrals to counseling. He also appreciated the care package he received from the Mitchell Institute. In addition, he mentioned the MILE III experience that he participated in prior to college as helping him make some social connections with other Mitchell Scholars on his campus. He was not able to devote a lot of time to making social connections or cultural experiences. Jack stated, "I'm really just looking to pass this semester and taking it a semester at a time, because thinking anything in the future is kind of overwhelming right now." Jack was unable to focus on becoming socially integrated on campus because his academic and personal life were consuming his time and energy.

Moving out. Jack was interviewed again in the spring semester of his senior year. He was planning to graduate in a few months with a biological sciences degree. He still had two summer classes to complete but could technically participate in graduation ceremonies, although he was not sure he would. He still had no contact with his parents or brothers because he would be a "bad influence" on his brothers according to his

parents. Jack reflected on his first-year of college and believed it was eye opening for him socially and culturally. He previously had been restricted from many activities in high school due to his families' religious practices. He started in the honors college, which he liked, but was unable to maintain the grade point average to stay his second year. He attributed this to working 30 to 40 hours a week at a local grocery store chain, which he needed to do to pay for school. He over-worked himself and ended up in the hospital multiple times his junior year. This led to his medically withdrawing and taking a year off from classes. This breakdown happened when he was promoted to supervisor at the grocery store where he worked since high school. Jack stated:

> I was just overworking myself over schooling. I had gotten a new job just recently... [I was] promoted to supervisor at [the grocery store]. So, learning how to be a supervisor and classes I was taking and just…overall everything of life its kind of just like, destroyed my immune system.

Since he was on track to graduate a year early, he would still finish in four years, but the semester off was a major challenge for him. He medically withdrew in the fall semester, but he could not come back until a doctor cleared him. These medical visits created unexpected financial burdens. Though the Affordable Care Act covered him, he had to use the money he was refunded for his class withdrawal to pay his medical bills. Jack explained:

> My ambulance rides and my ER visits were covered through the refunds that the school gave me from doing a medical withdrawal. They refunded my tuition, and I paid an extra $6,000 that semester, because I was planning to go to Peru over

winter break for the ecology class. And so, they refunded me the extra money that I paid for that class. And that I wound up putting it all towards my hospital bills.

His advisor told him that there was a policy that if you medically withdrew one semester you needed to be out the next one. He focused on working during the spring semester and took summer classes to attempt to get back on track before coming back in the fall.

He utilized TRIO, student accessibility services, and the counseling center throughout his time in college. TRIO was helpful with his housing situation his first year when he could not move back with his ex-girlfriend's parents and had no place to go over break. The Promise Fund provided by the Mitchell Institute helped him have the money for a deposit on an apartment his sophomore year so he would have a place to live over the summer. This apartment became the place that he lived through most of his college years until he moved in with a new girlfriend after she graduated. Jack established accommodations from accessibility services to ease his testing anxiety. Taking the semester off was also a social challenge because he had been comfortable with peers in his major classes, but upon return, knew fewer people. This exacerbated his social anxiety. Staff members from the Mitchell Institute were essential in supporting Jack to make the transition back to college from his medical leave. Jack stated, “[Mitchell Institute] very much helped me, you know, feel motivated when I didn't feel motivated, like, especially last year trying, um, you know, bring up the ability to come back. Because I was mostly just dreading this final year.” Jack was hoping to use his biological sciences major to work for the state in an environmental office. He had some distant connections to someone who worked for the state, but said he would also check in with Mitchell Institute staff for other government job opportunities.

Jack was not sure how much debt he had but was not worried about paying it back. He appreciated that the Mitchell scholarship was dispersed over four years. Many of his scholarships were one year and he got too busy to reapply after the first year especially when he was having medical issues. He felt that he learned more about leadership from his workplace than from college, but he was spending most of the time working off campus rather than participating in activities on campus. Jack was committed to staying in this area and seemed averse to going to other parts of Maine because it takes him awhile to adjust to new places though there are not as many job opportunities in his current location. He considered going the manager track at the grocery store chain. Overall, he was unsure about whether or not his investment in college would create advantages for him:

> So, to me, the emancipation part was very much worth the investment. But, on the contrary, if I had known that I could have succeeded as well as I have at [the grocery store], I don't know if I would have invested four years into college…..The first year was very good. You know, there's a lot of experience I gained from it both socially and, you know, academically, like everything. Yeah, especially living on campus very much prepared me in a way that I didn't get as a, you know, child and the religion I was in. So, I feel that that part was worthwhile.

Jack was excited to be done with his coursework and to be able to do less juggling as a full-time student and a full-time employee. He planned to continue working at the grocery store while job searching and living with his girlfriend who was searching for a full-time elementary school teaching position.

Nick

Nick ran away from home with his older brother, Eugene, also a Promise Scholar, at age 11 to escape his abusive mother who had obtained legal custody of her three children after a divorce. After the boys arrived in Maine, Nick's father was essentially wanted for charges of kidnapping. Nick, his brother, and father had to work to establish their father's legal custody in Maine, and the family had no home of their own for the first two years after the boys arrived. They had to hide from authorities in the state that granted their mother custody. Nick and Eugene had to file under the interstate commission for juveniles to enroll in school in Maine. Since their father was disabled and could not work, they lived in an attic of a family member's house and in a tent in a campground until they were able to secure an opening in low-income housing. The brothers and their father suffered extreme poverty. They worked with a Senator's office and appeared at multiple hearings for their father to finally be granted legal custody. Once this legal battle was over, their sister who was younger and remained in Ohio with their mother was able to leave their mother as well. Nick found a friend to drive with them from Maine to Ohio to pick up his sister who also left without their mother's consent.

Nick and his brother were able to enroll in an upper middle-class school system in eastern Maine and for the most part had enriching educational experiences there. Nick was involved in an environmental competition club and was the Hugh O'Brien Youth Leadership (HOBY) award recipient at his school. He attended leadership and environmental conferences in addition to taking AP and honors courses. He also worked at a local pizza shop. His involvement in these clubs sparked his passion for

environmental science. He decided to pursue a marine science major in college. The Mitchell Institute selected both Nick and his brother Eugene as Promise Scholars for their tremendous perseverance and determination.

Moving through. Nick chose to enroll in the state's largest public research institution, UMaine, because of its reputation and his father's and older brother's advice. His older brother also attended UMaine at the time. Nick developed many social connections in his first year. His strategy was to connect with multiple groups like student government, volunteer groups, and recreational sports to have a layered network of peers. He also discussed rushing the fraternity where his older brother was a member. At the time of the interview, he worked for the campus newspaper, a position he obtained through his brother's connections, as a receptionist for 10-12 hours per week.

Nick's struggles during his first semester of college were primarily financial. He owed a bill in the first semester even though he had enough in scholarships coming in second semester to cover the bill. He worked with student financial services to be able to defer the bill until the second semester. He attributed all of the legal issues he was exposed to as a child as being the reason why he can jump through institutional hoops easily and will not give up. Nick explained:

> Challenges, in comparison to what I've gone through with my family, everything else feels like a tiny challenge, so miniscule. So, having to go through the court and all these adults and [Maine Senator's] office and [Department of Health and Human Services] and all this paperwork, and having to do that at such a young age, makes everything else feel so easy that it's almost not even a challenge. That kind of goes back to what I was saying about going back to the financial aid

> office…. over and over, that's kind of what we had to do with DHHS, go into DHHS over and over and say the same things over and over until we finally got it. I think it's just made it so much easier to do whatever I have to do to overcome any obstacle.

Nick also relied on his older brother who had gone through similar challenges at the same institution for support, and he often reached out for advice and tips for navigating these campus resources. Another challenge for Nick was completing all of the required documents to enroll in college the summer before his first year, such as the housing and medical forms. Since his brother was working most of the summer and not around, he did not have anyone helping him keep track of what he needed to submit to UMaine and this almost precluded him from getting on-campus housing. He was in a triple originally, but the third student did not come that semester. Without his brother's help, he was on his own figuring out how to set himself up and submit the required forms into UMaine on time. Overall, he enjoyed his college experience and did not seem too inconvenienced by the "shoestring" budget he had to live on. He reported missing some activities, but quickly learned what events were free. He also utilized the promise fund from the Mitchell Institute to buy a laptop when he started school. Nick believed he had grown because of the adversity he faced as a child. He stated:

> I'm happy that I'm able to still seem so normal after going through everything my family's been through. I've had a pretty challenging childhood, like living in low-income housing you have a lot of people around you who have also been through a lot, and they don't always end up in a good spot, but I feel like I'm still

professional and decently polite and well-mannered, even after all of this. I wasn't corrupted by it, which I'm really proud of. I think it's made me stronger.

Although Nick had experienced some setbacks during his transition into college, he was able to continue to stay involved and utilize the skills he gained during his childhood to persist.

Moving out. The second interview took place Nick's senior year at UMaine. Nick was in a leadership role in a prominent campus organization and was graduating in two months. He rose through this student organization's ranks as a member his sophomore year, vice president his junior year, and president his senior year. These positions provided a decent amount of income. He earned $5,000 a semester and performed about 20 hours of work per week for the executive role. He also worked as a property manager for a local property owner and as a science tutor. In addition, he was completing a senior thesis for the honors college which he started the beginning of this academic year. In the morning before he headed to campus for the day, he worked on his job search. He recently had an interview with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration corps and was hoping to be selected as a cadet, which is similar to a military experience, but the cadets work on the nation's ocean research vessels. This is a highly competitive program. Nick was also exploring other job options through connections he made at a career fair and with fraternity brothers who were in a similar field.

In this interview, Nick reflected on his most difficult time in college. During his sophomore year after a breakup with his girlfriend, he needed to move out of the apartment they shared because his name was not on the lease. He needed to "couch surf" until his brother helped him get a bed in his fraternity house. He was under a lot of

pressure academically and personally. After not having eaten all day, he blacked out after drinking at a fraternity formal, woke up the next day to discover he had tried to assault paramedics, and was having criminal charges pressed against him. Nick worked to appeal the charges that could have resulted in suspension from college during his winter break. The charges were eventually dropped, and he was allowed back on campus his spring semester. He credits his family's experience with social services and the criminal justice system as helping him navigate the disciplinary process. He knew what his rights were and pushed the university conduct system to get back into school. He had to attend mandated counseling that semester, which he decided to do off campus. He continued involvement in the student organization and was elected vice president the spring after his charges were dropped.

He credited the Mitchell Institute and his involvement with an honor society on campus as helping him understand professionalism. The fellowship he received from the Mitchell Institute one summer to pay for housing at an internship for the Department of Marine Resources was "life changing" and one of his best learning experiences. This experience helped him gain confidence in his field and recognize what areas of marine sciences he would like to pursue. In addition, being in meetings with presidents and provosts of the university on a regular basis had improved his communication skills. He did not get involved with many student-support programs on campus primarily because of the stigma connected to them. In high school, many of his teachers and peers knew he was from a "rough" background and he appreciated not having that reputation in college. Nick explained:

> I think that some students are hesitant to get involved with like, first year and TRIO [programs] because of the stigma around it and that like, they don't want to identify themselves or identify their families socioeconomic background…. personally, I would rather just kind of be normal for once is kind of how I felt about it... I was kinda like already that kid in high school...so to a large degree, I've been a little bit stubborn and like wanting to do things my own, which has been like one of my biggest weaknesses.

However, while working on a new project called "I'm the first" on his campus as a student leader, Nick realized that if first-generation college students could hear stories of people like him, they might explore opportunities previously considered off limits to them as first-generation. Nick continued to keep a gratitude journal, which was a strategy that the Mitchell Institute suggested on one of the leadership retreats. He realized how his outcomes could have been very different if he stayed with his mother and did not run away with his brother. When he was 11 and made it to Maine, he never thought college was a possibility for him, and now he was grateful that it was. Though his brother graduated from UMaine a few years earlier, Nick felt a sense of pride that he was the second person in his family to graduate from college. His younger sister also attends college in Maine and is on track to graduate in two years. Nick felt confident in his ability to transition to the workforce given the work experiences he had through the Mitchell Institute fellowship and his role in a student organization's leadership.

Elaine

Elaine grew up in Central Maine and experienced a traumatic childhood. She was neglected by her biological father and abused by her mother's boyfriend until her mother

abandoned her. As a result, she had to move in with her grandmother. Her grandmother also neglected her, so she decided to emancipate herself from her family during her senior year of high school. Despite living independently most of her senior year, she maintained a 3.1 GPA and took AP and honors classes. Elaine participated in Upward Bound and used the knowledge she gained in that program to help her apply for college. She decided to attend a small private college in Maine. Without the support of Upward Bound and a summer bridge program, Elaine may not have had an easy transition to college. She stated:

> For the most part, it was actually a pretty seamless transition, because I went from a six week intensive program with Upward Bound, I had a two week period off, and then I went into something that they do here, the [Summer Bridge] Program, which runs very similarly to Upward Bound.

As a result of her participation in these programs, despite her financial challenges, Elaine had the confidence that she could succeed in college.

Moving through. Elaine credits her involvement with TRIO, Upward Bound, and the Mitchell Institute as helping her get through the first difficult weeks in college. She recalled:

> They [Upward Bound mentors] came and visited me for the first couple of weeks…And I swear, not a day went by when I was not getting a phone call, saying, "Hey, how's it going, do you need anything at school? How do you like your class?" At the time it was class, now it's classes. And they were just really supportive.

Elaine struggled financially throughout college because she was an independent student and had no other family financial support. She talked about how this was a challenge when she first enrolled, “I actually had to appeal my financial aid forms here to be filed as an independent student…I pay for all of my own stuff. I don’t have any outside help, and I don’t have contact with either of my parents.” Despite the financial struggles, she persisted by managing multiple jobs during the school year and the summer. Though she was nervous about the amount of loans she had to take out her first year, she was confident in her decision to attend college.

Moving out. When I interviewed Elaine, she was a senior about to graduate with a psychology degree and a writing minor. She was planning to move south after graduation to be with her husband who is stationed near Atlanta, Georgia for military duty. She was managing trying to find a job in a place where she had no connections or network. She explained, “So it's very hard to figure out what we're supposed to do because neither of us really know what we're doing.” She was relying on support from the TRIO coordinator and the career center at her college to help make this move. She focused on “looking for something that fits within my degree and can help me make loan payments to start with.” Throughout college, Elaine typically worked three jobs anywhere from 20 to 60 hours per week. She felt that those skills helped her gain confidence to face the next stage in her life. As she looked to the future, she was proud to be the first in her family to graduate from college. She stated:

> I am the only one in three generations in my family to even graduate high school. As far back as I know one's graduated college unless it's a distant relative, no one in my immediate family has a college degree... So it does mean a lot to me.

Elaine hoped to work for a non-profit focusing on educational outreach; however, she realized that a job in that field may not be as stable or pay enough for her to pay back her $45,000 in college debt. Surprisingly, she had reconnected with her biological father in Georgia and was looking forward to being closer to him. Her father has disabilities, and Elaine realized she may have to help him in the future as his health declines.

Eugene

Eugene planned to run away from his abusive mother in 7th grade. After his mother won custody of Eugene and his two siblings, she developed mental health issues and constantly fought with her children. Eugene along with his younger brother planned an escape from Ohio to Maine to live with their father. His brother, Nick, who is also a Promise Scholar who participated in this study, went with him. Eugene's plan to leave his mother is explained below:

> And so when our dad took us to the police station to be dropped off for mom, my brother and I got out of the car and ran away. And police aren't in business of chasing little kids... So we ran away…and eventually got to Maine after about a week or two.

Eugene was so stressed by the time he got to Maine he was physically ill and had cramps from lack of food during the trip. He entered middle school in Maine very angry and distressed. Until his father got legal custody of the children and state assistance, they were extremely poor. Eugene recalled, "Barely surviving. Barely. When I say barely, I mean barely bought just enough food to live on and clothes were, all my clothes were given to us from people from our church or stuff like that." Junior and senior year of high school life was more stable for the family, and Eugene began to consider applying to

college after encouragement from teachers. His teachers told him he could excel in college. Even though he never truly believed it, he decided to apply to colleges that would not be too far away from his younger brother and father since they relied on him for support. It was not until his MILE III experience with the Mitchell Institute that he realized, "there was a lot more to college than what I just, you know, took at face value." He was accepted into three colleges and decided to attend the University of Maine.

Moving through. Although Eugene was late to the college game, only considering it at the start of his senior year, he did not waste any time making the most of his university experience. He joined a fraternity, was the president of a campus organization that had a $100K budget, and managed a profitable student investment portfolio as a business major. He credited understanding what college could do for him to the Mitchell Institute. He stated:

> I think the Mitchell Institute has done a lot. I mean I could definitely be here today without the Mitchell Institute, but would not be nearly as successful. For all I know, I would have dropped out because I had no motivation about school.

He fondly remembered a conversation with one Mitchell Institute staff member the summer before entering college that made him realize he could do anything he wanted in college. He stated:

> Probably the biggest gift they've [Mitchell Institute] given me, is realizing that my background is pretty much irrelevant and that I can do whatever I want, and that actually it's probably an advantage, because given the stressful stuff I've been through, I have situations that stress other students out to the point of nearly breaking, don't even phase me.

Eugene used the stress he experienced in his past to drive him through the difficult times in college, though his college experience was not as difficult as his childhood. He described feeling confident about what he could achieve in college and beyond.

Moving out. Two years after graduating from the University of Maine, Eugene continued in the full-time legal consultant job he obtained after interning for the company in the summer before his senior year. He was able to intern due to the Mitchell Institute fellowship, which paid for living expenses in the city where he had to relocate for the summer internship. After that summer, the company wanted him to continue working during the academic year in their smaller office that is closer to the university. The firm eventually offered him a full-time position during his senior year. Eugene is content with his job yet yearns for more financial independence so he can do work he is more passionate about even if it pays less. Overall, Eugene was proud of what he had been able to accomplish given the challenging background he came from.

Jim

Jim moved around constantly throughout his childhood and was in and out of Department of Health and Human Services protective custody, often separated from his siblings. His father was alcohol dependent and his mother had mental health issues after she suffered a series of personal losses including the death of an infant child. Around 6th grade, the state placed Jim with an aunt and her partner. This was a good situation for Jim. However, his parents got back together and requested custody of him. He moved back in with his parents; soon his father left and his mom was not able to afford the apartment. They got evicted numerous times and ended up staying in motels in different towns so he was unable to attend school regularly. He explained:

> So, we got kicked out of that house and then we went to [another town] and we stayed at [Meadows] Inn for like two weeks. Actually, a week and a half I want to say. And at that time, I'm still not in school. It's been about two, three weeks and I am not in school. So…we're there for a week and a half and they kick us out of there and we go to the, um, [Old Time] Inn. That's the last place I'm at with my mom. We're there, I finally get enrolled in school.

After his mother was reported to DHHS again, he was placed in the custody of his aunts and he was enrolled in a school in their town near the reservation where they live. By the spring of his first year of high school, he was enrolled in three different schools and missed over a month of school. His Dad stopped drinking and convinced his aunts to let Jim move back in with him. Jim left his aunts and enrolled in another school. During that summer, his father began drinking again and the courts got involved. Jim's aunts were finally granted permanent custody, but Jim's sister had to stay in foster care. He explained:

> I got to live with my aunt on reservation, and I know a lot of people there, and [my sister is] still in [another town]. She doesn't get any part of her culture, or her heritage, she's always up there. So I feel sort of bad, but at the same time, it was probably in both of our best interests.

Once permanently settled with his aunts, he worked with the school counselors to recoup his credits from the other schools and got back on track academically. He graduated as the salutatorian of his class. He participated in Upward Bound before entering college to help him prepare for the expectations of college. He stated:

> I did the Upward Bound program for three years and that was one of the greatest things I've ever done. I wanted something that prepped me for college, and it was like going away to college, just slightly more rules cause you're still in high school.

Jim enrolled in a small public four-year university in Northern Maine and planned to join the baseball team.

Moving through. Jim enrolled in a public four-year regional campus that was part of the University of Maine system for his first year, but at the time of the first interview, he had started his second year at UMaine, where he transferred due to a difficult transition his first year. He explained:

> I didn't think I would ever be homesick in my life. But not seeing my family really affected me. And being three hours away and on, like I get a hundred and fifty dollars a month from the tribe, so I live off of that stipend for gas and everything.

Jim struggled with the larger campus size at the University of Maine and connecting with other students, but was happy to be closer to his friends and aunts. He had participated in only one Mitchell Institute event, but was interested in attending the next MILE. He said, "But I don't really do many of the events. But now that I'm closer… I'll probably be more apt to going on more events. I didn't want to drive like, three, four hours." However, he also mentioned his car needing costly maintenance, which he did not have the money to fix since he did not work and lived off his tribe's stipend. Although it was still early in his first semester at UMaine, he was not yet socially integrated on campus.

Moving out. Jim was interviewed again during his senior year. He was on-track to graduate in May even though he had to take a year off from college due to his low academic performance. He became unmotivated to attend his classes, so he stopped going. He was put on academic probation and had to take community college classes to earn his way back into UMaine. At the time of this research, he enjoyed working as a line cook at a restaurant. A few of his friends worked there and he was planning to move in with them after graduation, but knew he could also return to his aunts' house. He will graduate with a degree in political science and hopes to attend law school so he can advocate for Native rights. He had not applied to any law schools or engaged with pre-law advising, but planned to work for a bit before pursuing that career.

Karmen

Karmen grew up in Southern Maine and was abandoned by her mother in high school. Her father lived out of state after her parents spilt up when she was young, and he did not have the financial means to support her. She explained:

> I was 15 and she [my mother] told me she was done being a parent and I had to be my own adult and so I started paying for my own groceries and I paid part of the rent. My other sister was doing the same…So the end of my junior year, so I was 16 or so, she told me that she was moving and I wasn't invited.

Karmen continued to live with her older sister and they paid their own rent, but eventually she realized it was not a positive environment for her and moved in with a friend's family that provided meals and a place to live rent-free. She participated in sports in high school and took Advanced Placement courses. Karmen relied on her homeless liaison and guidance counselor in high school for motivation and knowledge to apply to

college. She selected a private four-year college that specialized in marine sciences, which was her preferred major. Her grandmother, dad, and sister helped her move into her dorm.

Moving through. Karmen quickly realized that not all college students had to be as independent as she was. However, she believed this experience was an asset to her transition to college. She stated, "I've kind of lived on my own for a while now. I moved out of or left my house at 15. So, I've been already kind of doing my own thing and living on my own, so that wasn't too difficult." However, paying her own way through college was her biggest challenge. She is responsible for $10-12,000 per year out of pocket for which she did not take out loans. She worked 40-50 hours per week during the academic year to be able to pay this bill. She explained:

> I also realize that I have a lot more on my plate now and college isn't necessarily the same as high school. I work 40 to 50 hours a week on top of my full schedule, so I don't get as much time to study, but I still am performing at a decent level. So I'm not dissatisfied with it, but I would wish it would be higher….I am the nighttime supervisor, so it's a real job. It's not a hard job, but it's pretty stressful. I work 3 to 11pm five to six nights a week.

Even though she had to sacrifice her academics, she was still able to enjoy her classes. When she encountered unexpected financial hurdles, she relied on the Mitchell Institute's Promise Fund. She remembered, "At the beginning of last year, my laptop completely crashed and I just wasn't ready financially for my books. So, the Promise Fund helped me out a lot." Everything she made working went toward her out of pocket tuition costs having no financial support from her family. A small setback could mean she did not

have the money to enroll the following semester. She continued, “So I’ve never felt like I didn’t really belong socially or academically, but financially sometimes I’ve thought like maybe it wasn’t my best choice.” At times, Karmen questioned if she made the right decision attending the college she did because she was sacrificing so much to pay the tuition.

Moving out. Karmen graduated in 2018 with a degree in marine science and a minor in chemistry. After graduation, she initially accepted a job at a laboratory in Maine as an organic chemist. She worked there for a few months, but learned over that summer that she was accepted into a marine science fellowship program. Although it was a pay cut, they provided her room and board and she got to work in the field for which she was truly passionate. She made the decision to move across the country and intern as a Marine Science educator. She talked through how this position might help her future with the Mitchell Institute and her family. Since she originally wanted to go to graduate school, her family pushed her to pursue that option. However, the Mitchell Institute explained that this would give her valuable experience that graduate schools would appreciate. She reported making connections with professors conducting research in the field and hoped these relationships would result in a funded Master’s degree program.

Ken

Ken was raised in a small town in Southern Maine in an abusive and impoverished home. His father was incarcerated multiple times during his childhood, and his parents eventually divorced. His family received SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits, and they would have to live with friends or neighbors on occasion when their power was disconnected. To help support his family, he worked starting at age 14 as a dishwasher at the restaurant where his mother was employed.

Despite these challenges, he was a leader in his high school. He was president of a diversity club and formed a card club, in addition to participating in community service. He was motivated to attend college because he did not want to live the same life his parents had. He stated, "I didn't want to live fearing if my lights would be on, if I could support the people around me, or how I wound up in jail for drinking too much and breaking probation...Just too stressful." His decision about which to college attend was purely financial. He had hoped he could attend a small private environmentally-focused liberal arts college, but he stated:

> I would have to pay 10 grand a year. I said, "No thank you." UMaine, this was before I received you guys' scholarship, I would have to pay a grand a year, I said, "No." Here, it was free... So it was based on price; however, I think I'm getting the same education. Maybe not exactly what I wanted to a T; however, still a major I'm going to use for my job in the future.

Ken decided on a smaller regional campus of University of Maine and had some challenges as he transitioned to a college four hours away from his home in southern Maine without a car or public transportation options.

Moving through. Ken made ends meet in college due to the scholarships and financial aid packages he received, and he had very few out of pocket costs. One unexpected cost was laundry. He discussed, "I don't know how they do it at other schools, but they charge for washing your clothes and drying them. So, it's really tough some weeks getting the money for it. However, my family has helped out a little bit by depositing like $10 into my bank account." He made friends and joined clubs with other "computer geeks" like himself. He also described his experience at MILE III the summer

before he attended college. He stated, “I made some amazing friends on that trip, got some good sunburns. I’d say overall, it’s definitely one of the more prominent experiences of my life.” Although there were not any Mitchell Scholars he knew on his campus, he felt that he had made social connections. He was comfortable asking professors for help and often attended their office hours and tutoring sessions. He was currently looking for a work-study job and was hoping to work about 15 hours per week to have extra spending money to pay for his board game habit and laundry.

Moving out. At the time of my interview, Ken should have been in his final semester graduating with a biology degree; however, he had decided to participate in a study aboard program in the fall to complete the elective credits he needed to graduate. To pay for one additional semester, he planned to get support from financial aid and apply for a Mitchell Institute fellowship of $1,500 to cover travel costs. He also applied for the same internship he participated in the prior summer that paid $5,000 and provided housing. He believed this experience would help him line up a job when he returned from Japan. He was hoping to work in a laboratory setting for a few years and gain some experience before applying to a Master’s programs in molecular biology or genetics.

When Ken needed support in college, he knew he would have to rely on the resources at his college or the Mitchell Institute. He stated, “My family…is very low income, so I never ask for money just because I know they need it. In fact, I usually try and send them money so that they can do things like keep the internet on or have gas for work and stuff.” Having a work-study award was beneficial for Ken in more ways than he expected. He stated:

> I'd say having to get a work study was… Honestly, a really good thing. Not just for the monetary benefits. I mean, they helped out a lot…. Having that income was immensely useful...but the connections I made along the way with it and the skills I learned and the things I could put on a resume right now are also extremely helpful.

Ken felt good about where he was in his college career and was looking forward to the future. He stated, "I'm getting to pursue a career that I feel will have a big impact. Not really just on my local community and me, but on humanity as a whole to a degree, you know. I wouldn't want anything more." Although Ken was not having the typical four-year college trajectory, extending his college experience by one semester allowed him to gain more cultural experiences and confidence in adapting to new environments.

Zane

Zane grew up on an island off the coast of Maine connected to the mainland by a bridge. Growing up in this small idyllic island community was not easy especially when his father was physically abusive and struggled with alcoholism and his mother found it difficult to keep a job in a tourist-dependent economy. In addition to his alcohol dependence, Zane's father was involved in criminal activity. Despite this, Zane was involved in school as a member of the band, choir, soccer, and track teams. Zane decided to move out of his parent's house his junior year in high school due to the abuse he was experiencing. He stated:

> My junior year was probably one of the worst years of my life, honestly. I just distanced myself from my parents so much. And just grew apart from them…my dad actually ended up getting drunk all the time and in the winter, he would come

> home drunk every night and just be verbally abusive and sometimes physically abusive.

After moving in with a more stable family, Zane was able to continue his success in high school, which led him to apply for colleges. He described his motivation to get to college:

> I came here [to college] to get an education so I can go out into the world someday and actually make a difference. I want to be able to provide for whoever I need to provide for and not have money be something that affects my life.

Although he felt economically supported until his junior year in high school, Zane watched his family's financial stability crash due to his father's addiction, which motivated him to choose a different path. He applied to three colleges with encouragement from his teachers, peers, and grandparents. He was accepted at all three, but he felt that UMaine based on cost was the only "realistic" option.

Moving through. Zane had many high school friends who also attended UMaine, which made his social transition relatively easy. However, the rigorous requirements of his engineering major made it difficult at times. He immediately became involved in club soccer and a jazz trio. He also considered joining a fraternity that he got a bid for recently, but needed to weigh the cost of the dues in addition to his other expenses. Zane talked of missing high school. He stated, "I've just been thinking a lot about the past and stuff like that, and I've been really missing home and just my senior year of high school, and just being back at high school because it was just so comfortable." However, Zane also knew that involvement in college would help him belong and let go of the past. He said, "I think I'll feel more, more like this is my home once I get involved with more

extracurricular things". He also noted that his relationship with the Mitchell Institute and connecting with other Promise Scholars on the MILE III trip was helpful. He explained:

> I feel like if I ever needed anything, like I've talked to the Mitchell Institute a few times about struggles I thought I may have had or I thought I may have needed help, and they've always been there for me whenever I needed to talk to someone.

He also mentioned that two of the scholars he met during the summer were in the fraternity he was most likely going to join. Overall, Zane's transition into college was relatively smooth and he used the strategy of getting involved to overcome the initial challenges.

Moving out. At the time of my research, Zane was in his final semester of college at UMaine, was a member of a fraternity on campus, and worked part-time as a dishwasher. He had recently accepted a full-time engineering job at a firm in Portland, Maine. Coming off a challenging senior fall semester academically and socially, Zane was feeling hopeful because his spring course load was lighter and he already had a full-time job lined up after graduation. Zane met his future employer at a fundraising event hosted by the Mitchell Institute. He said, "I don't think I could do much better than what I have right now. Yeah, no, I'm pretty much just like where I want to be at this point." His transition both into and out of college was supported by being a Promise Scholar, and he continued to maintain a close parent-like relationship with a Mitchell Institute staff member. He planned to get an apartment in Portland with another fraternity brother and start his career in June.

Summary of Narratives

Although the level of trauma, poverty, and abuse varies for each Promise Scholar, it is clear that all the Promise Scholars faced extreme and harmful circumstances in their childhoods, which continued through college for some. Jack, Elaine, Karmen, Jim, and Zane needed to emancipate themselves from their families, live with other family members or friends in order to continue on their journey to higher education. Without resources from their high schools and support from other adults, their trajectories could have been very different. In addition, the Promise Scholars' personal resilience and ability to overcome hardships should be recognized and commended. When they applied for the Mitchell Scholarship, the students and the adults supporting them were keenly aware of how they needed personal and financial resources to make college attendance possible. The forms of capital that influence inequality in society are economic, social, and cultural (Bourdieu, 2002). For the Promise Scholars who come from backgrounds that provide different forms of capital than what is offered in a middle-class household, school is supposed to be a place where they can enhance the capital required to excel in higher education. Yet given their demographics and traumatizing experiences, gaining all the capital needed to succeed in college during their K-12 school experience is unlikely especially considering the lack of economic stability, which often resulted in gaps in their school attendance. Thus, examining whether or not the three forms of capital provided by the Promise Scholarship are able to support the students effectively as they transition into a new environment aids in understanding how to reduce educational inequality. In the following sections, the themes developed from the Promise Scholars' narratives are explained.

The Importance of Economic Capital

Economic capital is the most critical form of capital for at-promise scholars' college enrollment and completion. The concept of capital is part of the three conceptual categories of social reproduction developed by Pierre Bourdieu (2002). Economic capital is defined as the financial resources one has access to in order to gain status and power in society. The amount of economic capital one has is typically the result of improved social and cultural status. As highlighted in the stories of Julie, Nick, and Jack, the scholars all experienced financial hardships especially prior to entering college. Some were homeless and faced food insecurity, while others were living independently by the time they finished high school. Without financial support from scholarships and grants, most may not have been able to attend college. Nick explained:

> I think by the time I was going to college, we were already accustomed to the fact that it's on us. Eugene was going to college by himself paying for it himself, I'll be doing the same thing. So pretty much just apply for scholarships and try to get grants and work study and work hard and take loans if you have to.

Once admitted and enrolled in college, Promise Scholars' attention during college was split between meeting their basic needs while making their finances work, achieving academically, and, if they had time, engaging socially. Though the Promise Scholars have the ability to support themselves financially during college, having additional resources to fall back on is critical to continuing with their studies in hardship situations. In Jack's case, working so much to be able to afford college caused him to stop in his degree progress. Maintaining enough economic capital to stay enrolled each semester was critical to these students' ability to stay in college.

Moving Through College

The economic capital that Promise Scholars need to transition to college and persist during college is the most prominent theme. All of the Promise Scholars had unexpected financial hurdles in their first years of college outside of the regular tuition and fees required to attend. From car maintenance and computer malfunctions to medical bills and books, there were numerous financial barriers that created significant amounts of stress and worry for the Promise Scholars as they entered college for the first time. This stress carried into their academic and social existence on campus. Jack was hospitalized for exhaustion and dehydration due to working 30 or more hours per week and being a full-time student. The pressure to pay for his classes and finish a degree in three years to avoid paying for a fourth year ultimately led to a medical withdrawal and a semester away from school for him. Without the school's refund of his pre-payment for a travel course in the spring, Jack would have had to take on more student loans or more hours as a grocery supervisor to be able to pay his medical bills out of pocket. Elaine reflected on her economic challenges in her first weeks of college:

> I went into college with about $500 in savings and that was absolutely the only money I had from anywhere. I did not have parents that I was speaking to at the time, I did not have family I could stay with…[It was] really, really nerve wracking the first month of school looking for jobs….It made it very hard the first couple of years of college because I was working anywhere from two to three jobs and I was taking the max number of classes.

This scholar was grateful for the summer bridge program she participated in prior to starting college her first semester, which included a scholarship to pay for her books.

Otherwise, the $500 she had saved from working that summer would have been completely gone after buying books.

Since the Promise Scholars had little to no financial support from their parents, they most often relied on themselves and the wages they could earn through part-time employment to provide the necessities that student loans would not cover. In addition, the Mitchell Institute's support via an emergency fund to overcome financial barriers was critical when they had no other way to earn more money when unexpected costs arose. All of the Promise Scholars interviewed accessed the emergency fund at least once throughout college (Table 2). They also received financial support from grandparents, friends, and extended family though this was often a last resort. The Promise Scholars were unlikely to ask their parents for money because most often they knew they would not have any to give. A few reported sending money to their parents and siblings while they were in college to help pay the bills. They did this knowing that their parents were unlikely to pay them back. The strategy Promise Scholars most often employed to overcome the financial challenges was to work more and focus on classes so they would not have to spend money on social activities with peers. They also contacted the Mitchell Institute when they needed more money than what they could earn through their job. Scholars were often surprised at how easy the process was. Julie said:

> [The Mitchell Institute] helped me with my down payment for my car, which was really, really helpful, and it actually took a lot of me to ask for help, because I don't like asking people for help, but I messaged [MI staff member] and she called me the next day and she didn't even hesitate in saying they'll help. It was nice knowing that, if I needed help, that they'd be there... I didn't have to go

> through a really long process of asking and I didn't have to go through a bunch of different phases.

For many of the Promise Scholars the Mitchell Institute was the only place to turn to for financial support when unexpected expenses emerged. The Promise Scholars lived semester to semester and relied on checks from their scholarships and part- or full-time jobs to meet their living expenses during college. When Promise Scholars faced challenges with financial services in college, they relied on the knowledge base of the Mitchell Institute staff. For example, when Karmen was completing her FAFSA she had no parents supporting her application process, and her university would not accept her independent status after her first year when she had her high school homeless liaison vouch for her. She explained:

> I had written appeal papers. I had gone through every person in the financial department, and there was just no budging. No one was going to give me anything. And so, when [MI contact] had printed off, this is what they can ask for, this is what they can't ask for, this is what they should be doing, and she just wrote it all out. She talked to some of the financial aid people specifically. She had me say certain things. And that just significantly helped me. Because if it wasn't for that, I literally couldn't be here right now. So I think that was probably the biggest help for me.

Jim also reported issues with how financial aid was distributed at UMaine when he was asked to pay back money the university had already issued to him for the cost of books. He said:

> Yeah, even though I shouldn't owe anything because I'm supposed to go to college for free. I'm being penalized for extra money cause by getting those five days after the fact they realized, oh you had a five-hundred-dollar book scholarship, we need to charge you because you can't go over your cost of attendance. So, and I have no way to pay for that.

Without the support of people knowledgeable about the financial aid and FAFSA system, Karmen and Jim would have had to come up with more money out of pocket to pay their tuition expenses. The Promise Scholar's access to staff that is knowledgeable about working within financial aid systems is a valuable resource that supports the scholars' transitions.

Table 2

Promise Scholar engagement with Mitchell Institute

Name	**Attended (MILE I, II, or III)**	**Promise Fund Use**	**Fellowship Use**	**Obtained job/internship through Mitchell Institute connection**	**Involvement as alumni planned**
Elaine	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Eugene	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Jack	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Jim	No	Yes	No	No	No
Julie	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Karmen	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ken	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nick	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Zane	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Moving Out of College

Working during college was often a priority over academic work for these scholars. However, when it came to searching for jobs and managing adult life after college, having a job in college prepared Promise Scholars well. Promise Scholars felt that their resumes were stronger than other students who did not have work experience upon which to draw. In addition, they already had the experience of being on their own and managing their bills, housing situations, and other expenses so this was not viewed as a stressful transition like going to college was. For Karmen, having only one job after college seemed easier:

> I have worked all through college. I had held down a full-time job, even a second job. So, I worked all throughout college to pay for it. So, it was less hard to just start working. It was a little weird because I had more time almost than when I was in college, because in college I had a full-time job and classes and now I just have a full-time job.

Surprisingly, most of the Promise Scholars were not concerned with paying back their college debt. Most had federal loans, and none had private loans. If it had not been for the Mitchell Scholarship and other scholarships they received through their communities or colleges, the scholars would have been in more debt. This lightened their financial burden enough for them to feel that their loan payments were manageable. Ken stated:

> Thankfully, when it came to paying for the bill, I've always had an easy time with it. Between the Horatio Alger Scholarship and the George Mitchell Scholarship and the financial aid I received from the government, I am able to pay my bill

every semester. …I'm graduating with relatively low debt for what most people get, and I'm very, very thankful and grateful for that.

However, their debt did influence their career decisions and job applications. In some cases, the scholars expressed a desire to work in non-profit, government, and education-related fields. However, because these jobs did not pay as well, in their opinion, they ultimately chose a different path. Eugene explained:

> I certainly want to find a job where I can work towards issues that I actually care about, versus kind of what I do now…I just feel like there's not a ton of passion for what I do within myself. If there were no barriers to that I would be doing them, you know, but often those things don't pay so and that's something that I need to be cognizant of.

A strategy often implemented was to stay in Maine because the cost of moving to another area was perceived as out of reach. For some Promise Scholars, starting at a job close to family and where they went to school would allow the Promise Scholars to save money to be able to make a bigger move later in their career should the opportunity arise. In one instance, a better paying position was offered to a Promise Scholar, but she decided to remain close to her family. The Promise Scholars seem fairly risk averse regarding career decision making opting to preference financial stability to career advancement, increase in salary, or personal satisfaction.

Social Capital Gained Through Mitchell Institute Engagement

The network of relationships by virtue of membership in specific social group defines social capital (Portes, 1998). Social capital increased through engagement with the Mitchell Institute thus improving the transition into and out of college for the Promise

Scholars. Receiving the scholarship increased the Promise Scholars' social networks. Due to severed relationships with family members and other family instability, many Promise Scholars did not have a social network that would enable them to improve their circumstances. Schlossberg and colleagues contended that moving through a transition requires taking stock of coping resources and then using or strengthening those resources (1995). The Mitchell Institute was able to strengthen the Promise Scholar's social resources. Julie, Nick, and Jack were able to gain social capital through their participation in the Mitchell Institute's leadership experiences and fellowships. The Promise Scholars who were more engaged in the programming had better outcomes during and after college due to the increased social connections and career networks.

Moving Through College

Promise Scholars who built social capital in the early years of college improved their college experiences. Those who were involved in campus activities and social groups early in their college experience had an easier transition. However, joining groups and activities was not always a realistic possibility with work schedules outside of class time. Scholars often connected with other students in their dorms or at Mitchell Institute events. The social support from peers within their major courses also built social connections for the Promise Scholars. Some of the social connections made at the early Mitchell Institute events lasted throughout college. The relationships built with other Mitchell Scholars served them well as they were learning to navigate the institutional culture on their campus when difficulties arose. There was a fraternity on one campus that many Mitchell Scholars joined over the years. The fraternity brothers would make an effort to recruit other Mitchell Scholars. Eugene, Nick, and Zane were all members of

this fraternity. These connections were invaluable for Nick who broke up with his girlfriend and did not have his name on the lease. He started the semester without a place to live:

> I moved out…I slept in my friend's dorm for like two weeks and then I moved into [Fraternity house] because my brother was the president. Um, so like, I was kind of like bouncing around had just moved all my stuff like right as a semester was starting…we were like three or four weeks into the semester.

Promise Scholars were more likely to turn to their peers and the Mitchell Institute when challenges arose because they did not feel that their families were able to understand the academic and social dynamics of a college experience. Jim discussed how his parents were not able to support him:

> My dad is homeless and my mom…tries to like almost reach out to me every day, every day. I pay attention to her. Just because….She's just aggravating, yeah. Now, I love, my mom... She's still my mom, but I can't worry about it.

Socially, Jim's parents could not support him because they were in difficult circumstances themselves. Jim also discussed how he got his current job as a line cook through one of his friends. Karmen explained how her family did not understand that college was not just about classes, but also social opportunities. She said:

> It's hard being the odd one out because I'm constantly busy, and I have things going on, or there's just things I can't skip or things that I'm doing. I just applied for an internship with NASA. And things like that are just completely out of the realm of my family's mind. And it's hard because sometimes I have to miss things that are just not as important as what's going on here, and sometimes they

really don't understand that. So it's difficult taking a different path than everyone, but I'm obviously glad that I am doing that.

Zane was able to find an internship during college through one of his fraternity brothers, and Nick became involved in a student organization through the encouragement of an older fraternity brother. Nick stated:

> My freshman year when I got involved in student [life], the President of Student [Organization] was a guy named [Peter]. And he invited me to go to an international student association coffee hour... So we went to that and we represented Student [Organization], and he kind of like planted the seed in my mind…but jumping back up a little further. I really wanted to do [student organization leadership] because I never got to do it in high school because it was a popularity contest and I wasn't…you know, one of the rich kids…So I figured when I came to college like no one really knows who I am. This is 10,000 students. You know, now's my chance.

For Nick, seeing another student he knew through his fraternity become involved gave him more confidence to do something in college he did not feel he could do in high school. Gradually, Nick worked his way up through the student organization. The experiences he gained interacting with the Mitchell Institute and mentors in his fraternity were critical in expanding his social capital during college. Nick believed encouragement from both social networks helped him attain his goals. He stated:

> Actually, after a phone call with [MI staff member].…I remember sitting in a stairwell and just kind of thinking like… I'm getting a little traction here in college. I think that either sophomore year, I'm going to have an executive

> position in a student [organization] and by my junior or senior year, I'm going to be president because I saw him [a fraternity brother who was president] ... So, he has become like one of my top role models and I decided that I wanted to try to emulate that as much as possible.

Turning to the Mitchell Institute and his fraternity brothers for advice and support contributed to Nick's success; his junior year he was elected to vice president, and when I interview him senior year he was serving as president of a prominent student organization. The Promise Scholars who utilized the social capital facilitated by the Mitchell Institute and the peer networks available on their campuses had less difficulty adjusting to their new environment.

Moving Out of College

The Promise Scholars who built robust social connections while in college most often did so through student groups, professors, academic advisors, and the Mitchell Institute. These social networks were critical in lining up job opportunities during and after college. The Promise Scholars were more likely to stay in Maine after college because their family and social networks were in Maine. Jack was averse to moving outside the area that he is currently in to find a job more related to his Biology degree. He described his current job search, "I've been looking but there's really nothing available right now…I mean, there's a couple jobs available, but they're all towards Southern Maine and I'm just not prepared to move yet." Only one Promise Scholar, Karmen, was not currently working in Maine, and she discussed the desire to return at some point in her professional career. The Mitchell Institute groomed the Promise Scholars throughout

college to understand the value of social connections that were utilized to secure a professional job. Eugene explained:

> I think the Mitchell Institute really got me thinking about those things earlier than I would have way earlier than I would have otherwise and way earlier than most students do at [Maine]. And I think that served me really well because I was practiced. By the end of my college years, I was practiced and prepared…for dealing with those things that you have to do to find a job.

Although Julie did rely on her family connections to get a job in her field, most of the scholars used connections through the Mitchell Institute, college peers, or other campus organizations. Promise Scholars reported that the Mitchell Institute played an important role in their career planning process. The Mitchell Institute supported six Promise Scholars in obtaining a full-time job or internship that related to their major. Zane obtained his full-time job as an engineer through a Mitchell Institute fundraising event. Zane reported:

> It was kind of weird…the way it worked out actually….I sat down next to him and I was like, you know, my name is Zane. And he was like, my name is so and so. And I'm the CEO of this company... And then we started talking about like, what the company did and everything and I was like, wow, that kind of aligns with exactly what I want to do.

After this meeting, the employer invited Zane to attend a career fair on campus at which the company was recruiting. The day before the career fair, Zane found a job offer letter in his email inbox with a note from the employer hoping to discuss it while she was on

campus for the career fair. Zane described contacting a staff member at the Mitchell Institute to share his exciting news:

> As soon as I got the email, I just like, texted [MI staff member]. I was like, I don't know if you're busy right now so I'm not going to call you, but I got a job offer and then she called me back and we were crying and everything and it was pretty heartfelt.

Through the Mitchell Institute's social network, Zane was able to meet this employer. Zane's experiences and persistence earned him the job offer, and the Mitchell Institute facilitated the process and prepared Zane for the experience.

In addition to social support from the Mitchell Institute, Promise Scholars' family networks also provided moral support after college. Although Ken felt some guilt having to depend on his family for a time after college, he knew he had his mother to help if needed. He said:

> As much as I don't want to be more of a burden on my mom, I'll probably have to live with her for a little bit. I'd obviously help out around the house and try and get a job to help pay for stuff, but that is something I'd have to do, at least for a couple months until we can figure out the apartment thing with my friends.

He knew he could go back to the restaurant that employed his mother and where he used to work if he was unable to find a job right away. The opportunities that arose for the Promise Scholars who graduated from college were different from what their parents had experienced. When he told his parents about his engineering job offer, Zane explained, "They didn't really like give me much like advice about it, I guess. I mean, I don't know as far as like, applying to jobs or anything. I've kind of just been doing it all my own as it

is.” Zane’s parents were proud of his ability to secure a job in his field, but were not able to support how he should approach this new environment.

The confidence that the Promise Scholars had in applying for jobs and understanding the process was supported by the Mitchell Institute’s social network and programming. Elaine remembers advice from the MILE II event that helped her feel more confident in job interviews. She recalled the advice:

> When you go to a job interview, you were interviewing them just as much as they are interviewing you. And I think every time I go into a job interview, and I find that much calmer because of it, and I do much better, because being able to remember that it's not just me being scrutinized here. I'm trying to decide just as much if I'm a good fit here as they are.

The Mitchell Institute is able to connect their scholars to people knowledgeable about how to approach a professional interview and prepare them for that experience. For Promise Scholars like Jim who did not engage with the Mitchell Institute programming, relying on family for support was most common, yet not effective. He stated, “My mom used to joke all the time that I'd make a good lawyer... There is no one really directly involved with my planning…maybe my aunts they are like you can do whatever you want.” Jim discussed wanting to become a lawyer throughout the interview, but had no clear plan to apply to law school or register for the LSAT. The Promise Scholars who engaged with the Mitchell Institute experienced more success in the job market due to the boarder range of their social network and career knowledge.

Cultural Capital, Leadership Development, and Aspirations

Cultural capital is specialized knowledge that is learned through interactions with social groups with similar habits and ideals (Berger, 2000; Bourdieu, 2002). Based on the trauma, mental health struggles, and substance use disorders the Promise Scholars were exposed to throughout their childhood, they were gaining cultural knowledge that is different from other students. Their attitudes towards education and beliefs about how to succeed in the world were affected. Cultural capital is the set of attitudes and behaviors that are learned through being exposed to specific social groups and differs along social class lines (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Limited exposure to the cultural norms of higher education influenced their college experience. However, selection as a Mitchell Scholar supplements this needed cultural capital because it is a prestigious recognition in the state of Maine. The Promise Scholars in this study acquired cultural capital to navigate their college transitions through engagement with the Mitchell Institute. This recognition bolstered their confidence and status on campus. Mitchell Institute staff served as resources to help the Promise Scholars understand the culture of higher education that was largely unfamiliar to the scholars. The Mitchell Institute influences aspirational and leadership development, yet Promise Scholars rely on cultural capital gained in their home environments to transition effectively.

Moving Through College

The Promise Scholars did not know what to expect transitioning to college because in their immediate families the experience was unknown. For most Promise Scholars, visiting colleges on class trips, seeking advice from high school teachers and counselors, participating in Upward Bound programs, and taking advanced placement courses were the modes of accessing the cultural knowledge of higher education. Many

of the Promise Scholars were in advanced courses with high school peers who aspired to college and realized that if their peers could do it so could they. College was encouraged for all of Promise Scholars, but they did not always know if going would actually happen because of all hardships they would face. Karmen explained:

> So, everyone accepted that it was okay if I didn't [to go college], and it was something that was going to be really difficult for me, and that was never a secret. Everyone knew, but everyone generally encouraged it and knew it was a good idea. Even if it was going to be hard. So it was never talked about in a bad way, like I shouldn't go, but everyone accepted that if I didn't want to go, I didn't have to go.

Although Karmen did not have the cultural capital from her family, she was able to build that capital in high school working with her homeless liaison and guidance counselor. Once recognized as a Mitchell Promise Scholar as a senior in high school, the students gained confidence that they had potential and that others believed in their ability to achieve. Elaine described how she felt when she was named a Promise Scholar:

> It was a really good thing because it was a lot of validation that I could do college (crying). Sorry, I had been living alone at that point and didn't have a whole lot of support. So, it meant a lot that someone thought not only that I could do it, but that I would do well and cared enough about that too.

She also discussed how her involvement in Upward Bound built aspirational capital. Elaine recalled:

> But, as I was with Upward Bound more and they kind of explained that there are other ways to pay for college and that there are a lot of resources out there, it

> started to become a more tangible thing, and eventually at some point, I got to the point where it stopped being a, if I go to college, and it became when I go to college. And I'm not entirely sure where that happened.

For Promise Scholars, explicit instruction on how to apply to college in addition to the resources and supports available made college a more attainable goal. Once they realized attending was in their reach, having mentors and programs believing they would succeed was critical.

Many of the scholars noted that the Mitchell Institute Leadership Experiences (MILE I, II, and III) had the most impact in building their confidence to succeed during college and guiding them on how to approach their college experience. Zane explained:

> They [the Mitchell Institute] kind of just talk to you about college and pretty much like get you geared it up for it, which was very nice. Um, because before going, you know, that as freshman in college you don't really know what to expect at all, unless you have, you know, siblings or parents that went to college before you but that wasn't the case for me.

During these leadership experiences, the Promise Scholars learned to step outside of their comfort zones and that, regardless of their backgrounds, they could achieve success in higher education. Jack recalled, "I really liked the MILE III event. That was a lot of fun. Granted, it would've been more fun if I had known any of those people. I was not as thrilled during the event, just because the strangers." Although Jack was uncomfortable at first, the MILE III experience helped him push through his social anxiety in a safe environment prior to attending university. Julie explained what she had taken away from the Mitchell Institute's events. She stated, "I've learned that sometimes it's good to get

out of your comfort zone. Sometimes you need to take risks and do things you would never do before."

In addition to their own programming, the Mitchell Institute encouraged the Promise Scholars to participate in community events that would expand their skills as leaders. Zane discussed how he was invited by the Mitchell Institute to speak at a Maine educator's conference. He stated:

> There was a bunch of teachers there from universities and high schools …all around the state, and [MI staff member] invited like four of us [Mitchell Scholars] from the districts… we just went in there and kind of like, just talked about our experiences and whatnot to like 75 people…And it was actually quite a cool experience.

Here, Zane learned not only how to speak in front of a large group of people, but also how to navigate the culture of a professional conference. The Mitchell Institute encourages the Promise Scholars to participate in valuable campus events as well. Julie discusses a conversation she had with a staff member:

> [MI staff] and I were also talking about the lab internship. And so I was thinking of applying there. We have a career fair coming up in a couple weeks, and they'll be there, so I was thinking of talking to the [lab] rep.

With encouragement from Mitchell Institute staff, Julie attended the career fair and secured an internship with the lab that summer. The Mitchell Institute created opportunities for Promise Scholars to access environments that were previously unfamiliar to the scholars.

The Mitchell Institute also served as a sounding board for Promise Scholars during college. Building from the trust that was established during the leadership experiences, the Promise Scholars learned that reaching out was not looked down upon but encouraged. The Promise Scholars acknowledged that knowing the Mitchell Institute staff would check on them throughout college was helpful. Even if the Promise Scholars did not always respond, they acknowledged having the resource of someone who knew what college was about was important. Jim explained:

> [MI staff member] and I talk from time to time, and that's nice, to have someone who checks up on you, that's for sure. But I don't really do many of the events. But now that I'm closer… I'll probably be more apt to going on more events.

Although Jim had attended only the Welcome Brunch, he hoped transferring to UMaine which was closer to events than his previous university would improve his engagement. When issues like deciding on a major or understanding how to use a syllabus arose, the Mitchell Institute staff were a vital resource in helping the scholars approach the situation. Zane explained how the Mitchell Institute helped him stay the course in a challenging major:

> I don't know what I want to do right now. And I talked to actually [Mitchell Institute staff member] a decent amount about it. I don't really know if I want to do this anymore. Like, the classes honestly just kind of suck right now. Like, I'm just taking a lot of kind of Gen Ed like calculus and physics for like engineering….but I just don't know it's me. And I was actually thinking about switching to education…she was pretty much like 'Zane, you should really like, you know, finish your classes at least this semester and go from there.' Because I

> think she was definitely like, you should try and stick with engineering. This is a super good field.

The Mitchell Institute staff encouraged Zane to stay the course with a difficult course load. Zane may not have had access to the knowledge that it is common for engineering coursework to be difficult at first and he may have decided to take an easier path. The Mitchell Institute was able to translate the messages often sent in higher education into actions and advice that the Promise Scholars could understand and use.

Moving Out of College

For most of the Promise Scholars, knowing that someone was checking on them and cared about how they were doing served as motivation as they approached their transition out of college. They all felt comfortable reaching out to the Mitchell Institute if needed, but most were managing or managed their job search processes independently. Although the aspirations to complete college were primarily self-driven, the recognition as a Promise Scholar increased their motivation to make it to graduation. Many Promise Scholars felt as though they could not let the organization that had invested so much in them down. Ken explained:

> They [Mitchell Institute] really let me actually achieve my dream of going to college in the first place. You know, without them, I don't know if I would have been able to afford coming here. And it's thanks to them that I was really able to pursue this….I didn't wanna let them down, you know, so I took that as something….I have people counting on me and people, you know, putting their hopes into me to do. To do this [graduate from college]….I'm not going to let them down. I can't just do that to them.

Ken went on to discuss that his post-secondary options would have been living at home and going to a two-year college without the scholarships he received. He stated, “I think that would have impacted my life. And the turbulence in it... I think my life will be a lot different. And I wouldn't be as far as long as far along as I am now.” The scholars recognized that although their families wanted to help, they may not have been equipped with the knowledge to advise them in certain career situations. Karmen discussed how she engaged with the Mitchell Institute:

> I really value their advice. I would go and talk to them about the things that most people would talk to their parents about, whether it was about FASFA or applying for jobs or grad school. A lot of people would talk big decisions over with their families, and I didn't really have anyone there to do that with.

The knowledge and experiences in the college classroom and in the workforce that the Promise Scholars gained certainly helped, but the advice and expertise from the Mitchell Institute guided many of the Promise Scholars to professional success.

Many of the Promise Scholars explained how they wanted to earn a degree to do something good for others. Ken wanted to study genetics to slow the aging process; Jim hoped to advocate for Native American rights; Eugene was involved in city government to keep housing affordable in his community; Karmen was researching the impact of climate change. Elaine explained how she developed a passion for her major, psychology, because of the stigma surrounding mental health. She stated:

> Part of why I wanted to go in psychology is actually because I want to help to change that, because when people say it’s not their problem, it’s a load of crap, an absolute load of crap. And just seeing the way my parents grew up and kind of

how their lives turned out, because I can't ever imagine that they expected their lives to turn out the way they did…. And, I feel like going to school is kind of my way of breaking a pattern that has been there in my family for a while now.

Overall, the Promise Scholars were able to succeed in college. Despite facing tremendous challenges prior to college, most were able to transition into college with support from the Mitchell Institute and strategies they learned throughout their life. Though two of the scholars, Jim and Jack, had to take a year off from college, they both managed to re-enroll and were on track to finishing their degree. Moving into the workforce was less challenging for the Promise Scholars because they felt confident in their abilities and this is reinforced by their engagement with the Mitchell Institute.

Summary of Findings

The life experiences of the Promise Scholars, though riddled with abuse, neglect, and mental health issues, provide hope that, with the right supports, first-generation limited income students can persist to college and graduate. Eugene, Karmen, and Julie had great responsibilities placed on them at young ages and used this experience to help them transition to being independent in college. They were the only Promise Scholars to have earned their college degrees, and all three had careers established in the fields of their choice. All but one of the other scholars was on track to graduate during the semester they were interviewed. Ken planned to do an extra semester abroad to enhance his personal interests and career goals while completing his general education requirements. Zane and Jack both had full-time jobs secured after graduation. Elaine, Nick, and Jim were still searching for jobs, but did not seem distressed about the process. Through the combination of their personal strategies and skills, in addition to support

from college access programs, guidance counselors, teachers, and the Mitchell Institute, the Promise Scholars effectively transitioned into and out of college.

Although economic capital was the most prominent theme in the interviews, the growth of social and cultural capital throughout their college experience also emerged. For the Promise Scholars who could not always be involved in campus activities and groups due to working, the Mitchell Institute support was critical to their success especially in their more challenging times. It is not only the social network that the students gained access to as a Promise Scholar, but also the scaffolding provided by the Mitchell Institute to aid the scholars in understanding how to leverage that network for career and leadership building. Even with the support and resources from the Mitchell Institute, the Promise Scholars most certainly faced challenges personally and academically they had to navigate on their own. Their nimble and strategic use of campus support, peers, and reliable family members also contributed to their degree persistence. The three major conclusions I developed from these findings are: economic capital is the most critical for at-promise scholars' college enrollment and completion; social capital increases through engagement with the Mitchell Institute thus improving the transition into and out of college for the Promise Scholars; and, the Mitchell Institute promotes aspirational and leadership development, yet Promise Scholars rely on cultural capital from their home environments to transition effectively. In the final chapter, I present a discussion of these findings and implications for future research and policy reforms.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In this final chapter, I present a brief review of the purpose of the study followed by a discussion of the major conclusions drawn from this research. Additionally, I present implications for researchers, the Mitchell Institute, other scholarship programs with similar goals, and institutions of higher education who serve at-promise students.

Review of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how resources provided by the Mitchell Institute influence at-promise students' transition into college and the workforce. By conducting student interviews early in college and then again during their senior year or later, I contributed to ongoing efforts to improve degree attainment and career outcomes for all students, specifically those from limited resource backgrounds. Through this research, I engaged in a thorough evaluation of the programmatic supports provided by the Mitchell Institute and obtained a deeper understanding of what is most effective in supporting at-promise students in overcoming degree completion barriers.

Cultural knowledge of higher education is not able to be easily replaced in one college preparation program; however, researchers find most low-SES and first-generation students have the capacity to graduate (Demetriou, Meece, Eaker-Rich, & Powell, 2017; Rondini, Bedelia, & Simon, 2018). Although higher income students have had years of experience and grooming for succeeding in school contexts, lower income students have limited exposure and need more than finanical support to succeed in college (Stuber, 2009).

Students from first-generation backgrounds have a more challenging transition to college life for a variety of reasons, and the limited support they receive from higher education institutions is problematic (Bloom, 2008; Hinz, 2016; Rall, 2016). Although there are programs available for at-promise students to increase matriculation and retention, they are not always accessible for students with different cultural knowledge and values (Ballysingh, 2019b). In addition, it is difficult for researchers to determine what aspects of these programs have the greatest impact. In this dissertation, I sought to discern what resources are the most critical in easing the transitions for at-promise students. These questions guided the research:

1. How do social, economic, and cultural capital provided by the Mitchell Institute influence Promise Scholars' transition from high school to college?
2. How do social, economic, and cultural capital provided by the Mitchell Institute influence Promise Scholars' transition from college to the workforce or graduate school?

In the previous chapter, the narratives of the Promise Scholars were explored to answer these questions. The capital gained from the Mitchell Scholarship along with other factors influences the Promise Scholars' transitions in and out of both college as well as their access to social, economic, and cultural capital. I uncovered three major themes that led to the development of the findings. These themes were: (1) economic capital is most critical for at-promise scholars' college enrollment and completion; (2) social capital increases through engagement with the Mitchell Institute improved the transition into and out of college for the Promise Scholars; (3) the Mitchell Institute promotes aspirational and leadership development, yet Promise Scholars rely on cultural capital from home to

transition effectively. In the rest of this chapter, I interpret the significance and meaning of the themes within the context of previous scholarship. Finally, I expand upon the findings and provide implications for research, policy, and practice.

Discussion

This section provides a general overview of the key findings through further exploration of the data paired with an analysis. First, I answer the two major research questions using the data obtained in the interviews. Then, I present the three major conclusions in order of importance with complementary research to highlight the applications of these findings to the Mitchell Institute and organizations that hope to improve degree attainment for at-promise students.

The social, economic, and cultural capital gained from the Mitchell Institute influenced the Promise Scholar's transition into college in a variety of ways. The increased economic capital provided by the scholarship and the emergency fund allowed Promise Scholars to attend the colleges of their choice. For some scholars, a residential college experience would not have been possible without additional scholarships. For Karmen, she would not have been able to attend the private college that specialized in her current field. She stated:

> I wanted to go to [private college] and I'm proud and happy that I went to [private college], but I would not have been able to go had it not been for the scholarships that I got especially the Mitchell Institute... [private college] made all the difference. The Mitchell Institute scholarship and all my other scholarships made all the difference of me getting to where I wanted to go. Had I not, I wouldn't have gone to the school I wanted to.

Too often, lower income students apply to less selective schools even if they are academically qualified because of perceived affordability. Economic interventions can improve enrollment of low-income students in more selective colleges (Dynarski, Libassi, Michelmore, & Owen, 2018). In addition to the scholarship money, every Promise Scholar utilized the emergency fund called the Promise Fund. The Promise Fund was frequently accessed during the Promise Scholars' first year of college when the unexpected costs of books or a new laptop could have added more layers of difficulty to their college transition. Nick stated, "They [Mitchell Institute] definitely helped out a lot because I've gotten like Promise Funds twice and…. I got help with my truck. I got a laptop at the beginning of freshman year." Nick was still using this laptop to write his senior thesis at the time of the second interview. Overcoming the financial barriers to college attendance was the largest concern for Promise Scholars moving into college.

The MILE III leadership experience, designed specifically for Promise Scholars, is key in building social connections with other Mitchell Scholars in similar circumstances. All but two of the Promise Scholars in the study were able to participate in MILE III, and those who did not both participated in Upward Bound before college. Promise Scholars like Julie, Ken, Zane, and Jack discussed how this experience was meaningful and pushed them to understand how they could adapt to a new environment like college. Informal mentor groups led by older Promise Scholars fostered connections and confidence that succeeding in college is possible even if you are from a low socioeconomic background. Jack recalled, "I did that [MILE III] my first year, that was very helpful. I made some good friends who go to Maine now who I, you know, I'm able to say hi to them." Julie described her memorable experience on the ropes course:

> We did the ropes course, and I am terrified – terrified!...[MI staff member] said, "You don't have to do it, but you should try, but you don't have to if you don't want to." So I tried, and I got about halfway up the ladder and I started freaking out…. But [MI staff member] said how proud she was of me for trying, and it just made me feel a lot better.

Julie was able to build a trusting connection with a Mitchell Institute staff member in addition to conquering her own fears. Connecting socially with other Mitchell Scholars and Mitchell Institute staff played a role in influencing the at-promise students' positive transitions to college.

Socially, the Mitchell Institute influenced the Promise Scholars' transition into college largely through their signature events. All new Mitchell Scholars are invited to a Welcome Brunch the summer before entering college. At this event, all Mitchell Scholars are formally introduced to the elements of the scholarship program and the motto that it is "more than a scholarship." At the Welcome Brunch, the Promise Scholars integrate with the larger population of Mitchell Scholars and typically sit with Mitchell Scholars on their campus to facilitate social connections. The Promise Scholars who attend MILE III earlier in the summer have the added benefit of reuniting with fellow Promise Scholars at this event. Many of the Promise Scholars made connections at this event that have an impact once they are on campus. Eugene recalled meeting one of his future fraternity brothers at the brunch:

> We exchanged phone numbers…. I came over to the house one time… a bunch of guys were watching games …. [I] realized that they were very academically driven like myself, and that it would be a good environment and you know,

> there's a saying, you become the average of the people you surround yourself with. So I was like, yeah, I'll give it a shot. And then I really started to like it and I ended up joining spring of my freshman year.

Eugene later recruited his younger brother Nick to join the same fraternity, which built a robust social network for them. Engagement with the Mitchell Institute and informal connections made at events broaden social networks of the Promise Scholars.

Finally, it is not only the Mitchell Institute that influences the Promise Scholar's cultural capital, but also the scholar's experiences of overcoming obstacles that help them succeed in those first challenging semesters of college. The Promise Scholars also tap into the knowledge base of the Mitchell Institute staff to navigate institutional barriers at college, such as financial aid or housing concerns. They also utilize the resilience they have developed throughout the years in their challenging family situations. Jim described when he was having a difficult time getting his book scholarship. He explained:

> I get a scholarship for my books and there is a new education director for the tribe. There was just a lot of stuff that both the university and the director were not doing. So [I went] back and forth like 10 times to like e-mail of the director getting a reply…They just had no answers for me... So I didn't get my books for 3 months last in spring.

Even without his books for three months, he was able to keep his grades up to stay enrolled in school. Karmen described her difficulty filing her FAFSA as an independent student. She sought guidance from Mitchell Institute staff on how to complete this process. She also discussed using the Mitchell Institute as a resource to build her communication and professional skills. Karmen reflected:

> I think I found who I was and I found my voice throughout college, and I think the Mitchell Institute really only saw that side of me for the most part... I felt very comfortable….I got to be around friends and just be professional, but I talk a lot and they know that and I think it really helped….doing those MILE events.

Karmen was able to master the communication skills needed to succeed at college, and the Mitchell Institute gave her the opportunity to practice them in a judgment-free environment at their MILE events. The Mitchell Institute provides space for Promise Scholars to learn more about the cultural experience of college, but the students also bring their own lived experiences to the equation that aids in their transition into college.

The second research question explored how social, economic, and cultural capital is influenced by the Mitchell Institute as the Promise Scholars transition out of college and into the workforce. The Promise Scholars continue to have their capital supported by the Mitchell Institute; however, when the scholarship money ends, the students receive more support socially and culturally as they transition out of college. Economically, the scholarship helps the Promise Scholars feel that their college loans, if they acquired them, are not crippling financially. Even with $45,000 in debt, Elaine was not too concerned with paying the amount back, but felt her financial obligations were limiting her job search. She stated:

> Because ideally, I would like to be working with nonprofits. That is really what I want to do. But I don't think for the first few years I'm working that that's going to be an option, because nonprofits generally don't pay very high. And job security is not always what we would like it to be in those fields.... So unfortunately, until I get my student loans under control, I don't think that's going to be an option.

Karmen also discussed how she needed to budget after college to be able to pay back her college debt, but realized she would be in an even more challenging financial situation without the scholarship support she had during college. She said:

> So between rent and my car payment and my loan payment and just regular groceries and living….I wanted to make sure that I could do it. I am definitely not living a luxurious life. I'm here and I have to coupon when I go grocery shopping. But I definitely make it work. I will be very, very broke when I leave here at the end of the year, but I think between all the experiences I get and everything that I've learned here…it's well worth it for the year to live at minimum wage and then move out.

The cultural and social connections that Karmen made in her current post-college fellowship were worth the economic sacrifices she was making currently. If Karmen had more financial obligations, she may have decided to stay at her full-time position as a chemist instead of this experience that more closely aligned with her career objectives. Although the Mitchell Scholarship ends as the Promise Scholars move out of college, there are lasting impacts of the scholarship money after college. The social and cultural support from the Mitchell Institute becomes more critical as the Promise Scholars move into their careers.

The Mitchell Institute openly supports the Promise Scholars in their job searches and assists in opening doors through their social connections. All Promise Scholars are encouraged to attend MILE II, a one-day career development workshop hosted at a Maine-based insurance company. The Mitchell Scholars who participate in this event

learn about the importance of networking and the untaught etiquette of professional culture. Nick explained:

> I would say that the most defining thing that the Mitchell Institute provided me was professionalism that I probably wouldn't have been able to like piece together otherwise …just looking at my desktop right now…the photo on here was taken [at MILE II] and it's like one of my best professional photos …just kind of like having that put together package was definitely something I learned from MILE II.

Direct instruction in how to present yourself in job interviews, along with the hands-on experiences of networking are important as the Promise Scholars prepare themselves for the professional workforce. Though the Promise Scholars work throughout college in minimum wage settings like the service industry, they have limited experience in the white-collar workforce unless they participated in an internship during college. Although the Mitchell Institute, through a $1,500 fellowship, supports internships, not all Promise Scholars are able to make that work financially. In addition, the Mitchell Institute also utilizes fundraising events like the Fall Gala to encourage scholars' interactions with business leaders in Maine. Zane actually utilized a social connection from the gala to get his first job offer. He explained, "I mean the Mitchell Institute actually played a huge role in me getting this job. So, because I met the CEO of the company at the gala… I set up an interview with them from that dinner." The Mitchell Institute also maintains Facebook and LinkedIn groups to post relevant jobs and internships. The institute serves as facilitators to expand their scholars' professional social networks, which are often limited based on their socioeconomic background.

Promise Scholars acquire cultural capital as they transition out of college through their academic experiences in college and knowledge shared by the Mitchell Institute. Although the Mitchell Institute makes valuable job connections, the office culture of specific fields is not part of their curriculum. Zane was concerned about moving into a professional work environment. He said, "I'm concerned about just like being in a new workplace and just seeing what that's like, like actually being working for a firm where I am applying my mechanical engineering knowledge." He discussed relying on recent graduates he knows from his college who also work at the same firm for support in this area. The Promise Scholars also utilize the Mitchell Institute's knowledge to aid in their transition. Eugene believed, "Those folks [Mitchell Institute staff] were very instrumental in getting me on the right path in college that allowed me to transition out of college in an effective way." He goes on to suggest how the Mitchell Institute could further support alumni in their transition. He considered:

> I think one thing that I am really not sure about is…how do you look for a new job while you have a job? …. I think the MI does a good job of like filtering information to things… they know that work. And certainly through the vast network of alumni and connections, I think it'd be a thing that could be done that would be helpful for me. And I think it'd probably be helpful for others as well, because their first job is often not necessarily [what they] are passionate about.

For Eugene, getting his first professional job was a positive outcome, but he wondered how to build his career into a passion. He also shared that he received a Mitchell Institute fellowship after college to complete a project management certificate, which continued to help him grow in his career. The Promise Scholars' families are not always able to pass

down the cultural knowledge of the professional workforce. The Mitchell Institute is one of the resources they turn to in order to understand these new work experiences. The Mitchell Institute facilitates the Promise Scholars acquisition of economic, social, and cultural capital as they transition into and out of college. Overall, economic capital from the scholarship is most important for at-promise students as they transition into college, social capital is acquired as scholars engage with the Mitchell Institute as they move through college, and cultural capital is gained through the knowledge the staff provides to scholars at all stages of their college experience.

The Mitchell Institute influences each form of capital as the Promise Scholars embark on their journey into college and into the workforce, though the type of capital that is most needed depends on where they are in their transition. Moving into college, the Mitchell Institute increases the scholar's economic capital, moving through college social capital is built and moving out of college the Mitchell Institute enhances cultural capital. Though all three forms of capital are needed for the Promise Scholars to successfully transition into each new environment, they work in concert throughout the Promise Scholar's college experience.

I offer the major conclusions of my research organized by the themes of economic, social, and cultural capital, Mitchell Institute support, and the Promise Scholars' use of personal strategies. I present the conclusions in order of importance. Embedded within the discussion of each finding is complementary research and a connection to the theoretical framework utilized in this study. This framework combined elements of Bourdieu's (2002) social capital theory with Schlossberg and colleagues (1995) adults in transition theory. The forms of economic, social, and cultural capital

along with the strategies and support received from the Promise Scholarship in addition to the Promise Scholars' personal characteristics influences how they move through their college experience.

Conclusion 1: Economic Capital Is the Most Critical for At-Promise Scholars' College Enrollment and Completion

Without financial aid and outside scholarship support, post-secondary education would not have been possible for the students in this study. The mission of the Mitchell Institute is to increase the likelihood that young people from every community in Maine will aspire to, pursue, and achieve a college education. The Promise Scholarship allows scholars to attend both private and public institutions that would have otherwise been out of their financial reach. Although a majority of Mitchell Scholars and all of the Promise Scholars in this study attended institutions in Maine, applicants are able to attend both private and public colleges in and out of state. Promise Scholars in 2014, like all Mitchell Scholars at that time, received a total of $7,000 in four equal installments of $1,750 and were more likely to attend public in-state institutions. Socioeconomic status remains a key factor in enrollment by type of college and degree program (Fain, 2019). Although private liberal arts and higher tier colleges are attempting to increase economic diversity in their applicant pools, higher income students are still overrepresented at these institutions (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2007).

The importance of the public flagship university for limited income and vulnerable populations given its affordability and mission is reinforced in this study (Ballysingh, 2019b). A majority of the Promise Scholars attended the University of Maine (UMaine), the flagship campus of the University of Maine system; only two

Promise Scholars attended private in-state institutions. Whether or not the University of Maine was an appropriate match is not as important as the financial feasibility of attendance for the Promise Scholars as they made their college selection. Low-income students are underrepresented at highly selective colleges, as they are often uncertain of the costs and their suitability, yet when offered a promise of aid and encouragement to apply enrollment increases (Dynarski et al., 2018). Kiyama, Harper, and Ramos (2018) suggested the perspective that first-generation college students are restricted from college enrollment due to their families' values should be replaced with an examination of larger systems that influence college access for underrepresented students. Clearly, economic capital available to the Promise Scholars and their families influences whether and where they enroll in college.

With the support of the Mitchell Scholarship, the Promise Scholars' economic capital was increased. This had a positive influence on the Promise Scholars' transitions to college. Prior research also demonstrated that first-generation students who receive scholarships have a better experience in their college transition (Smith & Zhang, 2010). Students who received loans and grants were more likely to finish their college degree, and low SES students who received loans and grants increased degree completion by 8 to 10% (Cabrera et al., 2012). Low-income students with a scholarship are also more likely to persist into their second year of attending a highly selective college (Dynarski et al., 2018). However, it is notable that many of the Promise Scholars did not know the exact amount of the Mitchell Scholarship, but knowing it could be relied on every year they remained enrolled was important. Jack stated, "Especially with the way the Mitchell Institute does [it], where they split it over four years it immensely helps…when my

classes got harder and required more attention…Definitely makes it easier because I forgot to apply for scholarships." The Promise Scholars know they can count on the money throughout their four years in college, which is beneficial especially when many private scholarships only supplement the first year of enrollment. Many of the Promise Scholars spoke of the social support they received from the scholarship as being just as important as the monetary difference the scholarship made in their college experience. Julie explained:

> The Mitchell Institute always played a huge role in what I do. They've always been there to help me. They've always been there when I needed them. There was a time where I was struggling in college, and I actually just called [MI staff member] and talked to her and she said if there's anything that I need it I can always reach out to her and that was a huge help.

Once the Promise Scholars overcame the initial college enrollment hurdle, the financial barriers did not decrease as they continued through college. In fact, they often had to take on more loans and debt through college due to many scholarships being only for one year or the variability in financial aid packages based on changes in parental income or other factors not in their control. Zane explained that he was removed from his parent's Medicare insurance and had to be financially responsible for the student health insurance fee. He stated:

> I think was $991 that I had to pay. Because I had to take the school insurance this year. And you know, I had an outstanding balance of $900…I don't have the money to do that right now I have to pay for food and rent and other things. And so, I called [MI staff member]. And I was like, I have this balance, and I can't sign

> up for classes right now until I pay it. And they just wrote me a check and then I could sign up for class.

Not surprisingly, unmet financial need, hours worked, and lack of resources influenced the college experience and whether or not students persisted (Britt, Ammerman, Barrett, & Jones, 2017; Burd, 2018; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Hornack, Farrell, & Jackson, 2010; Somers et al., 2004). Although only two of the Promise Scholars, Jack and Jim, reported leaving college for a semester or more due to academic or medical issues, with encouragement from family, academic advisors, and the Mitchell Institute staff they were able to persist and got back on track for graduation. Jim explained that without financial aid he had no path to afford the cost of attendance. He said:

> Well, without any of my financial aid I wouldn't be in school. So I basically I don't know, I tried pretty hard to get that back then….that's essentially why I didn't end up going back after I got the academic probation was because I also got financial probation.

Jim shared after he was on probation from UMaine that his aunts supported his decision to remain in college. He recalled, "And then last fall I was actually thinking of…after I got back in school again maybe take a break. My aunts are like no you don't take break…And I got the best semester I've had since freshman year semester." Due to his academic performance, Jim lost the financial aid that allowed him to attend college so he attended community college to recover some of his credits and was able to reenroll at UMaine after a brief separation.

Most Promise Scholars relied on the Promise Fund to meet their unmet financial need during college, which allowed them to remain in school. Without unrestricted access

to this additional financial support, most would have had unpaid tuition bills that could have prevented them from enrolling in the next semester. First generation students are more likely to cite not being able to afford college as a reason for leaving (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Limited-income students often have to work 20 or more hours per week, and working more hours often has a negative effect on academic performance (Perna & Odle, 2020; Pike, Kuh, & Massa-McKinley, 2009). Most of the Promise Scholars in this study worked at least if not more than 20 hours per week to pay their living expenses and additional costs related to college attendance outside of tuition and fees. For some, working most certainly had a negative effect, and for others it helped them learn to multitask and prioritize. Karmen accepted that working was part of her college experience. She said:

> But for the most part, I knew four years of college was not going to be what everyone usually sees college as. I knew I was gonna be working and it was gonna be hard and I was going to be sad. But I knew in the end it was gonna be worth it. And I think it was.

Working was often at the expense of the academic and social engagement that is known to increase student persistence and success for first-generation students (Davis, 2010; Kinzie et al., 2008).

Though most Promise Scholars reported not being concerned about paying back their college debt, which ranged from nothing to $45,000, their college debt did influence their career decisions. As first-generation graduates move through their early years in the workforce, often their ability to pursue a career they are passionate about feels limited due to the financial strain of having to pay back loans or support their family (Olson,

2016). During college, Promise Scholars at times had to support their families financially; however, most hoped that after graduation they would be able to save and start their own financial lives without having to contribute to their families' income. Zane explained:

> My mom's always like, kind of asked me for money since I was like in high school, it's like super annoying….I wish that didn't happen… but I hope in the next like five years…she stops asking me for money….I have the money but like, I can't. I gotta like, focus on myself… Hopefully, my mom just gets on her feet and is more self-sufficient in the coming years, especially when I'm like, starting my actual life.

The three Promise Scholars who graduated were employed full time in fields related to their degree. They were all financially independent and able to make ends meet as they had done during their time in college. Without the additional financial support from scholarships, the Promise Scholars would be in more college debt, which could further influence their career decisions post college.

Conclusion 2: Social Capital Increases through Engagement with the Mitchell Institute thus Improving the Transition into and out of College for the Promise Scholars

Social capital is widely considered an important factor to college success (Bourdieu, 2002; Putnam, 2015; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Students who enter college with more social capital reap the most rewards during college even if the same opportunities are available to all students (Stuber, 2009). The Mitchell Institute increases the social capital of its Promise Scholars by providing opportunities for engagement in events and programs with Mitchell Institute staff, other Mitchell Scholars, Mitchell Scholar Alumni,

university leaders, board members, and business people. The Mitchell Institute Leadership Experiences (MILE I, II, and III) are best known for creating those initial connections. However, Mitchell Institute staff also encourage "no-agenda coffee" meetings, phone calls, emails, and connect scholars with the 3,000 plus alumni network of Mitchell Scholars, the Mitchell Institute Alumni Council, and their board members. Since social capital is built through a series of personal experiences (Bloom, 2008), it is not surprising that the Promise Scholars who engage with the Mitchell Institute more often through the course of their college experience had more robust social networks and improved career outcomes. At-promise student success connects to social capital and individual engagement with the environment (Davis, 2010; Demetriou et al., 2017; Jehangir, Stebleton, & Dennanath, 2015). Specifically, the Promise Scholars who attended MILE III and used a fellowship award grant were able to obtain jobs or internships through the Mitchell Institute's social network. The Promise Scholars who did not engage in those opportunities had fewer social and career connections after college. Jack was not sure where to begin as he considered applying to major-related jobs. Jack spent a majority of his time outside of class working at a grocery store. He explained:

> So I don't really have much clues into the job market right now…knowing who's knowledgeable about things and who's not kind of because as of right now my biggest resources are like co-workers... But my coworkers at [grocery store] aren't really going to be knowledgeable about my degree.

Current research aligns with this finding, as students with opportunities for career skill development who had experienced greater community engagement were more predictive of a shorter job search than those with higher academic skill (Martin & Frenette, 2015).

For these Promise Scholars, engaging in social activities outside of academics and part-time jobs fostered connections that benefited them as they transitioned out of college.

Building a network of college-educated individuals to rely on makes a difference in degree completion, as recent studies have shown that less educated Americans have more limited social networks and tend to be more socially isolated (Putnam, 2015). Most of the Promise Scholars did not rely on their family for college and career advice, only moral support. Eugene and Nick both echoed this sentiment in describing their relationship with their father. He was great for personal support but did not have a great amount of knowledge in regards to college-based decision making. Nick stated:

> And, my dad was really against it [going to a private college]. He's like, no, UMaine. State university, take a sure fire route, you're going to get a degree you'll probably get a job afterwards, don't do anything too irrational or crazy with college, it's not something you should gamble on.

Although many students rely on their parents for assistance and feedback choosing their major and eventual vocation, the Mitchell Institute staff and professional development workshops provided that social resource to the Promise Scholars (Workman, 2015). By fostering a caring and trusting relationship, the Mitchell Institute staff served as a resource when students grappled with career and educational decisions, and the Promise Scholars felt encouraged and empowered that they were making the best choices to increase their career and personal success. Julie described the Mitchell Institute staff's role in her development. She said, "If I didn't get the scholarship, I probably wouldn't have been able to stay in college, but like I also said every time I needed something if I called [MI staff member], she would be there." Although Julie could rely on "moral

support" from her grandfather, she leaned on the knowledge of the Mitchell Institute when she needed support that was more complex. Career choices and decision making relate to family capital that continues to spill over into their life after college (Hoskins & Barker, 2019). Support from social networks that are more familiar with pre- and post-college experiences makes the transition into and out of college better for students whose stress is often increased by not having parental advice (Sy et al., 2011). Promise Scholar engagement with Mitchell Institute staff reduced the pressure on scholars to make difficult decisions on their own and eased their transitions during and after college.

Conclusion 3: The Mitchell Institute Promotes Aspirational and Leadership Development, Yet Promise Scholars Rely on Cultural Capital from Home to Transition Effectively

Cultural capital is the knowledge, skills, and abilities that provide access to a certain environment. In this study, how the Promise Scholars approached their transition into and out of college was examined. Although the Mitchell Institute aims to support and at times supplement the cultural capital of the Promise Scholars, the scholars came to college equipped with the capacity to persevere and overcome obstacles, which is ingrained in their previous life experiences. Non-dominant social capital such as resilience, guidance, aspirations, and belonging plays a critical role in college access and readiness (Clemens, 2016). The scholars have learned through their life experiences that achieving their goals takes hard work and persistence. However, this finding is not surprising given that the Promise Scholars were selected for the Mitchell scholarship because of their demonstration of these qualities in high school. Most of Promise

Scholars viewed their hardships as an advantage in college and in the workforce. Nick acknowledged:

> But like taking into account like where I am today, I can't believe that I honestly made it to college. Like, when I was 11 I didn't think that it was a possibility to live in Maine with my dad and my brother, let alone after I got here that my sister would ever make it here and be in college with me….when I do obtain a bachelor's degree is going to be really big thing because I just never thought that it was ever gonna happen when I was little.

Research supports that experiencing hardship at some point in life is better for college outcomes than those who have not had any difficulties (Lewine et al., 2019). The Promise Scholars were able to use their experiences in difficult situations at home to approach challenges in college with confidence.

The Mitchell Institute provided opportunities for these Promise Scholars to build cultural capital. Though familial support is key in the formation of aspirations in the pre-college years, even if that support is not present, the scholars are able to glean it from other social environments (Kiyama, Harper, & Ramos, 2018). The Promise Scholars relied on high school experiences, peers, and programs like Upward Bound and TRIO to build college-going cultural capital. Elaine relied on her TRIO advisor to support her college persistence. She stated, "I'm getting a lot of help from the TRIO office ….[my advisor] has been really, really helpful….. Just because I've worked with her for three years now, and she knows me very well. And we look at things very similarly. So, she's helped her for that." At-promise students are less likely to participate in cultural capital building activities, but when they participate in college access programming the effect is

positive (Saunders & Serna, 2004; Walpole, 2003). All but two of the Promise Scholars participated in the MILE III program facilitated by Outward Bound and Promise Scholar mentors. This program is strategically offered during the summer before students enter their first year of college and builds their aspirations to attend college by providing opportunity for the new scholars to interact with peers from similar at-promise backgrounds who have successfully completed two or three years of college. This leadership experience greatly influenced cultural capital and personal skills needed to be successful in higher education. Nick explained:

> It was a very fun weekend, but there's still these bits of life wisdom sprinkled in here and there, and career development sprinkled in here and there, and leadership development, communication, so they do a really good job of definitely being more than a scholarship…. That's really nice to have, a group of adults you can just talk to…They're there to support you even though they're not your actual family, they treat you like you're one of their kids.

The Promise Scholars also gain leadership skills through engagement with the Mitchell Institute. Many of the Promise Scholars in this study were selected to speak at Mitchell Institute events, attend fundraising dinners, and be representatives of the Mitchell Institute in other capacities that increased their view of themselves as leaders. Enhanced academic and personal advising, peer mentorship, and research experience leads to improved underrepresented student success in higher education (Ovink & Veazy, 2011). Underrepresented groups are less likely to participate in high impact practices, such as internships, study aboard, and undergraduate research (Harper, 2012; Kinzie et al., 2008). As a result, students are unable to acquire the cultural capital that they need to

succeed, so it is recommended that programs like the Mitchell Institute build these cultural experiences into their curriculum. Their fellowship program, which is a $1,500 grant, was utilized by most of the Promise Scholars to participate in all of above-mentioned activities and more. Karmen launched an underwater vessel in Belize; Zane was building a lightweight aircraft; Elaine conducted research with a professor; Nick interned for the state marine resources department; Julie interned on a logistics crew; Ken participated in summer research program, and Eugene interned with a consulting firm before being offered a full-time job there. The Promise Scholars were able to increase their leadership capacity through the MILE I, II, and III programs available to all Mitchell Scholars as well as through engagement in the Mitchell Institute Alumni Council after college. Elaine stated, "You get to network with Mitchell students and alum and everything. And that was really helpful. I learned a lot of things in those workshops, especially at that event [MILE II] that I still use." The students build cultural capital through Mitchell Institute experiences in addition to involvement in part-time jobs, work study, and social organizations on campus. All of these experiences improved their transition out of higher education.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

The results of this study are of particular interest to the Mitchell Institute and the John T. Gorman Foundation who oversee, fundraise, and provide grant money to the Promise Scholars program. Maine public school leaders, higher education institutions, and state policy makers may also find this research valuable to improve their understanding of what influences college outcomes for at-promise students in their communities. Though this research examines only one specific non-profit program, this

line of inquiry contributes to the growing body of research that ascertains what works for a certain population of students in improving degree attainment (Perna & Finney, 2014). The contributions of this research include bringing awareness to the successes of historically underserved population of students in higher education and developing strategies to enhance student transitions during and after college.

Implications for Research

Current research on at-promise student experiences in higher education is flourishing, yet the perspective that first-generation and underserved populations are not deficient in both academic and cultural traits is not as widely acknowledged (Harper, 2012; Rondini, Bedelia, & Simon, 2018). The nine Promise Scholars in this study enrolled and persisted in higher education through a combination of reliance on their own abilities and the cultivation of capital from a variety of resources. The current graduation rate of all Mitchell Scholars is 85% and similarly the graduation rate for economically underserved Mitchell Scholars in the same cohort is 81% (Patefield, 2019). The at-promise population is able to succeed, but more research could deepen understanding of why this gap, though shrinking, continues to exist. The framework of this study specifically examines how increased economic, social, and cultural capital from the Mitchell Institute influences the Promise Scholar's transition to college, rather than what the students and their families lack as they enter college and the workforce.

Using Schlossberg's (1995) adults in transition theory to compliment Bourdieu's (2002) social capital theory allowed me to explore how the Promise Scholars utilized unique skills and strategies in addition to the support of their scholarship resources. This framework also furthers research on the disentanglement of social and cultural capital,

which is recommended to more clearly examine societal structures that further inequality in our educational system (Lareau, 2011; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Future research should continue to challenge and eliminate forces that perpetuate disparity in higher education outcomes across groups such as low-income, first-generation students and students of color (Perna & Callahan, 2014). Though not a focus of this study, Mitchell Scholars who identify as Black, American Indian, or Hispanic are less likely to be on track to graduate in six years than their White and Asian peers (Patefield, 2019). In order for Maine and the Mitchell Institute to increase the post-secondary degree attainment of Maine students, demographic and geographic differences in outcomes should continue to be closely examined.

Combining two complex theories has its challenges. In Schlossberg's transition theory (1995), two of the four Ss, support and strategy, were at times difficult to untangle. Support can come from family, peers, social networks, and the Mitchell Institute so it is unclear which support influences their transition most prominently, though the Promise Scholars relied on all of these networks for support. A strategy could be engaging the support in addition to using their own coping skills. Thus, it is difficult to separate the strategies that at-promise scholars generate from their own experience versus the strategies that are influenced by economic, social, cultural, or other forms of capital. More recent studies on underserved populations in higher education specifically those from racially diverse backgrounds point to other forms of capital such as familial, aspirational, emotional, and provident capital which are not explored in this study (Ballysingh, 2019a; Ballysingh, 2019b; Yosso, 2005). However, Promise Scholars clearly utilize emotional and aspirational capital as they transition into and out of college.

Expanding upon the traditional notions of resources that at-promise students need to succeed in college such as academic preparation is important in developing a more asset-based framework for underrepresented student success.

Finally, there continues be a shortage of research in social and career outcomes on college completion of students from limited-income and first-generation backgrounds (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018; Dynarski et al., 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2007; Walpole, 2003). Having at-promise students earn a post-secondary degree is important; however, only through deeper examination of post-college outcomes will researchers understand if intergenerational cycles of poverty and abuse that prevail in under-resourced communities are broken with more students attaining college degrees. In Maine, it is often more difficult for young people to improve their economic circumstances as absolute mobility, the fraction of children who earn more than their parents, is declining (LaRochelle, 2020). Thus, continued exploration of the social mobility of at-promise students will aid in understanding if higher education remains an important factor in improving our society overall.

Implications for Policy

There are several policy implications for higher education institutions and the state of Maine that would encourage retention and degree attainment for at-promise students. Disconnect between higher education and K-12 education continues to create barriers for college access (Perna & Finney, 2014). The Mitchell Institute serves as a bridge for its scholars as they move from the public-school environment to the college environment. Other organizations such as Upward Bound, Jobs for Maine Graduates, TRIO, Maine College Circle, Finance Authority of Maine (FAME), and Educate Maine

work towards a similar goal of increasing degree attainment for Maine students. These organizations can enhance their connections to secondary schools and colleges to boost the success of underserved students. Perna and Finney (2014) reinforced the importance of understanding state context within policy and higher education. One rule or policy can have a ripple effect on the entire system, which has the potential to either enhance or diminish educational outcomes. For example, many of Promise Scholars remembered when they found out about receiving the Mitchell Scholarship at their high school graduation. This was usually after they had made their college decision and knowing about a scholarship may have led them to a different college choice, which may have improved their educational experience.

Although the Promise Scholarship through the Mitchell Institute is not a traditional state- or community-funded promise program, the Promise Scholars in this study received financial resources and education from their involvement with the Mitchell Institute that is similar to the major components of other promise programs (Perna & Smith, 2020). The success in degree attainment for the first-generation and low-income scholars in this study should encourage state policy makers to consider how statewide promise programs can be implemented. New England has a smaller percentage of available promise programs compared to other regions of the country (Perna & Leigh, 2017). Maine has one statewide promise program, Early College for Maine, that provides $2,000 for up to two years of community college in Maine and a free dual-enrollment high school course. Some higher education institutions in Maine are developing their own promise programs to cover a percent of tuition or reduce tuition cost for at-promise students, but these are institution dependent and the amounts of tuition covered and

length of the award varies. Maine legislators and the University of Maine System should consider expanding promise programs to provide financial resources for at-promise students to attend any two- or four-year college in state tuition free or with reduced tuition. Without increased financial support and state-wide higher education policy changes for students in lowest income levels, overall degree attainment in Maine is not likely to increase at the rate needed to fill the need of an educated workforce.

Promise Scholars in this study noted that institutional financial aid policies were challenges to continued enrollment. One common concern was the timing of the scholarship distributions and the process of declaring outside scholarships that influenced initial financial aid packages. The Promise Scholars were often unaware that informing a college about an outside scholarship could reduce their aid packages and result in their having to pay more money out of pocket than initially planned. Scholarship displacement, when colleges reduce the amount of aid offered when a student informs them of a private scholarship, disproportionally influences low-income students (Jaschik, 2017). First dollar scholarship awards typically provide higher financial aid packages for low-income students who qualify for need-based financial aid (Perna & Leigh, 2017). The Mitchell Institute has advocated for their scholarship to not offset a grant of any kind and if students do not have loans to offset work study. Implementing statewide policies in regard to disbursement, not ones that vary by institution, would support at-promise students and the organizations that they turn to for advice in these already complex matters. Also, students expressed frustration that even if they had scholarship money coming in during the second semester that would cover their bill, universities would not allow them to carry a balance into the next semester. This created problems registering

for courses or having to take out more loans than they needed to. Increasing the transparency of and communication around financial aid procedures has the potential to prevent financial emergencies for at-promise students throughout college. Finally, students who are emancipated from their parents were not eligible for as much financial aid as they would have been if they had remained attached to their parents in some cases. Counting what income independent students earn is not a viable strategy to covering the cost of their unmet financial need (Perna & Olde, 2020). Such policies proved to hinder Promise Scholars who were financing their education and living expenses 100% independently. Notably, the two of the three scholars who had the most significant college debt were emancipated from their parents and attended private colleges.

Requirements for on-campus housing and meal plans were also unpopular due to the added expense for at-promise students. For most of the Promise Scholars, living off campus allowed them to take out fewer loans and save on their cost of living expenses. Since living on campus had social benefits for Promise Scholars, ways to supplement the cost of housing and meals has the potential to increase social integration and reduce the financial burden of on campus living for low-income students. In addition, the cost of required university health insurance plans for students who could not be on a parent's plan or had insurance offered through an employer was difficult to afford. When students did need to use the school insurance, it often did not cover as much of the procedures as the student expected. Institutions should provide more robust health insurance plans for students from limited income backgrounds or work with state agencies to see if they are eligible for more cost-effective health insurance benefits. National changes to the Medicare system have significant consequences for low-income Mainers and these

reforms trickle down to at-promise students (LaRochelle, 2020). Many of the Promise Scholars also delayed medical procedures in college such as wisdom teeth removal because of the expense incurred, even though it reduced their ability to function academically and work hours that they needed to cover living expenses.

A number of Promise Scholars spoke of loan repayment programs offered in Maine that, depending on the field, would pay off college loans if they lived and worked in Maine after college. These loans were of interest to the Promise Scholars particularly those who were planning to be engaged in STEM fields. Although they were unsure of the requirements, they were aware of the potential to have support in repaying their college loans. Strategic communication and educational outreach to students who could most benefit from these types of programs would increase the Promise Scholars' knowledge and awareness of how to apply. These types of policies do entice students to stay in the state, even at the lure of higher incomes and more career opportunities out of state. Policy makers should enact more loan repayment programs that benefit at-promise students and can simultaneously bolster the employment needs of the state.

Implications for Practice

Current researchers suggest that the most important elements for underserved students' degree attainment include academic preparation, economic resources, and knowledge and support navigating higher education (Perna & Smith, 2020)**.** The Mitchell Institute is able to address economic factors through scholarship money, fellowship awards, and the Promise Fund. Increasing financial resources not just for the cost of tuition and fees, but also for costs of living and learning are key to the persistence of students who have limited financial support from their families. The Mitchell Institute

also provides personalized support and outreach that increases Promise Scholars' confidence and aspirations. For the success of future cohorts of Promise Scholars, maintaining the current elements of the Promise Scholarship are critical. More specifically, the paid internship opportunity or fellowship, emergency fund access, and Mitchell Institute Leadership Experiences are extremely beneficial to the Promise Scholar's college transitions. Currently, none of the activities are required parts of the program. However, given the findings of this research, it may be advantageous to consider requiring one MILE retreat and a fellowship experience to maintain Promise Scholar status. Although it can be difficult to require Promise Scholars to attend events, those who engaged in two to four activities are 20% more likely to be on track to graduate (Patefield, 2019). Scholarship programs whose goal is to increase degree attainment for at-promise populations should consider how they are engaging with their students beyond providing them with a check each semester.

The social connections gained during the Welcome Brunch and campus receptions especially earlier in their college experience created a sense of belonging and community that helped Promise Scholars persist. Even for the Promise Scholars who cannot participate in the Mitchell Institute programming due to work or family obligations, a virtual session or mentoring conversation with another Promise Scholar has the potential to fill that need. Although working can enhance financial and social capital for first generation college students (Nunez & Sansone, 2016), it also comes at the expense of losing time towards other valuable academic and cultural experiences. Working more than 20 hours per week, which many of the Promise Scholars did while in college, is not recommended (Perna & Olde, 2020). The Mitchell Institute may be able to

provide additional financial support for Promise Scholars who need to work more than 20 hours per week to pay their college attendance costs. The Mitchell Institute can also support at-promise students through decision making concerning the amount of federal loans they take to supplement hours they need to work. They can also guide scholars to work placements that will serve to build future job skills and professional connections. Colleges and universities can also reduce unmet financial need by keeping tuition low and increasing need-based grant aid (Perna & Olde, 2020). If colleges and universities are able to embed social capital building and networking experiences into classes or other required experiences for their degree programs, this stands to benefit at-promise student who may not have as much time to devote to these experiences due to the hours they spend working.

Most importantly, the trusting and caring relationships of the Mitchell Institute staff from the President to the project assistant emerged as a key component to the program's success. The Promise Scholars noticed and appreciated the targeted outreach from the staff throughout each semester. Even when the scholars did not always reply promptly, they indicated that knowing they had someone checking on them and sending notes and care packages meant so much. These Promise Scholars have all faced tremendous difficulties in their lives. It is important to acknowledge that the personal qualities and academic abilities of the Promise Scholars in addition to support from caring educators and community members encouraged them to enroll and persist in college. Having a knowledgeable adult with college experience to share their vicissitudes of life during college aided their transitions. A specific recommendation is the addition of a professional counselor to the Mitchell Institute staff. Although the current staff member

who oversees the Promise Scholars program has social work background, given the trauma that many of the Promise Scholars have experienced, the added support of a professional of this kind could bolster their strategies and skills to process life experiences and overcome hardships. A few of the Promise Scholars interviewed spoke of the difficulty they had accessing mental health resources on campus either due to lack of insurance coverage, scheduling conflicts, or an overburdened counseling system on campus. Although the Mitchell Institute does much of this work on an individual non-clinical basis, having a professional counselor could improve the Promise Scholar's confidence to face the dramatic changes in their life as they move from a stress inducing home environment into their college experience.

As one of many non-profit organizations providing support to underserved students in the state of Maine, the Mitchell Institute is both supporting and duplicating efforts from other programs. Equity and access in higher education is one of our nation's most challenging problems, and educational researchers know that it requires multiple levers moving at the same time to solve it (Perna & Finney, 2014). Thus, it is important to consider how non-profit organizations, K-12 schools, and higher education institutions can work together to reach the greatest number of students. The schools and communities that students learn and live in influence their college-going decisions along with the economic resources available (Perna & Leigh, 2017). Outreach and education to high schools about what federal, state, and local resources are available to support low-income students and their families as they consider college attendance is not consistent throughout the state. The Mitchell Institute in partnership with the John T. Gorman Foundation has created a results action plan to align their goal of all people in Maine

holding a post-secondary credential with other social services in the state including public schools, college-access organizations, advocacy organizations, philanthropic groups, and community centers. Engagement and collaboration with partners across the state is recommended to further their reach, which will enable them to achieve their goal of all students achieving post-secondary success.

Summary

In this chapter, I offered implications for future research, policy, and practices based on the findings of this study. The influx of economic, social, and cultural capital provided by the Mitchell Institute helped the Promise Scholars more successfully transition to college and to the workforce. The work of the Mitchell Institute has spanned over 20 years in the state of Maine and the stories of their current scholars and alumni, including myself, deserve to be heard and celebrated. I hope this study increases the awareness of their work, which has the potential to be adapted for use in other programs that serve at-promise students as they enter and complete college, which will contribute to the economic vitality of their states and the well-being of their communities.

To close, the path to college for low-income and first-generation students who have experienced challenging home environments is difficult but not impossible to navigate. As these students transition from high school to college, they utilize their personal characteristics such as resilience and motivation in addition to support from peers and educators to enroll in college. Once in college, their environment stabilizes and they continue to develop academically and socially, yet new barriers present themselves such as balancing increased financial responsibilities with academic and career success. With the support from non-profit organizations like the Mitchell Institute whose goal is

for all students to obtain a degree, at-promise students have increased economic, social, and cultural capital that enhances their transition through college. Upon completing their degree, students who have engaged with Mitchell Institute staff and programming have positive outlooks on entering the workforce and many have jobs in their field or job offers. Though these recent graduates are approaching an uncertain future, they have gained tremendous confidence in their ability to succeed despite the circumstances they face. For many of the Promise Scholars, college was not a realistic possibility for most of their lives; however, with personal and financial support it became a reality. The Mitchell Institute opened the college access door, but the Promise Scholars walked through it bravely and independently. Now the first in their families to graduate with a four-year degree, they have access to opportunities previously unavailable and hope to make an impact in their communities and the world.

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APPENDIX A

Interview One Protocol

College – Academics

- I'd like to begin by talking about your enrollment at [College]. What degree are you working towards? When do you expect to graduate?
- Were you enrolled in any other institution before [current institution]?

Transfer questions – if applicable
- What other institutions were you enrolled in?
- Did you attend classes at [previous institution]? For how long?
- Can you speak about your decision to transfer? What experiences influenced your decision?
- What do you think your major area of study will be? How or why did you choose that major?
    - So far, do you have any favorite classes or professors?
- So far, are you satisfied with your academic performance? Why or why not?
- Academically, how has college been different from high school?
- Now that you've been taking classes for a month or so, do you feel like you were academically prepared for college? Where have you gotten academic support?
- I'd like to move on to talking about other aspects of college now. Before we do, is there anything else you think I should know?

College – Social
- So far, has college life been what you expected? In what ways has it been different? In what ways has it been similar?
- Do you live on campus at [institution]? [If no] Where do you live?
- What do you spend most of your time outside of class doing?
    - Who do you spend your time with? How did you meet those people?
- What clubs, groups, and activities are you involved with at your school and in the community?
    - [For each] How and why did you get involved? How much time per week do you spend doing things with this group? What do you take away from being involved in this group?
- So far, has there been any time when you struggled to be at college for any reason?
    - Where or to whom did you go for support? How did it work out?
- Is there anything else about your social life at college that you'd like to tell me?

College – Financial
- Do you have a job during the school year?
    - What are your main reasons for working during the school year?
- What is your current job? Do you work on campus or for an off-campus employer?
    - How did you find this job?
    - On average, how many hours do you work per week at this job?
- Has there been a time when you struggled financially at college?

    - Where did you go for support? How did it work out?
- Who mostly pays for your college?
    - What loans have you or your parents taken out to pay for college?
    - What scholarships have you received that have helped you to pay for college?
    - How else do you get the money to pay for college?
- Do you have enough money to do the things that most students at your college do?
- Is there anything else related to the financial aspect of college that you'd like to share?

College – Transitions and Supports

- Now, I'd like to speak about your transition to college and where you've found support at college. What has it been like to transition to college?
    - What has been easiest about your transition? What has been most challenging?
    - Where have you gotten support during your transition?
- How do you balance your academics, your social life, and your job?
- So far, when have you felt most like you belong at your college?
    - Have there been times when you haven't felt like you belonged?
    - During those times, where did you get support?
- What has your relationship to important individuals in your life been like while you've been at college?
    - In what ways do you get support from those people?
- Can you speak about your relationship with the Mitchell Institute?
    - So far, what have been the most rewarding parts about your relationship with the MI?
    - Staff members at the MI often speak of Scholars as being part of the MI "family." In what ways do you feel like you are part of that family? In what ways do you feel you are not a part of that family?
    - Looking ahead, what do you hope to gain from your relationship with the MI?
- Have you attended any Mitchell Institute events, like MILE I or III, Brunch, a President's reception, or another campus event? What was your experience at those events?
- Are you aware that as Promise Scholar you have a guaranteed Fellowship stipend of $1,500 to use for professional development?
    - Do you have any ideas as to how you might use your Fellowship?
    - What would make the Fellowship program most useful to you?
    - Looking ahead, what other ways do you think the MI could support your professional development?
- Are you aware that as a Promise Scholar you are eligible for financial support from the Mitchell Institute's emergency Promise Fund?
    - The Promise Fund is designed to help cover expenses that might otherwise interrupt your college enrollment. Other Scholars have used Promise Funds to help with car repairs, college textbooks, the purchase of a college laptop, health insurance costs, and living expenses. What are your thoughts on the Promise Fund?
    - In the future, do you think you would feel comfortable reaching out to the Mitchell Institute for financial assistance through the Promise Fund?

    - In what other ways could the MI help you overcome unexpected obstacles as you work to complete college?
- In what other ways could the Mitchell Institute support you?
- Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your transition to college and the support you've received at college, or about your overall college experience?

Childhood
- Now that we've talked about where you are now, I'd like to spend some time talking about how you got there. Are you comfortable telling me a bit about where and with whom you grew up?
    - What did important adults in your life do for work?
    - [Probe for: siblings, stability/moving, other adults in the home, parental involvement]
- Who were some of your childhood role models?
- What were some of your favorite things to do as a child?
- What was your relationship to school like as a child?
- Before we move on to speaking specifically about high school, were there any specific experiences during your childhood that had a lasting impact on who you are today?

Childhood – High School
- Every high school is a bit different. Could you tell me about what your high school was like?
    - [Probe for size, diversity, rural/suburban/urban, socioeconomic demographics]
- Talk to me about your high school classes. Did you take classes in any particular track or level?
    - Overall, what grades did you get in high school?
- As a teenager, what was life like for you outside of school? How did you spend your free time?
    - Were you involved in any organized school and community activities?
    - [For each] How did you get involved? What did you take away from participating?
    - Did you work during the school year in high school? During the summer?
    - [If yes] Where did you work? How did you get that job? On average, how many hours per week did you work?
- When you were in high school, how did you define success?
- Is there anything else about your high school experience that you want to share?

Childhood – Planning for the Future
- As a teenager, who were your role models? Who did you look up to?
- What experiences or moments motivated you to want to go to college?
    - When did you know that you wanted to go to college?
- When you were in high school, what did you dream of doing after high school? What did you think you would most likely end up doing after high school?
- At the time of your graduation, what were your actual immediate plans? Did you experience any challenges in achieving those plans?
    - [If yes] How did you overcome those challenges? Where did you get support?

- What did important individuals in your life expect you to do after high school?
- In your adolescent years, how was college talked about?
    - Did any important adults in your life attend college?
    - What did important people in your life say about the cost of college and paying for college?
    - Can you discuss those people's involvement with your future planning? Did you receive any support as you were applying?
- At your high school, how was college talked about?
    - Were there any people or experiences at your high school that were helpful in thinking about what you would do after high school?
    - Did you receive any support from adults at your high school as you were applying?
    - Did you ever visit or spend time on a college campus?
- Among your friends, how was college talked about?
- What was your experience applying to college like? How did you decide where to apply?
    - What were some of the costs or challenges you experienced while you were applying?
    - Where did you go for support as you were applying?
    - How did you hear about the Mitchell Institute and other scholarship organizations?
- Ultimately, why did you decide to attend [institution]?
- Most people have both positive and challenging aspects of their lives that motivate them to achieve their goals. What were some of the positive aspects of your childhood and teenage years that motivated you? What were some of the challenging aspects of your childhood and teenage years that motivated you?
- Before we move on, is there anything else about your childhood and teenage years that you think I should know?

Looking Ahead

- Now, I'd like to speak to you about your thoughts, plans, and goals for the future. What do you dream of doing after college? What about this is most exciting to you?
    - What will it take for you to reach this goal? Do you foresee any challenges?
    - Where will you go for support as you plan for life after college?
- Do you think you will pursue any further education after college, like graduate school? What is the highest degree you hope to earn?
- What do important people in your life want you to do after college?
    - How do you feel about their goals for you?
    - How do you think they would respond to the goals you have for yourself?
- What challenges have you overcome to get where you are today?
    - What challenges might still await you?
- Now, how do you define success?
- Is there anything else about your thoughts, plans, and goals for the future you want to share?
- What about yourself and your experiences are you most proud of?
- If there were no barriers to achieving your dreams, what would life be like for you in 10 years?

APPENDIX B

Interview Two Protocol

Introduction

Similarly, to the first interview you participated in during college I'd like to begin by talking about your enrollment at [College]. How many years did you attend? What degree did you earn or are you working towards your degree? When did you graduate or when do you expect to graduate if you have not graduated?

Post College – Moving out

Please answer the following questions about your experiences after attending college.

Social

- At the time of college graduation/separation, what were your actual immediate plans? Did you experience any challenges in achieving these plans?
- What was easiest about your transition out of college? What was most challenging?
    - Where did you get support during your transition?
- Can you discuss people or your communities' involvement with your future planning? Did you rely on family, friends, or other resources?
- What was your experience applying to jobs/graduate school?
    - How did you decide where to apply?
    - What were some of the costs or challenges you experienced while you were applying?
    - Did you receive any support as you were applying for jobs or graduate school? If yes, from whom?

Has there been any time when you struggled personally/professionally after college for any reason?

- If yes, where or to whom did you go for support? How did it work out?

Have social connections from your college network influenced your experiences after college?

Has the Mitchell Institute and other Mitchell scholars influenced your experiences after college?

Did being a Mitchell Promise Scholar support your transition out of college? If yes, how?

Economic

- How much college debt do you have if any?
    - If you have debt, are you concerned about paying it back?
    - Does the amount of debt you have influence your career choices?

Can you speak to how the Mitchell Promise Scholarship or other grants/aid influenced the amount of debt you currently have?

What is your current job?

- How did you find this job?
- On average, how many hours do you work per week at this job?
- Are you satisfied with your income? Why or why not?
- Are you satisfied with your current employment? Why or why not?

- If you graduated from college, did what you learned in college prepare you for this job?
- Ultimately, why did you decide to choose your current career path?

How do you maintain a work/life balance?
Is there anything else about your economic circumstances post college that you'd like to tell me or other things that have been a challenge transitioning to a career?

Cultural

- Did you participate in any formal programs during/after college to support your job search or choosing a career path?
    - If yes, looking back now, where these programs effective? Why or why not?
    - If no, would you have wanted such support and what would that support look like?

How confident are you in your abilities to achieve your goals now?
Have you grown as a leader?

- Did the Mitchell Institute play a role in your leadership development? Why or why not?
- If not MI, who did play a role in your leadership development?

Does earning a college degree represent a significant personal achievement for you? Why or why not?
Did recognition as a Mitchell Promise Scholar influence your college and post college aspirations?
Can you speak about your relationship with the Mitchell Institute currently?

- Staff members at the Mitchell Institute often discuss how it is "more than a scholarship." From your experience, in what ways is this true? In what ways is it not?

Have you or do you plan to continue attending MI events and being involved as an alumni? Why or why not?
How could the MI improve its programs and supports to be more beneficial to you post-college?
Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your transition to the workforce or graduate school?

Concluding thoughts

Now, I'd like to speak to you about your thoughts, plans, and goals for the future.

- How do you define success?
- Do you consider yourself successful?
- If there were no barriers to achieving your dreams, what would life be like for you in 10 years?
- What barriers you do anticipate might get in the way of you achieving your dream?
- Are you where you thought you would be/wanted to be at this point in your life? Why or why not?
- Is there anything else about your goals for the future you want to share?

APPENDIX C

Construct Table Sample

Themes	**Julie 2014**	**Eugene 2014**	**Karmen 2014**	**Jack 2016**	**Ken 2015**	**Jim 2016**	**Elaine 2016**	**Zane 2016**	**Nick 2016**
MI built confidence, leadership, professionalism	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
MILE III participant	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Be close to family important/stay in Maine	Y	Y/N	Y	Y	N	Y/N	Y	Y/N	Y
Recognition with MI helped aspirations	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Concerned about making more money	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y