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STRIVING FOR STATUS:
UNCOVERING THE MECHANISMS AND CONTEXT OF ELITE UNDERGRADUATES' SUMMER DECISION-MAKING

Dissertation
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Abstract

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Maximizing college summer breaks for career preparation and prestige accumulation is an established routine for elite undergraduates in the United States. Social reproduction, meritocracy, and changes to the world of work increasingly complicate this issue. Yet despite this additional burden, there is little research into the costs and benefits of participation and limited comprehension of how and why elite undergraduates internalize norms around summer breaks. This study fills that gap by introducing the High Prestige Summer Experience Model, a framework for understanding this decision-making process. Using interviews with 13 undergraduates and recent alumni from an Ivy League university, this grounded theory study presents the five phases of summer planning and participation. Students refine decisions at each stage by measuring possible opportunities against three mental measurements (Threshold of Acceptability, Narrative Currency Value, and Summer Prestige Ranking). The norms and beliefs inculcated through peer culture influence this paradigm through which they view their college summers. Underlying this process are the mediating factors that nudge and shape each particular student's decisions: personal context; campus context; and societal context. Participants reported that summer experiences play an important role in peer positioning. They carry a

narrative currency on campus and the ability to frame their experiences buys social acceptance for undergraduates. Summer experiences allow students to explore jobs in ways not normally available during term-time study, provide opportunities for personal development and growth, and equip them for their post-graduate elite status through capital accumulation. Participants noted that significant emotional and social consequences flow from actions in the summer experience process while simultaneously questioning its value to them in the long term. The findings of an additional comparison group of participants at a different selective campus indicate that this trend toward high prestige summer experiences is being normalized at lower rungs on the institutional prestige ladder as well.

key words: elite undergraduates; grounded theory; meritocracy; prestige hierarchy; social reproduction; summer experiences

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Introduction to the Problem

The uncertainty and pressure associated with entering an Ivy League institution and maintaining or establishing elite status is affecting college students from an increasingly diverse array of backgrounds, even as academic stratification more broadly is contributing to economic and status inequality (Collins, 1979; Reitz, 2017; Sandel, 2020). Undergraduates at these institutions navigate their way to high status professions and positions of power in society under the influence of faculty (Kamens, 1974), peers (Binder et al., 2016), and institutional and structural forces. An increasingly crucial step in this progression from elite undergraduates to elite alumni includes the accumulation of high-prestige summer experiences (HPSEs) in the form of competitive domestic and international summer research positions, internships, and high-status academic or experiential programs. Such experiences can build social networks, increase social polish, and serve as a source of capital for those without an initial infusion from their families of origin. Those groomed for power by involved parents seek to reconvert the social capital acquired throughout the elite university experience back into financial capital by scrabbling for occupations at the top of the prestige hierarchy, while those from less-advantaged families strive for upward mobility (Deresiewicz, 2008; Hamilton et al., 2018; Harris, 2018; Sandel, 2020). For all students, their educational and professional prospects are critical to their quest for status since they serve as proxies for competence and intelligence in the social arena (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 577). Students are traditionally steered by “student cultures and campus structures” at elite institutions toward high-wealth, high-status occupations (Binder et al., 2016, p. 20). However,

downward mobility and wealth inequality (Chetty et al., 2014, 2017) and a fierce meritocracy (Alon & Tienda, 2007; Mijs & Savage, 2020; Sandel, 2020) form the background context within which contemporary students attending colleges at the top of the prestige hierarchy now compete to acquire or shore up status during their undergraduate years by accumulating additional prestige during summer breaks. The more generalized striving behavior and associated pressures on elite students have been noted from academic and inequality standpoints before (see, for example, Brooks, 2001; Deresiewicz, 2014; Giridharadas, 2019; Harris, 2018; Sandel, 2020) but their manifestation during summer breaks as HPSE accumulation represents a previously unstudied example of the workings of social reproduction and illustrate how the continuing advantages for the few have the potential to crowd out talented, non-elite students in the labor market.

This tension goes beyond the individual student level and manifests at institutions of higher learning as well. The desire to maintain elite status as an institution is at times at odds with the university's espoused duty to democratize, equalize, and promote social justice (Altbach et al., 2011; Geiger, 2004). This practice of promoting the accumulation of prestige generally—and high-prestige summer experiences in particular—seems to be causing students stress and anxiety and may be exacerbating societal level inequalities, and this study provides understanding for individual motivations and experiences of institutional contexts. This topic also points to ways in which we as a society are potentially producing a group of "winners" who have been socialized into, and will likely replicate, imbalanced lives and problematic values as postgraduate adults (Sandel, 2020). The implications are likewise significant for society, as these elite institutions serve as

gatekeepers (Karen, 1990) to disproportionate shares of leadership positions in those sectors guiding and implementing policies in business, technology, and government (Binder et al., 2016; Binder & Abel, 2019; Collins, 1979; Rivera, 2015; Trow, 1973).

Purpose of the Study

This study represents an effort to understand the nature of prestige-building summer experiences at Top Ivy University (TIU)[1], one of the original high-status colonial-era colleges (Collins, 1979). This topic arose out of nine years of work in residence life at this school, eight of which I also spent as a sophomore academic advisor charged with approving students' plans of study and declarations of major. This role overlapped with one that assisted with student mental health crises and Title IX issues as well, giving me insight into the challenges faced by these elite students: stress and worry about meeting deadlines and juggling responsibilities, the pressure to "measure up" and "be/do enough" relative to peers, and intense striving around careers and status. As a graduate of the same college, I recognized some of these difficulties as ones navigated by myself and classmates roughly ten years earlier, but other struggles were unfamiliar. The novel phenomenon that caught my attention and forms the heart of this dissertation is one that I have termed the high-prestige summer experience (HPSE): non-curricular, resource-intensive opportunities that students pursue and accumulate throughout their undergraduate years. A fuller definition appears in the next section.

The attendant processes of pursuing HPSEs may have consequences for some undergraduates. Anecdotally, students had reported during advising conversations that anxiety was a regular part of the summer planning process and perceived that they may

[1] A pseudonym for the university at which the study took place. More information about this appears in Chapter Three.

not be measuring up to others or their own idealized sense of where they should be on the achievement ladder. The effects of HPSE accumulation and striving behaviors might exacerbate the existing epidemic in student mental health and overwhelm (Twenge et al., 2019). There is also the question of how the broader process of socialization into the elites taking place at a highly selective university might play out for summer experiences. For example, peer and institutional messaging can signal what counts as prestigious during the summer and therefore what counts as worthwhile for post-graduate planning as well.

The disintegration of guaranteed pathways to social mobility was already an issue pre-pandemic in the wake of the Great Recession (Reeves, 2017). The rise in alternate work arrangements with fewer hours and less stability (Katz & Krueger, 2018); lower gross domestic product growth rates and increasingly unequal distribution of that growth (Chetty et al., 2017); and narrow conceptions of what constitutes an appropriately high-status occupation (Binder et al., 2016) were already complicating factors for elite college graduates. The threat of downward mobility and status incongruence (Dogan, 2000) can activate elites to engage in protective behaviors (Khan & Jerolmack, 2013; Tevington, 2018) to shore up status, which might lead to a greater likelihood of engaging in summer prestige accumulation. The stressors and uncertainty of life in the COVID-19 era compounded pre-existing economic anxieties and heightened the drive among those who were already on the fast track to elite status to make sure that they stay there. This dissertation starts from the assumption that HPSEs are a particular manifestation of social reproduction in an uncertain environment that allow students to feel like they are doing something to mitigate the risks around them. Prestige building and social capital

accumulation might become even more important in light of the far-reaching economic impacts of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic as they did in the wake of the Great Recession, when some research found that anxiety about economic security was highest among the most privileged and led to "the activation of cultural capital to ensure the reproduction of their class standing" (Tevington, 2018, p. 204).

Definition of Terms

High-prestige summer experiences (HPSEs) are out-of-term, non-curricular summer opportunities to enrich the term-time college experience. They confer knowledge and experience preferenced as prestigious or high-status in the elite campus setting (e.g., international travel, independent research, work in elite professional service firms/technology industry) and have career-building and network-building elements (the latter of which is a mere reconversion of this social capital into financial capital in later career building). They require an intensive outlay of resources to participate, typically meaning time to wind through the multi-step application processes and financial resources to sustain summers in expensive metropolitan or international locations. HPSEs may or may not come with a stipend, but any income generation is incidental to students' purpose for pursuing them. Students who need to secure funding beyond family contributions need to progress through an additional application process to obtain a stipend for living expenses.

This definition is informed by related bodies of literature and the interview findings from the study that point to the types of summer experiences that count as acceptable and confer status in an elite undergraduate setting. This concept of HPSEs demonstrates a means through which undergraduates can establish, reinforce, or extend

their status. This is increasingly important since being an elite undergraduate is an important initial step for future elite membership but offers no guarantee, as students compete with their classmates for prestigious post-graduate prospects. HPSEs help their efforts by building social capital, broadening professional networks, and in some coveted industries, leading directly to full-time postgraduate employment offers. These HPSEs are not only a way for undergraduates as individuals to accumulate prestige and stand out in the labor market, however. They also serve an institutional function for universities in two ways. First, by promoting HPSEs during the recruitment and yield portions of the admissions cycle, universities can lure the most high-achieving students who are most likely to become high-prestige alumni. Second, by placing their students into prestigious summer experiences, the university can increase the reach of its brand and increase the likelihood that its undergraduates will obtain prestigious employment. This cycle of prestige building therefore demonstrates how HPSEs can simultaneously serve as a maintenance mechanism for prestige at both the institutional and individual levels.

Research Questions

The aim of this study was to investigate how and why—and with what perceived benefits and costs—students accumulate and participate in prestige-building summer experiences at one of the most elite universities in the U.S. The study examined how elite undergraduates act to reproduce or expand their social advantage by using summers for enhancement of their postgraduate prospects; how they perceive, receive, and act on what positions them for future elite status; and the messages from their environment that they internalize around HPSEs. Therefore, the following research question and sub-questions guided this study:

- How do elite undergraduates receive, understand, act on, and create messages about high-prestige summer experiences?
    - How do undergraduates at an elite university describe their experience of considering, pursuing, and/or participating in high-prestige summer experiences?
    - What is the source, content, and stance of the messages that elite undergraduates receive about high-prestige summer experiences? How do they internalize them as normal and/or necessary?
    - How do undergraduates participate in the creation and transmission of the campus narrative around high-prestige summer experiences?

Conceptual Framework and Context

High prestige summer experiences were considered through the lens of social reproduction and capital accumulation, highlighting the sociological nature of the phenomenon and the central role of unwritten, high-status knowledge transmission. The constructs under investigation in this body of work rest on an understanding of social reproduction; prestige and status hierarchies; status groups; the role of elite universities in the United States; threats to economic stability and changes to the world of work; and the existing, albeit narrow, knowledge base about undergraduate summer experiences. These and other related bodies of literature are explored in depth in Chapter 2 of the dissertation, but a brief introduction follows here of the conceptual framework in which this study was embedded.

The current generation of undergraduate students find themselves leaving campus and embarking on their professional careers at a precarious time. Not only is the job

market suffering from the effects of a global pandemic, but other recent changes to the traditional structure of the working world have given rise to a gig economy and chronic underemployment. The risk of derailment on the career track is high for students graduating today. After a childhood of optimizing every opportunity available, elite undergraduates are primed to grasp firmly any perceived opportunity to accumulate additional status or prestige and attach it to their college resumé. The right summer experiences are not only a presumed pipeline to high salary, high status occupations, but they can also provide students with the right lifestyle markers that count towards elite membership. The instrumental value of summer breaks means that elite undergraduates can and will accumulate experiences that position them optimally both in the labor market and in the elite social sphere. Aside from any internal motivations, these students are also heavily influenced by the wider context in which they find themselves. The prevailing ideology of meritocracy tells them that if they work hard and achieve success, it is because they deserve it. Moreover, if the system in which they have been named winners is a just one, then there is no reason for them to question the system, which has serious implications for society.

The phenomenon of accumulating high-prestige summer experiences (HPSEs) that I noted in my work in residential life and academic advising seems to have evolved out of a desire to maximize not only one's chances of job market success but also to extend elite status beyond campus into the wider social world. In the same way that scholars have found that students encounter new "opportunities and discourses that trigger them to 'want' the jobs being offered" as they consider career tracks (Binder et al., 2016, p. 21), we can expect that these same discourses trigger them to want the

particular summer experiences that an elite institution or peer culture signals to them as being prestigious. These HPSEs occur within the context of forces and pressures acting on students to seek to make themselves competitive in establishing careers after graduation.

Research Design Overview

This is a qualitative study using interviews to understand how undergraduates at an elite institution receive, understand, and act on messages about high-prestige summer experiences. Grounded theory provided the theoretical framework for my approach to sampling, data collection, and data analysis. Grounded theory allows for the iterative data collection and analysis from undergraduates and recent alumni of their thoughts, opinions, and experiences with summer experiences and is an approach best suited to problems "when no theory exists or existing theories are inadequate" (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 241). This describes the state of research into how undergraduates experience HPSEs very aptly, as there is a dearth of knowledge about what elite undergraduates do with their summer breaks, why they make those choices, and what consequences they bear as a result.

Grounded theory does not presume an existing framework for concepts but rather allows a theory to emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in this case, the insights of the undergraduates and recent alumni who have experience with the phenomenon. This study was conducted at one elite university (Top Ivy University) located in an urban setting in the northeastern United States, using the reasoning explicated by others in the field "to see how the processes of elite career construction operate at the top of elite higher education" (Binder et al., 2016, p. 23). A setting section

in Chapter 3 provides some context about the college and what it is like to be there for students, based on previously collected institutional artifacts, documents, and conversations with career services staff. As that chapter will detail, the major source of data is the interviews with 13 undergraduate students and recent alumni about their college summer planning and experiences.

Significance of the Study

This research constitutes a starting place from which to understand the phenomenon of high-prestige summer experiences at the institutional and individual levels. Very few studies look at how students use their summer breaks, let alone the motivations and consequences of those choices. Few studies likewise are available that examine the capital- and identity-constrained extracurricular decisions of elite undergraduates. Despite this additional burden on students who must stay on the achievement treadmill all year long, there is little research into the costs and benefits of participation and little understanding of how and why elite undergraduates internalize norms around these high prestige summer experiences. Furthermore, there is a dearth of basic knowledge about the decision-making process and array of summer opportunities themselves.

This study is significant because it offers a foundational understanding of how and why students participate in high-prestige summer experiences, in particular the motivation for participating in a process that carries significant costs and burdens. It sheds light on how undergraduates rank summer opportunities with respect to prestige, how they experience the summer planning process, the benefits they perceive of accumulating HPSEs, their sense of how summers can help or hinder the transition to the

working world, and their understanding of the institutional and contextual messages around prestige and elite status that saturate their environment. The study also touches upon how the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has affected their summer planning, the value of internships, and their perception of HPSEs' value and ability to pursue them. Although at the time of writing it is presumed that vaccines and new treatment options will mitigate the medical effects of the pandemic itself, the return to virtual environments in times of public health crises may be with us for generations to come and even beginning to understand that impact on undergraduate prestige building is significant. The pressures on elite college graduates to reconvert social capital into financial capital through entry into high-status occupations may even increase with the perception of this cohort of undergraduates that economic normalcy might be months or years away.

The hope is that this work helps to explain a phenomenon that does not fit existing theories well, and by exploring the nature of high-prestige summer experiences, it is possible to see if those theories need to be expanded or revised to account for it. Research has already demonstrated paradoxes of high-prestige education, "whereby elite universities, rather than opening up unlimited job prospects to their students, actually restricted them" (Binder et al., 2016, p. 26); this research might demonstrate that the pursuit and accumulation of HPSEs likewise restricts the scope and opportunity of professional prospects and social mobility. The accrual of prestige and status over the summer serves a post-graduate sorting function that undermines university admissions and financial aid policies that seek to broaden and expand opportunities beyond the elite.

Limitations of the Study

While the final chapter will include a more in-depth discussion of this study's limitations, a brief word here is merited. This study presents an initial look at the phenomenon of high-prestige summer experiences; moreover, it is an intensive look at a single extreme context, led by a former participant, and occurring during an unprecedented historical global health event. As such, this study brings with it the attendant concerns about potential generalization to other settings and contexts. However, given the exploratory nature of the study and desire to investigate a phenomenon in its more extreme manifestation, this single-site study still has the potential to increase knowledge and pave the way for further research and understanding.

Personal Experience with the Topic and Setting

It is an interesting experience to come to a topic and a setting about which one has an extensive body of firsthand personal and professional knowledge and begin to acquire the theoretical and academic foundations after the fact. As I alluded to earlier in this chapter, the initial kernel of a research question emerged directly from my eight years of work directly with undergraduates at an elite college in the northeastern United States, from which I and my husband had both graduated as well. I lived in a residential community of under 400 sophomore, junior, and senior students and served in a variety of academic and nonacademic positions in my time there, ranging from title IX work to mental health resources to intramural sports. It is important to describe that in this residential community, students and staff live together and make use of common spaces in a way that is not necessarily typical of other selective residential schools. For example, the community shared its own dining Hall, gymnasium, and library. I ate my meals with

students, saw them in the laundry room, played on sports teams with them, and some even babysat my children over the years. Our lives were entwined in a way that goes far beyond the typical advisor-advisee relationship. It was natural that advising conversations often veered into the more personal and self-reflective. I and my fellow residential tutors noted over the years an increasing importance being placed on how students made use of their summers, which was growing alongside the anxiety and pressure experienced by students to maximize an already rich undergraduate experience. When I left my residential role and transitioned to non-resident advising, it became possible to pursue this topic without concerns about having academic and disciplinary authority over the students.

I had my own opinions about the HPSE phenomenon before the study began, which had developed out of my observations that my advisees and entryway students were reporting higher levels of stress around summer planning and decision-making, and this stress was hitting earlier and earlier each year. Students devoted hours of their time to researching, applying to, and interviewing for summer experiences, but it was hard to discern where this drive to accumulate these experiences came from and what benefit was to be derived from completing them. I was at times skeptical that this frenzy could be worth it to students. Furthermore, I had participated in summer experiences myself when I was an undergraduate that would fall under the HPSE definition. I spent a summer in a business management internship for a Fortune 500 company and another one volunteering for two months in orphanages and hospitals in Russia. I had mixed feelings about how much my own experiences had added value to my college years and whether they had enhanced my graduate school and job prospects. I was actively self-checking

throughout the data collection and analysis process of this study because I realized how important it was to bracket those opinions in the interest of completing the research without that bias.

Outline of the Study

This first chapter has been an introduction and overview to the problem of how undergraduates at prestigious American universities are socialized into elite status and the way that this manifests through the accumulation of high-prestige summer experiences. The second chapter will provide a deeper exploration of the relevant bodies of literature which have influenced the direction and design of the study. Of particular importance, sections on social reproduction and elite universities and their chartering purposes will anchor the chapter. The third chapter will elaborate on the research design, providing a rationale for the use of grounded theory, outlining the decisions involved in sampling and instrument design, and providing the step-by-step process of data gathering and analysis. Chapter 4 will present the findings of the study while Chapter 5 will weave those findings into a model that explains the summer experience process for elite students. The final chapter then returns to a summary of those findings and a discussion through the lens of the research questions and relevant literature, concluding with recommendations for policy, practice, and further research.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

To understand why and how students would devote their summer breaks to intensive, often grueling, prestige- and status-building experiences requires first understanding the social and educational context in which they are situated. During any time in history, it would be likely that these undergraduates would be seeking to secure their membership in the elite ranks after graduation. However, the combined effects of dramatic economic and labor changes since the turn of the millennium and the more recent effects of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic suggest that today's undergraduates might have an even greater motivation to do all that they can during their college years to assure their financial and social position once they leave campus.

The goal with the literature review for this grounded theory study was to provide "an armamentarium of categories and hypotheses on substantive and formal levels" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 46) to aid in the generation of specific theory for the phenomenon under investigation. To that end, I discuss the ways that the social role of higher education in America has changed over time before delving into the particular way that elite institutions form individuals to assume elite positions in society upon graduation. In addition to schools, families play a significant role in how elite status is produced and reproduced, so I discuss the forces of social reproduction and status attainment and maintenance. The background context for these sociological forces is comprised of an ideology of meritocracy, persistent wealth inequality, radical changes to the world of work, and a global pandemic that stopped global economies and had already claimed more than 6.3 million lives globally and 1 million in the United States by August 2022 (Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University, 2022).

The Changing Social Role of Higher Education in the United States

Despite other tasks and mandates, "the education of undergraduate students has been and remains the signature task of U.S. universities...in the minds of the American public the principal purpose of universities is to transform young people into 'college graduates'" (Geiger, 2004, p. 76). It is interesting that this idea has been so enduring given that other elements of the American higher educational landscape have been more changeable. Initially, the purpose of higher education was most viewed as serving the needs of democracy and therefore the state as a public good (Gutmann, 1987). This belief found expression as the Industrial Revolution, the German research university's ethic of knowledge creation in service of the state, and the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 converged to produce federally-funded colleges oriented toward agricultural and mechanical arts education and innovation (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008). These postsecondary institutions were examples of the unique 'intelligence-in-action' emphasis in American higher education that led to improvements in local political and economic conditions as a result of research (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008; Collins, 1979; Trow, 1973). The dialogue around higher education as a public good focused on what the colleges and universities were producing and reproducing, and whether it was the individual or the public that benefitted from it. There was a general idea that faculty were educating tomorrow's leaders, decision-makers, and citizens, and they should therefore be good stewards of the knowledge they possessed. There was an implicit agreement that academic freedom was afforded to the faculty as a privilege by society, since it was necessary to meet academia's obligations to society (Brubacher & Rudy, 2008). In this sense, universities became "sanctuaries of nonrepression" that serve democracy by

providing a space where “new and unorthodox ideas are judged on the basis of their intellectual merits” (Gutmann, 1987, p. 174).

Higher education also served American society as a public good through the related mechanisms of social mobility and career preparation. This was part of the second phase of its evolution from elite to mass education (Trow, 1973). Universities originally served gatekeeping functions because their social reproduction efforts meant keeping some people out. The converse of this exclusion was that once students were able to enter the realm of higher education, they too were able to pass through the gates and gain access to “many of the most valuable social offices, particularly in the professions” (Gutmann, 1987, p. 181). Immigrants of both the first wave of the 1840s and the second wave of 1890 to 1920 took advantage of this opportunity. Jewish students in particular “quickly identified education as one of the most accessible and expeditious ways of achieving upward mobility,” which led to their high enrollments that in turn explain the wariness with which they were regarded by administrations (Bowen, 2005, p. 28).

The United States is unique in that it had the structures for mass higher education before it had demand, largely as a result of the Morrill Acts (Trow, 2000). The land-grant institutions were ahead of their time as mass higher education institutions oriented equally toward scholarship, vocational preparation, and public service (Trow, 1973, p. 21). World War II and the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, known more widely as the G.I. Bill, was critical in opening the gates of American higher education to a large group of middle-class and working-class men and women to fill those colleges and universities. A 1947 Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching survey found that 10 percent of the surveyed veterans “would not have gone to college without

government support, while an additional 10 percent 'probably' would not have attended" (Bowen, 2005, p. 31). Even faculty members were more conscious and desiring of upward mobility after the war, and they were more ambitious about achieving it (Bender, 1997).

This massification of American higher education, however, was incompatible with the existing elite education model characterized by tutorial and seminar instruction, personal relationships between students and professors, and campus residency (Trow, 1973). Massification demanded a shift toward skill-building for elite roles in technical and economic organizations instead of only the traditional post-graduate pathways, and less emphasis on shaping character as well. Student expansion meant changes to curriculum, student workload, and faculty-to-student ratios. Even this trend quickly evolved into the next phase after massification, however, and higher education in the United States is now characterized as universal access (Trow, 2000).

A significant majority of Americans now expect that education be "practical and pay dividends" (Bowen, 2005, p. 22); this theme is consistent with the drives toward vocational training, economic growth, and social leveling of massification and universal access (Trow, 1973, p. 29). More and more Americans agree that "a college education is vital to success in the work world" (Baum & Schwartz, 2012, p. 3). Many students are actually looking for college to provide a gateway to better job opportunities ahead of all other considerations and this has led to internships supplanting university classes and formal credentials in importance in some fields (Khan, 2012). In the Chronicle of Higher Education's (2019) last pre-pandemic Almanac data, nearly 85 percent of first-year students said ability to get a better job was "a very important" reason for attending

college. This commodification of higher education and focus on economic benefits even colors the efforts of organizations otherwise championing the ways in which higher education leads to better lives and "foster[s] a healthier, more democratic society" (Postsecondary Value Commission, 2021, p. 9). Written by staff from the Institute for Higher Education Policy and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Postsecondary Value Framework clearly centers an "equitable value pipeline" at the core of its definition of how students can and should measure the value of a college education, incorporating short-term wages and earnings and long-term wealth accumulation into its economic return thresholds (Postsecondary Value Commission, 2021, p. 13). While the wisdom of defining the value of education by its monetary returns can be debated, the contention outlined in the Postsecondary Value and Framework inarguably represents a decided movement towards conceptualizing higher education as a private good and personal investment funded by the individual for a career outcome. A focus on what an individual gains economically from a college degree distorts the labor market with an overemphasis on capturing private wages as opposed to public interest and generating a social product, such as would be seen in contrasting careers such as banking and law with education and caregiving (Markovits, 2021). This dovetails with the increasing commoditization of higher education on the part of the institutions themselves and the role that colleges and universities play in the system of academic capitalism that profits from knowledge in the private marketplace (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009).

Interestingly, despite the clear shift in the meaning of college from a privilege to a right to an obligation (Trow, 1973, p. 5), there are still many of the institutions from the earlier phases alive and thriving in the American higher education landscape. The system

might transform around them, but elite schools retain their distinctive characteristics. In fact, the widening gap between tiers of colleges and universities preserves the original function of elite higher education which "is concerned primarily with shaping the mind and character of the ruling class, as it prepares students for broad elite roles in government and the learned professions" (Trow, 1973, pp. 7–8). American higher education has continued to experience increasing stratification over the years (Collins, 1979; Geiger, 2002; Trow, 2000), with metrics such as graduation rates and loan levels growing further apart for research institutions and community colleges (Reitz, 2017).

Elite Undergraduate Institutions

While many American undergraduates might view higher education as a training ground for the workforce and a means to employment, there is a significant minority of colleges that purposefully eschew the pre-professional preparation—the highly selective, elite undergraduate institutions. Categories and nomenclature of American higher education institutions have always been vague compared to English, German and French counterparts—even the distinction between public and private was hazy into the 19th century and more dependent on legislative clout (Hawkins, 1999)—but top private universities in the United States have always been at the selective end of any spectrum. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, as the reform and expansion movement in colleges began, a prestige hierarchy emerged that placed at the top the older colonial-era schools that embraced these changes, the new well-endowed private universities (such as Johns Hopkins University) and the large midwestern public universities. The most prestigious of all of these was and remains the Ivy League schools (Collins, 1979). They were among the earliest to screen students through special entrance examinations, and in

the post-World War One years, these institutions actively capped enrollment to better "mold the collegiate experience of their students" in addition to forming character and intellect (Geiger, 2004). These schools, organized around research, are known for enrolling the best students in the country and collecting "a national meritocratic elite" (Kamens, 1974, p. 367). Colleges and universities compete to attract "super students," those with at least one 700+ score on the SAT (Geiger, 2002), most of whom attend private institutions. Prestigious public research universities, especially those with some type of honors college program, can compete effectively for them only because of their reputational power.

The residential element of elite undergraduate institutions is crucial to their mission of character development and shaping the mind for varied elite roles after graduation, which is why colleges like Harvard and Yale are sub-structured into smaller residential communities like Oxford and Cambridge (Trow, 1973, p. 11) to maintain the size and character of traditional elite schooling models. Residence is required for elite schooling because congregation on a central campus and frequent association facilitate a common identity and shared norms and values that are a central part of the process of elite formation at these schools (Trow, 1973).

These elite universities have seen the market forces of finance and prestige take an increasing role starting in the 1990s and the opening years of the 21st century so that "the competition for status has made an institution's selectivity its foremost badge of prestige," converging in what Geiger (2004) refers to as "the selectivity sweepstakes—the annual contest to enroll the nation's best and brightest freshmen" (2004, p. 76). Harvard College offers an example from the tiny group of institutions at the very top of

the prestige hierarchy of U.S. higher education—it is so selective that it admitted only 4.6% of its 43,330 applicants for the class of 2023 (Harvard College Admissions and Financial Aid, 2021) News such as this makes it clear why parents and students find the business of elite academics so competitive and anxiety inducing (Binder & Abel, 2019, p. 42). Selectivity is a key component in national and international ranking lists, which are used by more than just high schoolers planning their applications; the United Kingdom is using a compilation of such rankings to administer its "High Potential Individual" visa program (Government of the United Kingdom, 2022; "World's Top Graduates Get New UK Visa Option," 2022).

Sandel (2020) argues that the 2019 "Varsity Blues" admissions scandal engineered by William Singer is simply emblematic of the way that admission to elite colleges has become the object of intense striving; a degree from the right university "has come to be seen as the primary vehicle of upward mobility for those seeking to rise and the surest bulwark against downward mobility for those hoping to remain ensconced in the comfortable classes" (Sandel, 2020, p. 13). The scandal involved a test cheating scheme and an athletic recruitment scheme, involving dozens of wealthy parents who bribed test administrators to obtain high scores for their children or bribed university officials and coaches to accept unqualified students as athletic recruits (Taylor, 2021). In an ironic twist, these wealthy parents are now paying sentencing consultants and mitigation experts to spin their stories in front of the judge with hopes of avoiding jail time (Taylor, 2021).

Highly selective private universities are an appropriate place to study prestige because of their gatekeeping (Karen, 1990) and chartering functions (Kamens, 1974).

Schools in general have long been viewed by sociologists as key "role-allocating devices in modern society" (Kamens, 1974, p. 354) and high prestige universities in particular serve a chartering or licensing function, approving the individuals that pass through its halls (Kamens, 1974). Consonant with this theory, the elite tier disproportionately educates graduates that go on to "assume an outsized proportion of the uppermost positions in the occupational structure" (Binder et al., 2016, p. 21). Degrees or "educational patents" from the right university confer elite status on individuals. The linkage between education and occupation is particularly tightly coupled: "the importance of elite education is highest where it is involved in selection of new members of organizational elites...similarly, schools that produce the most elite graduates will be most closely linked to elite occupations" (Collins, 1979, p. 36).

A liberal arts education of the type that elite schools provide arguably does more than transmit skills and knowledge, it develops the capacity to adapt to change and to learn new things quickly (Trow, 1973). It also develops the capacity for critical thinking and discernment:

> It takes a discriminating mind, a mind that is already stocked with knowledge and trained in critical discernment, to distinguish between…the trivial and the important, the ephemeral and the enduring, the true and the false. It is just this sense of discrimination that the humanities have traditionally cultivated. (Himmelfarb, 1997, p. 204)

This cultivation of a discerning mind with a broad knowledge base is prized by elite undergraduates. When asked about their college selection process, undergraduates at Harvard and Stanford reported not selecting the most directly, vocationally relevant

school (for example, MIT or the undergraduate program Wharton School of Business) because of a strong preference for obtaining a "'well-rounded' education while pursuing prestigious careers…[and] shoring up symbolic status and an ontological sense of eliteness" (Binder & Abel, 2019, p. 50). This is consistent with Weber's (1921/2010) theory about *Stände*[2] .stratification because the more privileged *Stände* look down on common physical labor or anything resembling 'mercantile activity' and raw economic acquisition (2010, p. 146). High-school students seeking membership in the elite ranks will therefore act in a similar manner and select the colleges and universities whose campus culture can best instill the requisite lifestyle of the *Stand* or estate to which they aspire. This movement away from good but not best relates to the trend about which Deresiewicz (2008, 2014) urged caution—elite education inculcates norms that foreclose regular, satisfying career opportunities for their students because they are a poor fit with elite values.

Campus Culture at Elite Undergraduate Institutions

Admission to an elite college or university gives students membership to "a small privileged institution with a very clear set of common interests embodied in common values, symbols and ceremonies, modes of speech, and lifestyle" (Trow, 1973, p. 22). Students, staff, and faculty all participate in constructing an environment on elite campuses that values certain types of cultural knowledge. Some scholarship points to ways in which "informal university practices exacerbate class differences among undergraduates" (Jack, 2016, p. 2) by assuming cultural knowledge about educational

[2] This is the original term that Weber used in his writing and recent translators have encouraged it be taken up again given that German already has the word '*Status*' that he chose not to use. *Stand* is closer to the French idea of *état* (estate) and "reflects a style of life, and an assumption about the rights that go with this status" (Weber, 1921/2010, p. 150).

institutions. Mastering these "hidden curricula" is central to succeeding in these environments, and it is students from the "right" backgrounds who enter these educational spaces with the right knowledge (Khan & Jerolmack, 2013). An elite college is in some ways designed to serve as a total institution: "by suppressing outside distinctions [it] can build up an orientation to its own system of honor" (Goffman, 1958, p. 83). Another way that researchers have considered these institutions is as status seminaries designed to produce a certain type of person, one who is part of a status group in which members "have similar life-styles, common educational backgrounds, and pursue similar types of occupations (Cookson, Jr. & Persell, 1985, p. 22). They have encouraged class endogamy by bringing together upper middle class children and forming them into friendship groups, which facilitates elite status group formation in the United States (Collins, 1979, p. 125). Degrees from elite schools are the new inheritances, and marriages in which both spouses have a college degree grew by 800 percent between 1960 and 2010 (Markovits, 2021).

Scholars have established that residential schools, much like other total institutions, have the capacity to smooth over background differences and create new identities and preferences among students (Binder et al., 2016; Cookson, Jr. & Persell, 1985; Deresiewicz, 2014). For elite undergraduates, what is considered valuable and prestigious is formed through a combination of peer cultures and campus structures. For example, Binder (2016) found that students on elite campuses construct a "peer prestige system…with its ranking of careers and companies as well as its drawing of the collectively understood lines that delineate ordinary from high-status jobs" (p. 35). The increasing institutional stratification and competition to enter the elite-dominating

universities manifests through peer culture and socialization processes in these schools (Brooks, 2001). Students internalize messages about employment that include qualities that will appeal to parents (steady, good pay), peers (impressive, “cool”), and self (fulfilling, something they are passionate about) (Petersen, 2019). The messages and norms surrounding elite students are so pervasive and interwoven that Deresiewicz uses the term “a constellation of values” (2008, para. 3).

Boundaries are also an important element of elite campuses. Symbolic boundaries around prestige are a way that already elite undergraduates delineate their status, even relative to other would-be elites, whether through condemning an overly preprofessional focus at the undergraduate program at Wharton School of Business or deeming MIT too technical (Binder & Abel, 2019). Elite schools have clear and sometimes impermeable boundaries separating them from society as well. The physical walls around the Old Yard at Harvard and the many gates at Yale are an example of the “extreme case” of demarcation sometimes present at these schools (Trow, 1973, p. 11).

Students in elite residential school environments show a curious contrast between the professed principle of hard work and the desire to appear at ease and as if tasks and responsibilities were effortless; those openly striving to do well are typically social outcasts (Khan & Jerolmack, 2013). In previous work, Khan (2011) identified this embodiment of ease as an important demarcation between classes, valued because of the difficulty in lower classes acquiring it. Further, he argues that narratives about meritocracy and hard work are “rhetorical cover” for students in elite educational settings to mask privilege born out of inequality:

> Talking to students, I overwhelmingly heard about their hard work, and

> how much they earned their success. The students similarly expressed a commitment to social justice and a narrative of just how far the world had come. The lessons from their accounts were of past injustices, present opportunities, and the necessity of work, discipline, and talent to make it. The world is a meritocracy. (Khan & Jerolmack, 2013, p. 14)

Social Reproduction

Scholars generally agree that institutions "do much of society's dirty work in reproducing privilege and disadvantage" (DiMaggio, 2012, p. 15). Higher education institutions in particular are seen as a prime reproducer of social structures (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/2000; DiMaggio, 2012; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Elite educational institutions play a major role in social class stratification as they assist elites' movements to maintain their advantages; for many families, this takes the form of investment in children's cultural capital that can be converted in turn to prestigious degrees and then back to economic capital through high status jobs (Bourdieu, 1985/2016). Social reproduction is essentially this process through which those in power shape society through actions and words to maintain their status and reproduce categorical distinctions of class (DiMaggio, 2012).

Bourdieu (1985/2016) was concerned with the ways in which dominant and dominated classes perpetuated conflict (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). He argued that reintroducing the concept of capital and elaborating on its multiple forms, its accumulation, and its effects could help us to understand how society can reproduce visible and invisible structures (Bourdieu, 1985/2016). It is not merely a game of chance with the possibility "of changing one's social status quasi-instantaneously" in an

"imaginary universe of perfect competition or perfect equality of opportunity" (2016, p. 83). This accumulation of resources and knowledge takes time, which is a critical feature in how one generation can gather and transmit resources to the next. Class differences are reproduced not just because of material inequalities but also because of the beliefs that legitimize these differences (Bourdieu, 1984). For example, the concept of meritocracy, which will be discussed later, is one such legitimizing ideal justice principle.

Schools and universities serve a sorting function and can at once "be egalitarian institutions and agents of inequality" (Domina et al., 2017, p. 311) because they position members of society in distal categories and legitimize that distance with status-differentiated credentials. Indeed, this is why Bourdieu and Passeron found that all pedagogic work in schooling is merely a function of the distance between the habitus inculcated by one's family and that offered by one's school (1977/2000). The institution has the power to dictate what is worth knowing, and parents have limited power in countering these narratives. Research demonstrates that parents tend to teach their children what they themselves know with respect to embodied capital and other elements of class stratification, with Hamilton et al. (2018) even calling parenting "a central mechanism through which class inequities within K-12 schools are produced" and hypothesizing that parenting behaviors are likewise a driver of reproduced inequality at the tertiary level (p. 111). Critics of Ivy League schools' claims to diversity point out that theirs is a diversity almost entirely of race and ethnicity, but largely homogenous with regards to class (Deresiewicz, 2008).

In the workforce, examples of social reproduction among elite undergraduates can be found in the elite professional service (EPS) firms (in the fields of consulting, finance,

and law), which draw a large number of these students because of the high starting salaries and paths to leadership positions in other industries established by former EPS staff (Guillaume & Halper, 2020; Rivera, 2012). Hiring in these firms is a process of skills sorting and cultural matching on dimensions of leisure pursuits, experiences, and shared culture evinced through lifestyle markers, partly because these firms typically rely on revenue-generating employees with limited human resources training to do the interviewing and selection (Rivera, 2012). Patterns of hiring emerge in which interviewers have preferenced and championed applicants resembling them economically and racially and prioritized typically upper class activities and extracurriculars that require large amounts of capital (such as squash, tennis, rowing, etc.) as proxies for interviewees' capacity for self-discipline (Rivera, 2015). These high-visibility industries are difficult to escape, even for students not interested in pursuing them. Investment banks and consulting firms are willing to fund on-campus recruiting events to the tune of "hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars per year" to attract elite undergraduates (Rivera, 2015, p. 280), and campus career service offices at some elite schools have staff devoted to guiding students through the application process for such jobs (Binder et al., 2016). In fact, it can be almost impossible for those outside these elite undergraduate pipelines to EPS firms to break into these careers because of how much they rely on the on-campus recruitment system (Rivera, 2015).

Status

This study defines status as "the respect, admiration, and voluntary deference an individual is afforded by others, based on the individual's perceived instrumental social value" and "is also known as 'prestige' or 'sociometric status,' because it is grounded in

social perceptions and evaluations of the individual" (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 575). While it may be easy to dismiss status or prestige as an abstract concept, an exhaustive review of the international literature demonstrated the cross-cultural importance of status and the negative outcomes associated with its absence: high status leads to higher self-esteem, higher subjective well-being, and better health, while "being accorded low status by others not only damages subjective well-being and self-esteem, it also promotes psychological and physical pathology" (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 583). Status is context dependent because of the way that local value systems will dictate what individuals in a given setting hold as valuable (Anderson et al., 2015). It might be based on achievement or ascription, though it is difficult to disentangle social origin and innate ability. Collins (1979) found no real shift from ascription to achievement even with the rapid expansion of American higher education in the second half of the twentieth century, but there has also been increased stratification as discussed earlier, which may have concentrated status in the surviving institutions from the elite phase of its evolution (Trow, 1973).

Weber's (1921/2010) writings on social honor and status groups, known as *Stände*, certainly emphasized the ascribed nature of this type of status which relied heavily on distance and exclusiveness. Membership in the various *Stände* was based on personal characteristics (marital status, physical or psychological eligibility), political affiliation, or class situation (p. 145). The stratification of *Stände* followed their "social assessment of honor" (p. 142) and contrasted sharply with any value added by 'naked' property or raw power. Individuals could claim social honor (status) by virtue of their lifestyle if it conformed to the embodied conventions of the privileged *Stände*, and they could do so more successfully than someone seeking to use raw power or economic

resources. Privileged *Stände* looked down on common physical labor and mercantile activity (p. 146) and typically did not accept the "newly arrived neophyte" (p. 147) despite adoption of the requisite lifestyle. Membership in the right *Stände* determined the ability to get a good job, make the right marriage, and interact with the right social circles (p. 144). Eventually, all *Stände*-related stratification stabilized with the economic distribution of power and could lead to legal privilege for a positively positioned *Stand*. In its most extreme form, a *Stand* becomes a closed caste (p. 144) and part of an almost entirely ascription-based status hierarchy.

Education, occupation, and income are the key tools for attaining status in the United States, which might at first glance lead one to believe that we have moved past any hereditary status hierarchy. The transmission of educational privilege from one generation to the next has already been discussed. Duncan (1961) created the first occupational status hierarchy by calculating the education required and income generated by various professions; he found that high status jobs require more education and accord high prestige (Treiman, 2000). Occupational prestige hierarchies are remarkably consistent across time and cultures with training time the most salient attribute for respondents (Lynn & Ellerbach, 2017). This all ties into a broader trend about how Americans derive value and make status claims. Increasingly, they report finding meaning that was once derived from religious identity or altruism in career identity, in what some are calling "workism" (Thompson, 2019). Millennials in particular willingly embrace burnout if it means the ability to optimize themselves and compete in the marketplace (Petersen, 2019). Adults engage in "intensive parenting" to optimize every aspect of their children's lives so that they stand the best chance possible of obtaining

admission into a prestigious college and in turn the right type of job (Harris, 2018). It should come as no surprise that staggeringly more teenagers reported that "having a job or career they enjoy" would be "extremely or very important" (95%) to them than measures related to family (47%) or kindness (81%) as an adult in a recent Pew Research Center report (Thompson, 2019). Status and work are tightly bound up with one another.

Status is also generally attained in the United States alongside the transmission of moral and cultural traits, beliefs, and values that come with membership in a status or reference group. A reference group is that collection of individuals that we feel "resemble us" in a significant way and make comparisons relevant (de Botton, 2004, p. 25). Cookson and Persell (1985, p. 17) found that "prep schools do serve as sponsoring agencies for some students of lower social class backgrounds" who do not receive these cultural transmissions in their family of origin but enter into the prep school student reference group. Residential colleges and universities in the United States are likewise able to create these webs of affiliation that cast long shadows over the life course of their graduates: "[It] begins in the dormitories, playing fields, classrooms, and dining halls of elite schools [but] does not end on the day of graduation but continues to grow, becoming more interwoven, entangled, and in the end, the basis of status group and class solidarity" (Cookson, Jr. & Persell, 1985, p. 21). Students from less-advantaged backgrounds who want to access these webs of affiliation are aware that to do so helps them capitalize on their elite baccalaureate credential by continuing their upward mobility into high status adult domains, but uneven experiences of navigating college resources make this more difficult (Jack, 2016).

In terms of status maintenance, research has found that, paradoxically, high-status individuals counter any threats to their status more strongly because "the achievement of status might intensify the desire for status rather than alleviate it" (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 590). This makes an elite campus environment a setting in which some individuals are entering into the arena with a large amount of cultural capital and high status and seeking to maintain those advantages, while others may be navigating that world for the first time and looking to accumulate upper class advantages themselves. Indeed, it is apparently not enough for students to have gained admission to top private universities in the United States. Research at elite campuses has found that these students fear making a blunder in terms of major or career and losing status (Binder et al., 2016; Binder & Abel, 2019; Rivera, 2015). As one study identified it, these students are stricken with a "peculiar combination of confidence and insecurity about becoming elites" (Binder & Abel, 2019, p. 42). People are more concerned about loss of status than possible gains and more willing to "put forth more effort to prevent status losses" (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 590), which might explain why the cost of the prestige treadmill at elite universities is an acceptable one for students shoring up status. Having reached the top of the higher education prestige hierarchy, they turn their sights towards securing places in the top rungs of the occupational prestige ladder. The more status they have, the more they fear losing it.

Losing status can lead to status incongruence, which is generated when an individual experiences gaps in level of education, occupation, income, ethnic origins, or other markers of identity; one might enjoy higher or lower status on these various dimensions (Dogan, 2000). Status incongruence is on the rise because of increasing

movement up and down the socioeconomic ladder and also tends to be more marked during times of upheaval (Dogan, 2000). The term “interchange of ranks” has been used to describe this intergenerational movement of individuals up and down the socioeconomic ladder, as those who experience downward mobility make way for others to rise (Lipset & Zetterberg, 1956, p. 563). While it is concerning to those eager to stay in the comfortable classes, downward mobility is simply part of any society that is an equilibrium of individuals from various groups, classes, and institutions (Pareto, 1935). Movement at the top of the ladder does, however, seem to be somewhat constrained. Elites tend to replace one another rather than introducing non-elite individuals to the upper reaches of the status hierarchy (Pareto, 1935), which is seen in the ways that technologists and venture capitalists are overtaking academic and government elites (Giridharadas, 2019).

Pareto wrote extensively on how modifications in the *élite* affect prosperity and political stability (Pareto, 1935). Whether through wars, revolution, or other societal upheaval, this class-circulation causes a rise in prosperity because it injects new elements into the elite of a society. The sudden intermingling, “or, in more general terms, when a class-circulation that has been sluggish suddenly acquires an intensity at all considerable, almost always observable is an appreciable increase in intellectual, economic, and political prosperity in the country in question” (Pareto, 1935, pp. 1797–1798). This belief in the value of refreshing the viewpoints and perspectives of the ruling class could certainly be one argument in favor of a meritocracy that elevates the deserving to the highest levels of the status hierarchy.

Questioning Meritocracy

> A lively sense of the contingency of our lot conduces to a certain humility: "There, but for the grace of God, or the accident of fortune, go I." But a perfect meritocracy banishes all sense of gift or grace. It diminishes our capacity to see ourselves as sharing a common fate. It leaves little room for the solidarity that can arise when we reflect on the contingency of our talents and fortunes. This is what makes merit a kind of tyranny, or unjust rule. (Sandel, 2020, p. 25)

Underpinning and legitimizing much of the narrative shared by elites and those at the top of status hierarchies is a narrative of meritocracy: they worked hard, they persevered, they obtained what they deserved. A meritocracy is defined as a "social system where individual talent and effort, rather than ascriptive traits, determine individuals' placements in a social hierarchy" and its defining traits are an emphasis on fair competition and equality of opportunity (Alon & Tienda, 2007, p. 489). The concept originated with Plato but found a wider audience with the 1958 publication by Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (Alon & Tienda, 2007). Supposedly, this can-do worldview of hard work is an advance over "the hidebound world of the crony establishment," pitting "the brave new world of talent, individual reward, and dynamism" against the rigidly reproduced structures from earlier eras (Mijs & Savage, 2020, p. 397). Espousal of this "ideal justice principle" paradoxically leads to opportunities for greater bias, however, because it posits that only "relevant inputs (e.g. abilities) should be considered and irrelevant factors (e.g. ethnicity, gender) should be ignored when distributing outcomes" (Son Hing et al., 2011, p. 433). It is apparent that those who

control the definition of relevant and irrelevant factors hold a lot of power in this type of system.

Many of the arguments about meritocracy center around political differences about how merit should be measured and which inputs are relevant or irrelevant, particularly because some of the traditional quantitative "measures of merit are hard to disentangle from economic advantage…[for example,] SAT scores closely track family income" (Sandel, 2020, p. 10). Some, such as Alon and Tienda (2007), argue that it is only the preponderance of these standardized test scores to measure "merit" that has led to tensions between meritocracy and diversity. They maintain that using measures such as class rank, which shows lower response to changes in racial or ethnic identity, would be a better metric for admissions offices unable to pursue comprehensive full-file review because of large applicant pools and proportionately smaller admission staffs (Alon & Tienda, 2007, p. 503).

What do meritocratic beliefs look like in action? Students espousing meritocratic beliefs in interviews with researchers at one elite preparatory school attributed the difference in status between themselves and janitorial staff as "bad luck" in an otherwise just system, different priorities resulting in different rewards, or (for those acknowledging systemic injustices) the result of an unjust time in America that had since passed (Alon & Tienda, 2007, p. 14). Another set of authors found that meritocratic beliefs lead to people believing that inequitable outcomes are the result of individual shortcomings by "locating the cause of status differences in the individual talents and efforts of group members" rather than in broader societal or structural causes (McCoy & Major, 2007, p. 341). Khan analyzed the ways in which actions and words diverged at an elite preparatory school

espousing moral commitments to equality in a context of increasing inequality, where students were adept at speaking a narrative of meritocracy but engaging in status-protecting behaviors (Khan & Jerolmack, 2013, p. 10). Some products of elite schools say that the result of such meritocratic thinking about themselves led to a genuinely held belief that those who were less bright were beneath them (Deresiewicz, 2008).

An increasing body of scholarly work is calling into question the very premise of meritocracy itself. Research in the last ten years has shown that this emphasis on the value of hard work and merit as a great driver of equality is harmfully perpetuating the concept that anyone who is not now succeeding in American education is doing so because of some lack of skills or work ethic: schools are simply contributing to and legitimizing structural inequality in society "by issuing a status-differentiated set of educational credentials that interact with labor markets and other social systems to influence individuals' placements in contemporary systems of social stratification" (Domina et al., 2017, pp. 313–314). As one pair of researchers framed it, meritocracy is just a trap that "pulls ever more people into a rat race" under the illusion that hard work is a stronger force than structural inequalities (Mijs & Savage, 2020, p. 403). The real-world consequences of this ideology are dangerous as it removes the protective narratives from centuries of social thinking that have valued the work of the lower classes: "To the injury of poverty, a meritocratic system now added the insult of shame" (de Botton, 2004, p. 71). Populist complaints in America and Europe draw strength not just from anti-immigration or anti-globalization views but also as a response to the tyranny of merit and its "politics of humiliation" (Sandel, 2020, p. 25). If those who accumulate rewards in a meritocracy believe it is because they deserve it and opportunity is equal—too distanced

from an understanding of their privilege to see any starting advantage—it means they will believe "that those who are left behind deserve their fate as well" (Sandel, 2020, p. 5). The implications for the fabric of society are quite dire in even a perfect meritocracy.

Threats to Economic Stability and Changes to the World of Work

There is increasing evidence that students are more anxious than previous generations about how their college experience will prepare them for the workplace and are treating it as "a forty-six month period in which they build the portfolio of experiences they feel are important for whatever it is they are planning to do after they leave their undergraduate institution" (Gates, 2014, p. 34). Students have little knowledge about how the working world operates but high ambitions as they leave high school and enter their undergraduate years and much of what undergraduates believe to be a high-status occupation is formed on the basis of peer culture with a healthy smattering of input from corporations influencing on-campus hierarchies (Binder et al., 2016; Deresiewicz, 2014; Giridharadas, 2019).

Students may also have good reason to be worried about their prospects. Researchers investigating social mobility have uncovered various findings that reflect stagnant or declining levels of income mobility in the United States. Chetty et al. (2014, p. 141) found that while those in the birth cohorts throughout the 1970s and 1980s had similar chances of relative income mobility, income inequality overall increased: the authors explained that the number of children climbing from one rung to the next remained stable over time but that the rungs themselves grew further apart. They conclude by cautioning that this means that "the consequences of the 'birth lottery'—the parents to whom a child is born—are larger today than in the past" (Chetty et al., 2014, p.

141). Another study by the same lead author looking at a different measure of mobility, absolute income mobility, found that the percentage of children entering the labor market today who earn more than their parents is only 50%, compared to 90% of those born in 1940 (Chetty et al., 2017). This drop in absolute income mobility was true for all groups "across the entire income distribution, with the largest declines for families in the middle class" (Chetty et al., 2017, p. 406). It is a paradox for believers in the power of education that historical highs in income inequality in the United States are coinciding with record levels of educational attainment for the American working-age population (Domina et al., 2017)

There are indications that people are unsettled about their ability to maintain or extend social class standing and that as a class, the upper-middle class is coping with these threats to downward mobility by accumulating a disproportionate number of experiences and opportunities for their children and limiting the chances that others elsewhere on the socioeconomic ladder will be able to take their spot (Harris, 2018; Reeves, 2017). This fear also helps explain the growing role that "the ever-growing parastructure of tutors and test-prep courses and enrichment programs" plays in the business of elite academics (Deresiewicz, 2008, para. 3).

Additionally, the pandemic's effects rippled through the economy and affected those of all classes: the knock-on effects of various lockdown measures, social distancing, drops in consumer confidence, and mass layoffs shrank the national economy and reduced the number of Americans employed full time across nearly all sectors (Casselman, 2020). Even Harvard graduates felt the pinch—13 percent of graduating seniors in May 2020 reported losing a job or postgraduate offer because of the pandemic

(Guillaume & Halper, 2020). A group of students at University Arizona began collecting data in April 2020 about internships across the United States and Europe to learn which had been affected by the pandemic (Mull, 2020). They used a mix of contributors' shared email communications and direct verification from companies as varied as John Deere, International Paper, Bank of America, and AT&T. Their reporting shows a snapshot of the difficult market for undergraduates in the summer of 2020, with companies' internships programs falling into the following categories: cancelled (195), planning for in person (125), switched to remote (163), hiring freeze (44), and a much smaller category who were actively hiring (16) (Arora et al., 2020). There continues to be a justified fear that the pandemic will diminish the prospects of students graduating into this economy and result in long-term, catastrophic financial consequences for "Generation C" as the Great Recession demonstrably did for the 2008-09 college cohort (Mull, 2020).

The stability of traditional employment in the United States was showing cracks in other ways as well, pushing college students to search for whatever advantage they can leverage on the labor market. A number of researchers have found that the world of work is changing in radical ways, largely with respect to pervasive underemployment and an increasing share of alternative work arrangements. Alternative work arrangements—defined as "temporary help agency workers, on-call workers, contract company workers, and independent contractors or freelancers"—have grown from 10.7% of the workforce in 2005 to as much as 15.8% in 2015" (Katz & Krueger, 2018, p. 3). This is significant because individuals in alternative work arrangements are more likely than traditionally employed workers to be hours constrained (part-time for economic reasons), earn less per

week, and be dissatisfied with the temporary nature of their work situation. Problematizing this trend further is the finding that there "has been a notable rise in the share of workers in alternative work arrangements for women…college graduates, multiple jobholders, [and] Hispanics" (Katz & Krueger, 2018, p. 13).

Even for those with full-time employment, trends around underemployment right out of college have been alarming for what they portend for future earnings and promotion opportunities. Underemployment, defined in the literature as when an individual is overqualified for a position, is found to be predictive of lower lifetime earnings, fewer opportunities for promotion into appropriate employment, and disproportionately affects women and graduates of color (Burning Glass Technologies and Strada Institute for the Future of Work, 2018). Just under half of female college graduates are underemployed in their first job and underemployed workers earn an average of $10,000 less annually than appropriately matched peers (Burning Glass Technologies and Strada Institute for the Future of Work, 2018, p. 8). Once an individual has been underemployed, the die has been cast and underemployment is highly likely to become a permanent derailment. With these alarming trends, it is not surprising that students and universities are thinking about how to ensure that college graduates find traditional college-level jobs in order to start their working life on more stable financial footing. There is also the issue of upcredentialing, in which an employer asks for a higher credential than a job's performance actually requires. Trow (1973) had already flagged educational inflation of occupations as an issue in the 1970s but did allow that when college graduates took on jobs not actually requiring a degree, they tended to transform and reshape them in ways (via skill, imagination, initiative) that rendered the jobs no

longer able to be filled readily by someone without a college degree (1973, p. 42) He likewise had early reported on predictions that rapid transformations of the economy would force changes on the labor force, resulting in as many as nine or 10 job changes over a working life (Trow, 1973, p. 43) These predictions have been borne out with findings from a recent longitudinal labor survey reporting that those in the 1957-1964 birth cohort held an average of 12.3 jobs between the ages of 18 and 52 (U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Undergraduates realize that inflated credentials and increased job changes mean that a robust resume might help them circumvent the pitfalls of underemployment.

Existing Work on Undergraduate Summer Experiences

One final body of literature to examine in relation to this study on HPSEs is the existing work on how undergraduate students spend their summer breaks. Undergraduate summer experiences, and the research available about them, can be generally classified into internships and study abroad.

Internships generally have become a staple in any competitive undergraduate's job search arsenal because of how essential they are viewed by human resources professionals and employers making hiring decisions. Among graduating seniors across nearly 700 universities measured, 60% had completed at least one internship or co-op experience (Reeves, 2017). A 2018 survey of more than 6,000 students from five public universities had comparable findings, reporting that 32% of respondents held a paid internship and those who did were "more likely to get a good job after graduating" (Fain, 2018, para. 1). In fact, some research shows that as many as half of interns receive a full-time offer of employment (Reeves, 2017, p. 115). Many colleges are combining advising

and career services offices as a sign of how seriously they are taking this push towards summer internship participation (Burning Glass Technologies and Strada Institute for the Future of Work, 2018). This trend makes sense for companies as they can use the internship pipeline as a way to vet potential hires for culture fit and save money down the road on recruitment and onboarding (Lufkin, 2022).

Internships may be a starting point for employment, but they do not always come with a paycheck. The lack of pay for internships has seen increasing coverage from media and interest from researchers and practitioners. The study of graduating seniors from approximately 700 universities had found that half of those completing an internship were unpaid (Reeves, 2017). Other research has shown similar levels of unpaid internships (43%) and colleges and universities are creating internships funds to encourage those without the financial resources to participate in these experiences (Lord et al., 2020). If students can obtain a paid internship, however, they earn unprecedented summer salaries across a number of sectors including consulting, finance and technology, with top firms paying monthly medians of $7,000 to $9,667 in 2021 (Lufkin, 2022, para. 2). According to the economist and data scientist from Glassdoor who worked on the most recent internship survey, there is also a move toward remote work for top internships that might allow students from more diverse backgrounds to earn high wages without relocating to major metro areas (Lufkin, 2022, para. 10).

Study abroad programs have likewise enjoyed widespread participation among undergraduates and short-term summer programs have contributed to real-growth in participation levels since the 1990s (Gates, 2014, p. 33). Aside from the established developmental benefits of cross-cultural travel and study, these programs outside the

United States are also serving an increasingly employment-oriented purpose according to employer surveys: some type of "international experience can make students more attractive candidates for hiring, provided students are able to articulate the relevance of the experience" (Gates, 2014, p. 34).

The phenomenon of accumulating high-prestige summer experiences (HPSEs) that I noted in my work in residential life and academic advising seems to have evolved out of a desire to maximize not only one's chances of job market success but also to extend elite status beyond campus into the wider social world. In the same way that scholars have found that students encounter new "opportunities and discourses that trigger them to 'want' the jobs being offered" as they consider career tracks (Binder et al., 2016, p. 21), we can expect that these same discourses trigger them to want novel summer experiences that an elite institution signals to them as being prestigious.

Concluding Remarks

It is likely that the forces addressed in this literature review are triggering students to desire HPSEs as a new badge of elite status. The phenomenon of accumulating HPSEs that I noted in my work in residential life and academic advising seems to have evolved out of a desire to maximize not only one's chances of job market success but also to extend elite status beyond campus into adult life in the wider social world. In some ways, today's undergraduates face a perfect storm. Increasingly, selective elite college admissions make a spot at a top university even harder to acquire but also more important than ever. Fewer and less desirable jobs are available, and the specters of downward mobility and underemployment were threatening graduating students even before the economic impact of a global pandemic was factored into the equation. Converting the

capital of their elite college degree into high-status jobs is both more daunting and more necessary in this context. Furthermore, the prevailing ideology of meritocracy tells these elite undergraduates that if they fail in their quest, they have only themselves to blame. It is no wonder that HPSEs and their intensive accumulation during summer break would result.

Chapter Three: Research Design

This qualitative study used interviews with 13 participants to understand how undergraduates at an elite institution receive, understand, and act on messages about high-prestige summer experiences. The study examined how elite undergraduates act to reproduce or expand their social advantage by using summers for enhancement of their postgraduate prospects; how they perceive, receive, and act on what positions them for future elite status; and the messages from their environment that they internalize around high-prestige summer experiences. Therefore, the following research question and sub-questions guided this study:

- How do elite undergraduates receive, understand, act on, and create messages about high-prestige summer experiences?
    - How do undergraduates at an elite university describe their experience of considering, pursuing, and/or participating in high-prestige summer experiences?
    - What is the source, content, and stance of the messages that elite undergraduates receive about high-prestige summer experiences? How do they internalize them as normal and/or necessary?
    - How do undergraduates participate in the creation and transmission of the campus narrative around high-prestige summer experiences?

In this context, "receive" includes the mediums through which messaging makes its way to students as well as the messengers such as peers, advisors, university staff, etc. "understand" encompasses both students' basic comprehension of the messages and any semantic loading of the messages they perform to move the message beyond its surface

meaning; “act on” comprises the full range of responses (actions, decisions, emotions, etc.) students engage in as a response to HPSEs; and “create” captures the ways in which students may generate and spread their own messages about HPSEs to peers. This study aims to understand what elite undergraduates are doing in the summers, why they are doing it, how they find out about it, and how they in turn co-construct the narrative around summer experiences.

Grounded Theory Research

Grounded theory provided the theoretical framework for my approach to sampling, data collection, and data analysis in this study. Emerging in the 1960s from the field of anthropology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), grounded theory was notable from the beginning for offering qualitative researchers a set of steps to follow that would bring the same rigor and reproducibility of quantitative research to investigations of people and society that could not easily be broken down into analyzable numbers. Field notes, observations, documents, and interviews and their transcripts all become important data points for the grounded theorist, from which cycles of applying codes and meanings allow for refinements of themes and generalizability to theory (Charmaz, 2000; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Straus (1967) explained how codes could be applied to small units of data and then compared against one another and as-yet uncoded items in what they termed “constant comparison” and which led one “to generate theoretical properties of the category” (1967, p. 104). They invented grounded theory to move away from a scientific, hypothetico-deductivist approach that took theories developed independent of real-world data and then evaluated them against events in the field. However, Glaser and Strauss were also wary of creating an overly inductivist

approach that completely eschewed previous theoretical knowledge (Kelle, 2019, p. 68). Instead, this was where their concept of theoretical sensitivity came in as the "ability to have theoretical insight into [one's] area of research, combined with an ability to make something of [one's] insights" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 46).

Various proponents of grounded theory in the years since have differed on how exactly this use of existing theories and models should be incorporated into grounded theory research, with Glaser going so far as to suggest that research questions or problems unnecessarily cloud one's work: "He moves in with the abstract wonderment of what is going on that is an issue and how it is handled" (Glaser, 1992, p. 22). Some grounded theorists criticize Glaser's positivism but grant that Strauss and his subsequent co-author Corbin might better be labelled as post-positivist because they assume an objective external reality but do give voice to respondents and acknowledge and uncover how respondents' views of reality conflict with the researcher's own (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510). Strauss and Corbin went on to develop a coding paradigm that firmly embraced the use of a researcher's existing knowledge and was generally based in philosophical and sociological pragmatism but still applicable to a wide variety of other schools of thought (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Kelle, 2019). This is the approach that I used for my study as it allows for the use of theories and professional knowledge to be drawn upon when generating codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 32) and this reflects my approach to the research problem as described in Chapter 1. I adopted Corbin and Strauss' (2015) definition of theoretical sensitivity as "having insights as well as being tuned into and being able to pick up on relevant issues, events, and happenings during collection and analysis of the data" (2015, p. 78). The sources for developing this theoretical sensitivity

include reading the relevant literature, the researcher's personal and professional experience, and leveraging the data analysis process to examine words and phrases.

Grounded theory in general is a useful framework for approaching research problems such as this study on HPSEs. It encourages iterative data collection and analysis from participants and a frequent refining of instruments and models (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Because it is well suited to areas of research "when no theory exists or existing theories are inadequate" (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 241), grounded theory is logical choice given that there is little existing research around prestige and status as elements of undergraduate summer planning and experiences. Furthermore, grounded theory does not presume an existing framework for concepts but rather allows a theory to emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which in this case was the insights of the undergraduates and recent alumni with firsthand experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Accordingly, there were no predefined coding schemes before coding and analysis.

Grounded theory is lastly an approach to research that emphasizes the constructed nature of reality, which conforms to the assumptions underlying my research questions. The coding paradigm that Strauss and Corbin (1990) developed has a focus on predicting and explaining behaviors, which makes sense given Strauss's sociology background (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). It also explains why there is a focus on structural conditions and their impact on actions, and then the resulting consequences on those conditions as a result of the action or intervention. The literature review for this study consequently focuses on the sociological underpinnings and related theories around high-prestige summer experiences because of the constructed nature of the phenomenon.

Sampling Strategy

This study used a two-phase purposive sampling approach (Patton, 2002) with the choice of institution followed by the choice of participants. The first phase was the selection of the setting and associated population. The study institution is an extreme case (Patton, 2002) because in it one can see distilled the production of elites. The selection of an extreme institutional context is appropriate in this study because it offers a setting rich in the phenomenon under study (HPSEs) and rife with the constructs (prestige and status forces, intensive peer socialization, institutional structures) that a review of the literature indicated are relevant. As such, I selected this elite, highly selective college campus context to sample from with the belief that "more can be learned from intensively studying extreme cases than can be learned from trying to determine what the average case is like" (Patton, 1980, p. 101).

The second phase was intended to be maximum variation sampling of the eligible students and recent alumni within that extreme case of an elite campus so that I could understand the range of meaning-making and responses within a single high prestige institutional context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I solicited participants over an email list of a generally representative group of 400 undergraduates and with targeted email outreach to a group of 28 former academic advisees and entryway students who differed in no significant way from the general undergraduate population. A goal throughout the recruitment phase of the study was to emphasize to prospective participants that I was seeking to engage a wide variety of opinions, experiences, and identities for the interviews. This language was present in the recruitment email (see Appendix A) and screening survey (see Appendix B). I had also intended that the screening survey would

assist in this maximum variation sampling should participant numbers be higher than anticipated. For this reason, the screening survey included several measures on which I hoped maximize participant differences: major and minor, summer experience content, attitudes toward six summer experience statements, and racial, ethnic, gender, and identity asks several demographic questions and includes

Following expert opinion on nonprobabilistic sampling, I intended to interview 12-25 participants, a number likely to reach data saturation and the basic elements of themes and core concepts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 186; Guest et al., 2006). However, this number of interviews was "a point of departure rather than a firm number" (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 251) and I continued active recruitment of new participants even as data collection was proceeding. I knew that the emergence of new data dictated that the point of saturation had not yet been reached, but yielding participants continued to be a difficulty and is discussed in the limitations section at the end of this chapter.

Setting and Site Description

This study was conducted at an elite university located in an urban setting in the northeastern United States with an undergraduate population of under 7,000 students. The reason for this is the same as other researchers looking at processes of high-status occupation sorting and prestige accumulation—"to see how the processes of elite career construction operate at the top of elite higher education" (Binder et al., 2016, p. 23). My written agreement with the university stipulated that I would omit direct reference to the institution's name, so it will be referred to throughout the study as Top Ivy University (TIU). TIU is among the most highly ranked higher education institutions in the country

(U.S. News & World Report, n.d.) and world[3] (Times Higher Education, n.d.). These national and international rankings are a frequently referenced measure of prestige and status (Sandel, 2020) and justify selection of this campus for the study.

An essential element in this study was the immediate settings of the students because they are likely to contain information, messages, or interactions about how and why they should spend their summer breaks pursuing prestige- and status-building opportunities. As leading systems theorist Bronfenbrenner (1993) explains, institutions and individuals act mutually upon one another and systems, structures, and culture filter down to students in their immediate settings, which he would term their microsystems. This view of ecology as reciprocal interaction between students and setting dovetailed with my professional experience with the phenomenon and with Strauss and Corbin's understanding of human behavior. The campus setting is a strong socializing force at TIU because 100% of first-year students and 98% of upper-level students live on campus[4], either in one of 12 dormitories or one of 12 large, self-contained residential communities, respectively.

To understand the campus setting for current undergraduates and recent alumni, I collected artifacts, documents, and emails and held two conversations with staff involved in career services. Some of the documents and artifacts that I examined were ones that I had collected during my years in residence life (e.g., approved door drops, dining table tents, advising materials, and email communications), while others were publicly available items such as career service and fellowship websites and documents and reports

[3] TIU consistently ranks in the top three institutions domestically and top ten internationally.
[4] These numbers and other data about the campus setting come from the TIU residential life website but cannot be cited without compromising the site's anonymity.

available for download. This documentary data contributed to an understanding of the institutional landscape of these undergraduates and the forces at play in their campus lives.

The TIU campus is one that is located in a desirable urban setting with public transit, shops and cafes, parks, and a river. The spheres in which they engage in intensive peer socialization include dining halls, libraries, gyms, and open campus greens. There are a wide variety of student groups and social clubs on campus though there is not a clear, centralized student union location. Extracurriculars and socializing more generally can be as intense and overwhelming for students as their academic load and it would not be unusual to hear students agree that there is a "work hard, play hard" mentality on campus. Students receive messaging about career preparation and summer planning through a number of official and unofficial channels. Door drops from top firms with recruitment event information are commonly delivered to their dorm room doors. Residential staff assist in cover letter and interview preparation workshops right in their residence halls. There is a strong culture around pre-career socialization and prestige hierarchy construction that have relevance for this topic. Students benefit from many tailored recruitment fairs and opportunities that are not generally available to the college-going set, with top firms hosting TIU-only coffee chats, catered evening receptions, and easily accessible on-campus interview sessions.

Population and Sample Characteristics

The population under investigation for this study was all non-first year undergraduates currently enrolled at TIU and alumni from the classes of 2021, 2020 and 2019. First-year students were not eligible for participation because they would not yet

have had a college summer break in which they could have participated in an HPSE and would have spent less time on campus adopting and normalizing the prevailing attitudes or opinions around pursuit of HPSEs. While this was a decision I had made prior to March 2020, it ended up being especially important because the opportunity to spend time on campus was limited due to rolling campus closures at TIU. The alumni were included only from recent years (2021, 2020 and 2019) to balance similarity of campus context with time to develop perspective on college years.

I extended an invitation to participate in this study to a roughly representative subset of the overall undergraduate population. More specifically, I sent out an initial recruitment email (Appendix A) over the open list for one of the upper-level student residential communities. At TIU, first-year students are required to live on campus and then have the option of forming rooming groups of up to eight individuals to enter a lottery for random assignment to one of 12 residential communities for their remaining years. Because of this randomization, the students in any residential community should be roughly representative of the wider university undergraduate population in terms of majors and minors, socio-economic background, and racial, ethnic, and gender identity. Among the eligible students were a small number of my former entryway students and sophomore advisees, but their inclusion posed no issues given that these topics would have been a normal part of our professional conversations.

I also sent the study recruitment email to a targeted group of 28 alumni from the class years of 2021, 2020, and 2019. These individuals had experienced that same environment typical of an elite college campus but had either partially or completely avoided any pandemic impact on summer experiences. They also had some amount of

post-graduate experience and perspective to bring to bear on their reflections on their college summer experiences. They were a group of former academic advisees, entryway students (who had lived in my section of the residential community), and participants in intramural sports. The goal was to include a mix of identities and majors.

Instruments and Data Sources

There were two instruments in this research study which resulted in two related sources of data. The first instrument was the combined informed consent and screening survey (see Appendix B) created in Qualtrics. The link to this item was included at the end of the recruitment email sent to all of the undergraduates in the residence community and the 28 alumni that I contacted individually. The informed consent provided prospective participants with the overview of the study, confidentiality measures, and anticipated risks and benefits. The screening survey gathered basic demographic information as well as general information about students' experiences with and opinions on HPSEs. The original goal of this screener was to collect enough data points to allow me to sample for maximum variation within a pool of eligible candidates on attitudinal measures around HPSEs and summer breaks in general, racial, ethnic and gender identity, college major and minor, variety of summer experiences, and family socioeconomic background. Over enrollment in the study was not an issue and the screener was not used for its initial purpose, but this data nonetheless provided valuable contextual information about the participants.

The interview protocol (see Appendix D) was the second instrument in this study and resulted in 13 interview transcripts and accompanying completed virtual card sort documents. I created two nearly identical versions of the protocol to reflect that current

undergraduates and recent alumni would be at different points in time relative to their summer experiences, so verb tense changes were the biggest change between the two protocols. I also asked current undergraduates and alumni from the class of 2021 directly about the impact of the pandemic on their summer planning. The interview protocol was created based on the relevant research literature, background interviews with college career staff, and my professional experience.

I conducted semi-structured interviews in keeping with the grounded theory emphasis on approaching the research problem with an open mind and staying flexible as participant responses drive the discussion in new directions. I wanted to have some map to follow consistently with all the participants while also allowing themes to emerge rather than constrain findings with externally imposed frameworks. To facilitate this, I developed an interview protocol with standardized language and ordering of main topics with the same set of prompts and probes when further details were important to gather. The main sections of the protocol included general background questions, a virtual card sort activity about motivations, sources of information, and campus prestige hierarchy, summer norming, pandemic effects (if applicable), a no-constraints summer break, and a final wrap-up question. The questions and prompts in the protocol elicited participants' thoughts on the following:

- motivations for participating in HPSEs
- factors influencing choices around HPSEs
- sources of information and their relative value when making summer decisions
- definition of prestige with respect to summer planning and experiences

- perception of peer and institutional messaging (medium and content) and whether campus culture of university discourse impacted their thoughts and actions with regard to HPSEs
- any costs or challenges in pursuit and participation in HPSEs
- impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic on summer planning
- whether they felt a tension between trying to maximize the utility of their summers and using them for relaxation or other non-instrumental purposes

In addition to traditionally posed open-ended questions, the interview protocol also included a novel interactive element—a virtual card sort activity (see Appendix E). This activity allowed participants to manipulate virtual sticky notes and sort them into buckets of importance and relevance for their own decision-making around summer experiences. They were also able to edit items in real time, should they alert me to a key factor that was not already present in the activity. I created this activity using Google Jamboard and shared the link to a private, individualized copy with each participant in the same email in which I confirmed the interview time and supplied our private Zoom link. The virtual card sort activity covered the topics of motivations for pursuing summer experiences, sources of information, and ranking a hierarchy of summer experiences. The virtual card sort activity took place after I asked participants to get us started with an easy question about what they had done so far with their summers and what they had expected college summers to be like before they matriculated at TIU. We then switched over to the virtual card sort activity and participants completed those activities and talked through their choices before returning to the rest of the questions in the protocol.

The goal of the interviews was to touch upon all of the key topics in the course of the conversation, but I welcomed participants' choices to discuss items in the order that made sense for their experiences. As predicted when developing the study proposal, some participants addressed constructs of interest during the virtual card sort activity during the earlier part of the interview and therefore were not asked those questions later. This was the case with summer norming, which came up during the motivation section when sorting items such as "peer pressure" and "prestige." Some individuals also chose to go into depth about the role of their family or non-TIU peers early in the interviews while others mentioned those influences later on when explicitly prompted.

I was also open to revising the study's interview protocol and virtual card sort activity after completed interviews to reflect participants' insights and reactions, which is consistent with grounded theory best practices. However, I only needed to make slight adjustments to question wording. For example, I changed the final wrap-up question of the interview after two interviews based on an email response from Abigail[5], who revealed that as soon as she saw what I was studying was eager to sign up because she had so many thoughts about summer experiences. This made me realize that some participants might have strong opinions about the phenomenon that would not otherwise fit into the protocol, so I chose to alter the final question to explicitly solicit these thoughts and opinions. This led me to alter the final question from "Before we wrap up, is there anything else that you would add, or anything that you would like to revisit and

[5] All names are pseudonyms selected by participants during the interview process. After verifying their understanding of the informed consent form, I offered them an opportunity to name themselves for all subsequent reporting of study results before I started the audio recording. I wrote these pseudonyms down on in a single list that only I had access to and used these pseudonyms throughout the interview instead of their real names.

explain in more depth?" to "Before we wrap up, was there any burning thought you had about summer experiences that I didn't ask you? Or some opinion you wanted to share when you heard what this topic was?" This resulted in a lot of rich final thoughts from many participants. One, Erin, revealed that the involvement of a professor later sanctioned by her university for sexual misconduct and sexual harassment had tainted her views on her summer abroad under that professor's supervision. While she said she did not have any negative experiences with that individual, it had made her wary and distrustful of the department after the investigation revealed that other faculty were aware of his actions and had continued to let him chaperone first-year female students on study abroad programs. There was no way I could have anticipated this type of experience or opinion, so I was pleased to see how this alteration in the interview protocol opened the door for these types of revelations and sharing opportunities. The interview protocol functioned exactly as it should, providing a menu of discussion questions and leaving participants in charge about the order in which to discuss them and how much time to spend on each topic.

Pilot Study

I piloted the interview protocol, including the virtual card sort activity, with two TIU alumni. The goal of the pilot interviews was to obtain feedback about the flow, pacing, and resonance of the protocol items from two individuals with differing academic and professional backgrounds who were nonetheless exposed to the same elite campus influences. Charles and Cassidy each completed an interview with me using the initial draft of the interview protocol that was approved at my proposal defense. These interviews were a mix of "in character" administration of the interview and "off the

record" discussion to gather of their insights and opinions on the instruments themselves. Charles, a hard sciences major with professional experience working with college students and high school students, chose to participate in the pilot interview as himself circa junior year of college. Cassidy, an English major whose career has been a mix of work with college students and writing and design work for religious nonprofit organizations, had a less exact point in time that she used as a reference and more generally just considered her college experience. It is important to note that both Charles and Cassidy graduated from the same institution as the alumni participants.

The pilot interviews were incredibly helpful as I refined my instruments. I was able to iron out some minor technical details and amend my wording in the protocol accordingly, such as learning that a pop-up message appears for the participant when I pressed the record button in Zoom. Administering the questions in real time also revealed that portions of the protocol were overly formal for the collaborative, conversational tone that I was hoping to achieve with the participants. Charles and Cassidy both commented on transitions between topics that were too abrupt and a question or two that they felt struck an odd note. Stepping out of character, they helped to workshop alternative phrasings. During the virtual card sort activity portion of the interview, Charles shared that personal development was a key driver for his summer planning and he suggested that I add it as an item. He also dove into a deep discussion about the possible relevance of the other items for college students and recent alumni. Both pilot participants encouraged the use of a broader question for the bucket slides, suggesting "walk me through this" as opposed to asking about each item individually. Their awareness of how long the interview might feel for a participant was particularly valuable. Beyond the

formatting and content feedback that day so graciously provided, Charles and Cassidy also gave me the opportunity to conduct two vastly different types of interviews. Charles' interview ran more than two hours; he was happy to get into character and spoke at length in response to every protocol item. He spent a great deal of time discussing the role of his family in his summer planning, which was a stark contrast to Cassidy, whose own experience did not include any role for either of her parents. This divergence in experience was seen in this study sample responses as well. Cassidy's interview was shorter in length and more matter of fact in tone. Whereas Charles had interacted with many of the official University structures around summer planning and experiences, Cassidy reported that she received much of her messaging and impressions secondhand because she felt intimidated by the official parts of the structure. Again, this was a trend echoed by actual participants in the study. I had not anticipated that Charles and Cassidy would have such distinct approaches to conversing on the same topic, but I was grateful for the exposure once I launched into participant interviews and saw that variation present among alumni and current undergraduates, as well.

I made a number of changes to the instruments as a direct result of my two pilot interviews. I chose to make the entire demographics block of questions in the screening survey voluntary instead of forced response so that participants would not feel pressured to identify themselves beyond the ways that were comfortable and safe for them. I also went through the interview protocol and cleaned up a few sections that were too wordy according to Charles and Cassidy. I streamlined the instructions to myself, added contractions back in to make the wording more natural, and removed the questions about

any ideological impact of summer experiences. I decided that these two questions should serve to guide data analysis rather than appear as explicit questions during the interview.

In the virtual card sort activity, I removed the original slide three that asked participants to sort items into buckets around the question of summer norming. Charles and Cassidy both thought that this was one activity too many, unnecessarily added to the length of the interview, and that a simple question about campus norms would suffice if the participant had not already broached the topic. On the first slide, I added "personal development" as a sortable item after Charles' interview. Other changes to the yellow sticky notes on that slide included simplifying "wanting to live in/travel to a particular city or country" to "desire to travel over the summer." The interview with Charles included a discussion about the item "pressure, worry or uncertainty about the future" because he identified that his feelings about the future included both a pragmatic uncertainty about what type of job he might enjoy as well as a broader, more existential worry about life after college. That item was accordingly separated out into two distinct sticky notes: "chance to try different jobs" and "worries about post-grad future." Lastly, I adjusted the layout of the prestige hierarchy slide to be more user-friendly.

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection Procedures

I began my sampling by sending a recruitment email (Appendix A) to the undergraduates in one of the 12 upper-level residential communities at TIU. This recruitment email served as an important introduction to both me (for those students not familiar with me already through my previous residential position) and the topic under investigation. I explained who I was, my interest in the topic, and what prospective participants could expect if they chose to enroll in the study. I emphasized that I was

curious about the full spectrum of experiences, positive and negative, with regard to summer breaks. The recruitment email closed with a link for the informed consent and screening survey (see Appendix B) that gathered basic demographic and attitudinal data about the prospective participants. The screening survey was initially intended to serve two key functions: 1) provide me with salient characteristics of the respondents on which I could choose to sample, should I receive more interest than anticipated and be unable to interview every interested student; and 2) gather contact information for scheduling. I received a low number of responses to the recruitment email and, as a result, did not need to winnow the participant pool with the screening survey results. Instead, the responses were helpful for understanding the composition of the study group and getting a sense of general attitudes about their own summer experiences and tensions with summer experience culture generally before the interviews. I simultaneously reached out to a group of 28 recent alumni from the classes of 2021, 2020, and 2019 with a similar recruitment email and informed consent and screening survey. I provided a short, personalized introduction tailored to the individual and then said I was including the email that I had sent over the undergraduate open list with fuller details. I closed by asking them to fill out the screening survey and informed consent (hyperlinked) if they were willing and able to participate.

I contacted everyone who completed the screening survey to set up an interview time. Thirteen of the 15 prospective participants confirmed interview times. While exchanging scheduling emails, I also sent them a link to an individualized copy of the virtual card sort and a personal Zoom link. Each virtual card sort and Zoom invitation

contained unique links; there was no chance of participants seeing one another's answers or faces inadvertently.

I conducted the interviews myself one-on-one via Zoom during the fall and winter of 2021/2022. After beginning by asking participants if they had questions about the informed consent, I asked them to self-select a pseudonym (all but one accepted the offer) and then confirmed permission to record the interview to generate a transcript. The single hand-written document linking participants to pseudonyms was kept in a secure location in my office. All digital files for the participants (audio files, interview transcripts, and virtual card sort PDFs) were labeled with pseudonyms. Participants' real names did appear electronically in the study materials.

I interviewed each student participant once for anywhere from 42 to 93 minutes. The informed consent had suggested that interviews would be approximately 45 to 60 minutes long, but some individuals chose to share more broadly and in greater detail than anticipated. After each interview, I immediately deleted the auto-generated video file and retained only the recorded audio of the interview to generate an interview transcript. Audio files, transcripts, and back-ups of NVivo project files were stored in a secure folder dedicated to this study on a departmental server at Boston College.

In order to prepare the data for analysis, I used Rev transcription services to create transcripts for all 13 audio files. The accuracy of some of the transcriptions was quite high and needed little in the way of corrections, but I chose to perform first round coding while listening along with the audio recording for the remaining interviews because of some small discrepancies. This strategy gave me confidence in the accuracy of the final

product. I saved each transcript as a Microsoft Word file and then uploaded them to a project in the latest version of NVivo software to perform the coding cycles.

Analysis Strategy

The analysis strategy for this study was guided by grounded theory's cyclical coding approach and constant comparison of new data and codes to the emerging body of concepts and themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saldaña, 2016). I discuss the process in detail in the following sections, but the general approach was to begin with a round of open coding of the interview transcripts. This first round captured the major facts, concepts, and ideas from an initial examination of the data as well as researcher process codes. Next, axial coding identified causal connections, strategies, contextual variables, and consequences among the many ideas and concepts from the first round. Lastly, I used selective coding to build out the most important core concepts more robustly. This allowed for theory building and model generation in the final stages of analysis. Throughout this process, I returned frequently to the transcripts to recode earlier interviews within the new schema that were developing. I simultaneously engaged in memo writing and diagraming and visualization to link ideas and concepts through words and images. Diagrams are a central part of grounded theory as they can help explain connections and relationships not just in a final theoretical model but also assist in the analysis process as the researcher clarifies linkages among concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell et al., 2007; Kelle, 2019).

Open Coding to Axial Coding

The first coding cycle in grounded theory research is open coding, in which a researcher labels small units with an eye toward major facts, salient concepts, and ideas

that derive from an initial examination of the data, without concern about how they might be analyzed or explained. I adopted this very open approach and coded the interviews without preconceived mind maps or hierarchies. As I progressed through the 13 interviews, I did begin open coding by skimming through the full code list so that I could use the "find" function in NVivo to select a pre-existing code when applicable. However, I also gave myself permission to generate similar but distinct codes instead of forcing a unit of data into a pre-existing one. Most important for me was labeling concepts and constructs without too tight of a linkage to other ideas, theories, or interviewees. This open coding cycle resulted in 1,279 codes, which was similar to other researchers using the same methods (Scott, 2004). While this strategy created a lot of work for myself as I moved into axial coding, I was confident that I was staying true to the intention behind the grounded theory process.

The axial coding cycle looks for ways that the raw data connect to one another. I first began axial coding by reading the full code list and removing obviously redundant codes. This also helped me to see the body of data as one large collection, whereas in the open coding cycle I had been focusing on each interview on its own. I found the image offered by Munhall helpful in this stage: "themes 'cluster' or form patterns" (2007, p. 317). I kept myself open to noticing where codes showed convergences, such as participants' comments about the summer application timeline, and then looked for related themes that connected to that "what" code. I found that participants were also sharing about strategies they implemented to manage timeline pressures and consequences that flowed out of the overlap of academic and summer experience

deadlines. I proceeded through other code-dense themes to build up categories to be used in the later selective coding cycle.

At this point I also turned to the guidance offered by Corbin and Strauss (2015) They described the basic paradigm features as conditions, actions-interactions and consequences or outcomes, with a set of investigative questions. Considering the answers to these questions when cleaning up my open coding helped to make the codes available for grouping during axial coding yield even richer insights. I include these questions below, adapted for my understanding within the context of this specific research project:

- What? What phenomenon, event, or construct is the participant describing?
- Who? Who is involved and in what way?
- How? How does the participant describe or ignore aspects of the phenomenon?
- When and how long? Is time or its passage important or relevant for the participant with reference to the phenomenon or aspects of it?
- Where? Is location important or relevant for the participant with reference to the phenomenon or aspects of it?
- Why? Does the participant justify or rationalize actions or feelings?
- By which? Which strategies does the participant use and under which conditions?
- To what end? What consequences (anticipated or not) flow from the participant's actions?

Using the investigative questions elevated my brute organizational strategy into the realms of theory building and not just sorting. I did this in an iterative fashion, skimming the code list, writing out the questions in various formats, returning to the codes, and so on. It resulted in the 73 categories seen in Table 1. I further refined these

themes into 23 folders within the NVivo project file for all of the major themes that were emerging from the long list of standalone open codes and derived categories. The folders that emerged mapped onto the key categories and sub-categories emerging from axial coding. Collating related open codes into these folders further facilitated the merging of redundant codes and the recoding of overly case-specific codes. I continued to ask myself, “What are the axes around which my data revolve?” and frequently used this as a prompt for memoing during the axial coding phase.

As I moved from the open coding of the concepts that appeared as the yellow sticky notes in the virtual card sort to how they might cluster as categories, I realized that the answer to “why” students were participating in summer experiences actually fell into three subcategories: motivations, rationalizations, and justifications. Motivations were the reasons that participants gave before a summer experience as a driver for participation generally in this phenomenon or specifically in a particular summer opportunity and were generally directed toward self (e.g., wanting to develop foreign languages skills). Rationalizations were similarly self-directed but given after a summer experience to explain their participation (e.g., an internship might have been boring but at least came with international name recognition). Justifications were the reasons given to others before or after a summer experience, frequently directed toward parents and peers (e.g., diversification of experiences, stronger resume). Rationalizations and justifications were an interesting part of the analysis process because they revealed a lot about the values and norms of the contexts in which students were operating. Splitting a single concept of “why” into three subcategories helped to illuminate the background forces at play for students, which figured into later theory building.

Table 1

Axial Coding Guiding Questions and Derived Categories

What? What phenomenon, event, or construct is the participant describing?	Who? Who is involved and in what way?	How? How does the participant describe or ignore aspects of the phenomenon?	When and how long? Is time or its passage important or relevant for the participant with reference to the phenomenon or aspects of it?	Where? Is location important or relevant for the participant with reference to the phenomenon or aspects of it?	Why? Does the participant justify or rationalize actions or feelings?	By which? Which strategies does the participant use and under which conditions?	To what end? What consequences (anticipated or not) flow from the participant's actions?
Summer experience content	Close peers	No prior reflection on phenomenon	Summer planning timeline	Being abroad	Motivations	Identifying summer experiences	Costs of pursuing summer experiences
Summer experience characteristics	TIU peers	Naming of privilege	Academic timeline	Returning home	Rationalizations	Applying for and getting summer experiences	Personal development
Expectations entering college	Parents	Acknowledgement of diverse backgrounds on campus	Impacts of timeline	Being outdoors	Justifications	Funding summer experiences	Stress and anxiety
Attitudes about summer experiences	Siblings	Class consciousness	Leaves of absence	Staying on campus		Role of personal connections throughout	Employment
Summer funding	Non-TIU peers	Erasure of identity	Time cost of summer process	Dining halls		Bumping up prestige score	Clarity about career
Senior thesis	Teaching staff	Exploitation	Longer-range college trajectory	Residence halls		Ways to maximize success	Avoided regrets
Summer internships	Residential staff	Inequity				Protective behaviors	Things to do differently

Research	University offices	Emotional costs	Signaling	Paths not taken
Summer school abroad	Mentors	Tension between reality and ideal		Adventure and fun
Summer school on campus	Non-TIU professional contacts	Recognition of arbitrary nature		Decisions about future college summers
Campus culture		Benefits and burdens of TIU affiliation		
Internal states		Merit		
Counterexamples				
Goals of summer experiences				
Personal characteristics				
Pandemic				
Retelling of experiences				
Universe of acceptable choices				

Selective Coding

Selective coding is the process of interrelating the major categories identified during the axial coding phase and looking for similarities and differences. By organizing the data around several core themes, it is possible to define the central phenomenon and the core categories that comprise the densest, most connected concepts. This was the stage when I was heavily leaning on memoing and diagramming, writing and drawing about the commonalities, divergences, and surprises that emerged from participants' words. I found it helpful to attempt some of the table construction suggested by Scott (2004) when thinking about this portion of the analysis, even though she used a more constructivist understanding of grounded theory.

Using the investigative questions generated during axial coding proved critical when turning to selective coding. For example, I had recognized that "retelling" was an important theme in participants' experiences with summer planning but had been stymied about connecting it with the relevant themes that would move it beyond just a descriptive finding. I needed it to have explanatory power. One of the steps that I went through was to take these core categories and use the investigative questions to consider their role in the emerging theory. For example, I had seen in the axial coding cycle that storytelling, framing, and elements of peer culture were tightly related in a category I thought of as narrative currency. I used memo writing to ask and answer these questions:

- What is narrative currency?
- When does narrative currency occur?
- Where does narrative currency occur?
- Why does narrative currency occur?

- How does narrative currency occur?
- With what consequence does narrative currency occur?

The memo writing clarified that narrative currency is a value that TIU students assign to various summer experiences. The result of this analysis was that I identified narrative currency value as a spectrum measure of a summer experience's ability to be reframed and recast as "good" stories to peers (what). Peak points for this concept were the fall return to campus and the spring lead-up to departure (when). It typically took place in dining halls, residence halls, discussion sections, and student group meetings (where). These stories about a summer experience could serve signaling functions to convey coolness, uniqueness, status, and prestige and establish social position (how and with what consequence). Narrative currency value was a useful mental measure for students deciding among possible summer break options to maximize the value they derived afterwards from the experience (why).

Through memoing and diagramming, four of these core categories emerged as I was looking for connections within and across participants' stories. I had already noted many themes and categories that were clearly essential to participants' understanding of what a summer is for and how it should be used, but the process of organizing the codes and clustering them thematically revealed that four were central to this phenomenon of high prestige summer experiences. The first category contained all the codes and ideas about the process itself (with its attendant goals, tasks/strategies, and consequences at each step), which I refer to as the High Prestige Summer Experience Process and describe in full in Chapter 5. The other three core categories were more abstract. Encapsulating different aspects of the deeply internalized norms around summer experiences, they

represented mental models that participants used over and over again throughout every step of their summer planning to evaluate their choices and even the value of other students' summer experiences. I titled these the Threshold of Acceptability, Narrative Currency Value, and Summer Prestige Score. They are explained in Chapter 5 where they receive longer, in-depth treatment as a prominent element of the theoretical model.

Moving Toward Theory

Once the richest of the core categories had been fleshed out in ways supported by a web of clustered selective and axial codes, I began to use diagramming to place them in relation to one another. I did this by physically manipulating pieces of paper with the categories on them. The ability to easily move concepts to precede or follow one another facilitated the creation of a logical process with phases that flowed in order. Getting those steps in sequence made it easier to see how the goals, tasks and strategies, and consequences could be grouped. I also drew various diagrams and models by hand and on the computer, which forced me to consider the best way to describe the phenomenon I had uncovered. For example, one early effort involved using a toolbox to represent Threshold of Acceptability, Narrative Currency Value, and Summer Prestige Ranking. This was discarded because those three concepts are not tools to be picked up and put down but are better understood as internalized mental models. I also attempted a version with a ruler representing this measurement dimension, but it was not dynamic enough.

During selective coding, I had also been thinking a great deal about the way that the layers of context for the participants contained the mediating factors that amplified portions of the summer experience process or offered protective benefits. Corbin and Strauss (2008) define context as the "structural conditions that shape the nature of

situations, circumstances, or problems to which individuals respond by means of action/interaction/emotions" that "range from the most macro to the micro" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 87). Looking at the data to identify conditions, interactions and emotions and consequences that overlap and affect one another helped me to understand the circumstances encircling the summer experience process, leading to a richer and deeper analysis and more concretely to an important element in the final theoretical model (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 90). While I did not use the conditional/consequential matrix that they offer in their writing, I did find that considering which conditions were at work on the phenomenon I had investigated (the high prestige summer experience process) and which consequences flowed out of participants' actions helped me to develop my own model. I was also undoubtedly influenced by Bronfenbrenner's (1993) work, most specifically the idea of visually representing something similar to a student's ecology. This concentric circle concept was likewise present in theory building guidance offered by Corbin and Strauss (2008).

Throughout the theory building process, I discussed my modeling with others. I spoke with my advisor about the concentric circle visual that might depict the mediating factors on students' summer experiences. I debriefed the charts and diagrams at length with two TIU alumni, checking to see if the logic and process that I saw were apparent to others. One alumna, with a background in graphic design, was a particularly helpful sounding board about the specific advantages and disadvantages of some of the visuals I was considering[6]. In the end, the theory emerged from a process of very free coding,

[6] This TIU alumna deserves an extra nod of gratitude for drawing the figure at the center of the High Prestige Summer Experience Model, which can be seen in Figure 3 at the beginning of Chapter 5.

hours of memoing about clustered themes in the data, and pages of drawings and diagrams reifying the relationship between concepts.

Comparison Group

The institution that is the focus of the study requested that I include students from another institution in my investigations. Accordingly, I recruited a comparison group of undergraduates from Most Selective College (MSC)[7], another residential, most selective, Division I institution in the same urban area. While slightly larger than the campus of the main study population, this comparison institution has many of the same characteristics and will be described in brief in Chapter 4. The sampling strategy for the comparison group involved identifying a group of undergraduates in a leadership course, selected because they were considered more likely based on their academic interests to be aware of maximizing their summer breaks for prestige accumulation. Students were incentivized to participate in the study with an offer to swap survey completion for one week's regularly assigned response paper. A separate Google form, linked only in the post-survey message displayed by Qualtrics, allowed for participants to retain anonymity and still receive assignment credit.

The class at MSC had 33 students enrolled across all four class years and from three of the undergraduate colleges at this institution, with majors ranging from management to marketing to psychology to secondary education. One significant way in which this sample differed from the main study group is that the comparison group had a disproportionate number of athletes who, as will be discussed further in Chapter 4, seem to face a different mix of pressures as regards their summer planning.

[7] I have anonymized the name of the comparison college as well and refer to it throughout the dissertation with this acronym.

The informed consent and screening survey, interview protocol, and virtual card sort activity instruments were used for the comparison group as well. However, this was not a completely parallel data collection process. These instruments from the main study were converted into a Qualtrics survey (see Appendix E) with a mix of open-ended text boxes and sort and rank questions that approximated the main study activities. This approach gave the comparison group complete anonymity. I began the analysis process by downloading survey responses as an Excel spreadsheet. I discarded two incomplete surveys and removed six first-year student responses. This left 25 complete responses from the class years of 2022, 2023, and 2024. In terms of analysis, I tabulated some basic sociodemographic and academic characteristic tables and read through participants' responses with an emphasis on comparing and contrasting with the main body of study data (the TIU interviews). Some interesting comparative results will be shared in the findings chapter using general qualitative reporting methods.

Positionality and Reflexivity

In Chapter 1, I addressed my relationship more broadly to the site, participants, and topic. Here, I expand on that theme by discussing the ways in which I worked to move beyond thinking about positionality and reflexivity as concepts to actively incorporating strategies that accomplish them. Because the researcher is the key instrument in a qualitative study, it is crucial that "inquirers explicitly identify reflexively their biases, values, and personal background, such as gender, history, culture, and socioeconomic status (SES) that shape their interpretations formed during a study" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 183). I was particularly thoughtful about this step because I was in a sense conducting "backyard" research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) and

investigating a site that is both my alma mater and my previous place of employment. I was interviewing some participants with whom I had worked as an advisor in previous years; I was asking questions about the helpfulness of campus offices and departments related to summer planning in which I have friends or former colleagues. There are many points of connection or contact with this research study. This relationship to the site and participants necessitated deep reflexive thinking on my part, which I incorporated into my study through writing notes or memos about my hunches, observations, or concerns related to the participants and process. Sufficient reflexivity is marked by an adequate reckoning of how my own experiences with the site and phenomenon under study influence my work "so that they do not override the importance of the content or methods" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 184).

In order to move beyond simply thinking of reflexivity to doing reflexivity, I incorporated the tenets of active reflexive research outlined by Mauthner and Doucet (2003), who question the existence of an absent or neutral researcher and instead argue that we are "'embodied,' situated and subjective" as we carry out our research at all stages from initial epistemological and ontological thinking before a project to the decisions we make about which transcript excerpts to present in a final manuscript (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003, p. 414). They provide concrete examples of how qualitative researchers can increase the reflexive elements of their work through interrogating their social location and emotional responses to our respondents; academic and personal biographies; institutional and interpersonal contexts; and ontological and epistemological conceptions of subjects and subjectivities (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Some specific ways in which I operationalized reflexivity during the interpretation process included

talking out my own reader-response thoughts about participant experiences that were atypical and difficult to relate to, which allowed me to process that disconnect before I moved on to the analytical and writing stages. I also considered by own academic and personal backgrounds. Coming from previous degree programs centered in ethnic area studies, literary analysis, and international development, I knew that I had a more sociological and historical approach to this study than other educational researchers might have, something that Mauthner and Doucet called "a position of theoretical and methodological pluralism" (2003, p. 420). I needed to be aware that this academic background had a role to play in the texts I chose during the literature review and the method I adopted for analysis. I had been drawn to grounded theory early on in my doctoral studies after using it for a course requirement studying the experiences of two graduate student veterans because the way in which it allowed participant stories to drive the findings without external frameworks was very appealing based on my own views about knowledge construction. I also valued that it had space for researcher knowledge as long as it did not overshadow the data. Without that encouragement from an instructor to use it, however, I may have moved in a different direction when designing my own study or even adopted a broad, descriptive quantitative focus. It was only after defending my proposal and beginning data collection that I better understood how well the sociological underpinnings of grounded theory fit with the stories that emerged from participants' summer experiences.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

There is something of a divide in the literature available about how qualitative researchers can conduct rigorous studies with reliably produced results. One group

borrows from the terminology of quantitative work and discusses strategies to increase validity and reliability and how to ensure that a sufficiently high value of interrater reliability can be met with coded data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Miller, 2000; MacPhail et al., 2016; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Another group eschews these terms altogether because of their positivist roots that can be out of place in a field of investigation that celebrates more open, interpretivist approaches (McDonald et al., 2019, p. 2). Instead, qualitative data can and should be considered through the lens of "trustworthiness," which includes the elements of credibility, transability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I read works from proponents of both approaches, which do have overlap, and did my best to incorporate the most relevant strategies for my study, such as memo writing; leaving an audit trail; member checking; peer debriefing; prolonged engagement; disclosing positionality; triangulation; and reporting discrepancies and surprises in the data.

Memo writing was a central part of this study because of the role that it plays in grounded theory research (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saldaña, 2016), so it was a logical step to include in my trustworthiness efforts. I used memos to keep notes about adjustments and revisions to the IRB application, interview protocol, eligibility criteria, coding, and emerging themes throughout the study. This was not only a useful analytic tool but also led to more accurate writeups of the data collection and analysis process because important details were recorded in real time. It was also essential to leaving an audit trail, which improves reliability and reproducibility by documenting my procedures and the steps that I employed to collect and analyze data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Padgett, 2017). The goal in my memo writing and

throughout the sections in this chapter was “making the research process transparent” so that others may clearly follow my decision-making and could feasibly re-create this study (McDonald et al., 2019, p. 5).

Data coding and core concept identification are more credible with the inclusion of member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Saldaña, 2016) and peer debriefing (Padgett, 2017) to reduce the risk of idiosyncratic interpretations of the data. I performed member checking during interviews by paraphrasing and summarizing participants’ comments and waiting for affirmation that my understanding of their words was correct, such as in this exchange with Victoria about norms she identified on campus:

> Erica: So, it sounds like there's this divide between frivolous and productive and that’s kind of what comes into play, like, for TIU undergrads, if you’re not doing something productive, then maybe you also aren’t doing something prestigious. There's not prestige associated with just kind of frivolous travel or frivolous hanging out at home doing nothing.
>
> Mo: I think *so*. [emphasis by participant, who went on to give examples of producing concrete outputs]

I also occasionally probed explicitly by asking participants follow-up questions to promising lines of inquiry, such as this exchange during my interview with Sarah about the as-yet unexplored at the time role of non-TIU peers’ counterexamples:

> Erica: So was it hearing about other people’s, like those non-TIU peers, hearing about their different kinds of lower stress or lower pressure summers? Did that help reduce the pressure on you, or did it feel that you were just so far apart in terms of what you were doing that it didn't help at all?

Sarah: I feel like it definitely created a dissonance for me.

Member checking not only took place during interviews but also occasionally after the recording had ended. For example, two participants (Abigail and Henry) were interested enough in hearing more about others' responses after their interviews concluded that we had a brief discussion about my emerging findings. In a similar manner, I discussed data and hunches in a way that respected confidentiality with peers who were former fellow staff at TIU or fellow alumni. It was helpful to use these individuals as a sounding board because of their familiarity with the study's setting and population. Peer debriefing also took place to some degree with my advisor and fellow doctoral students about high-level concepts and early findings, respectively.

Prolonged engagement (Padgett, 2017) means that participants have a relationship with the researcher who is not an unfamiliar, outside investigator, and it increases the rigor and trustworthiness of the final product because individuals are more comfortable disclosing information and less likely to omit or obscure information. My role within the TIU residential community led to many years of sustained engagement with the setting and population generally but also with some participants who were known to me before the start of the study. This level of involvement can cut both ways, however, which is why I also placed a great deal of emphasis on disclosing my positionality (McDonald et al., 2019; Padgett, 2017). I chose to include a lengthy section in Chapter 1 devoted to sharing my relationship to the site, interviewees, and personal experiences with the topic. In conversation with peers and my advisor, I also explicitly discussed ways in which participants' opinions and experiences did and did not overlap with my own to address and reduce personal bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Two final strategies that related directly to data included triangulation and reporting discrepant results. Triangulating data is the process of positioning the study data (in my case, interviews) in relation to other sources to arrive at a consistent meaning (Creswell & Miller, 2000; McDonald et al., 2019). By considering the other material I had available to me, I was able to confirm that the concepts and themes emerging while coding the interview transcripts were not idiosyncratic. Rather, they found echoes in the advising documents, emails, older survey data sources, and staff interviews that I had collected. While the need to anonymize TIU made it difficult to report on any of that material directly, I was still able to corroborate my findings in confidential discussions with my advisor who was aware of the setting's identity. I also made sure to report discrepancies and surprises in the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which enhances the credibility of research by making it clear that discordant or unusual stories are not hidden from the study write-up. Chapter 4 contains a section devoted to surprises and discontinuities.

When considering which steps to increase trustworthiness to pursue, I was working to stay consistent in my assumptions about knowledge and about its construction. Consequently, I chose not to use a second coder because it is not generally adopted as a trustworthiness measure in grounded theory (McDonald et al., 2019, p. 15). Interrater reliability (IRR) is not part of any of the foundational texts of the method. Furthermore, the reflexive, iterative nature of the cyclical coding process makes the discussions about coding agreement that other methods pursuing IRR might hold redundant. Examples of when to abandon interrater reliability completely include "when developing codes is part of the process, when there is a single researcher, [and] when

researchers are embedded in the research context" (McDonald et al., 2019, p. 3). These scenarios all applied to my study, indicating that it was both theoretically and methodologically incompatible with this particular investigation in which "codes are the process, not the product" (McDonald et al., 2019, p. 13). The codes in this grounded theory study were not a pre-set list that needed to be applied consistently across cases. Rather, the process of reading transcripts and tagging participants' words with codes was the central task of the first step in analysis. The continual generation, application, refinement, and integration of codes into themes was inextricably linked to the data analysis and theory building processes of this study.

Limitations of the Study Sample and Method

This study presents an initial look at the nature of HPSEs at an elite campus and how undergraduate students pursue and accumulate these experiences or, conversely, choose to opt out of this prestige- and status-building mechanism. As with any study that aims to investigate a largely unexplored phenomenon, there were limits to both the breadth and depth of the exposition. It faced the usual issues of a small, ungeneralizable sample. It is possible that students who had a terrible summer experience selected out of the study; it is likewise possible that students who opted out of the accumulation of summer experiences were not interested in participating. Unfortunately, there were two participants who left this study before the interview and they both identified as male: Lyle, who decided to take a leave of absence from college, and Mark, who had initially been interested but reported that he was busy with work and having difficulty finding a time to schedule the interview. The loss of these two participants negatively impacted the representation in the sample because they were the only economics majors (one of the

most popular majors at TIU); Mark came from the dominant on-campus consulting pipeline (and I had hoped to hear his insider views on that); and Lyle was the only male undergraduate who expressed interest in participating. Beyond diversifying the sample, I would also ideally conduct the study over a longer period of time to follow participants from college and into their early careers. By including a group of recent alumni, I hoped to capture some sense of post-college maturation and retrospective interpretation.

One key issue here is that these research questions were being investigated at such an unusual time, at a point in which the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic was easing in some parts of the United States as a result of high levels of vaccine uptake[8] while elsewhere, entire countries were still deep in the thrall of second and third waves of infection (Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center, n.d.). This context might result in socioeconomic differences for students being amplified, as some economists have already expressed surprise and dismay at how the rich have gotten richer despite the pandemic's economic toll (Levinson-King, 2021). Participants reported that the pandemic certainly had short-term effects on the availability of in-person classes, internships, and study abroad experiences, but any long-term impact on the medium through which learning and career preparation take place cannot yet be discerned. Despite any possible limitations of conducting this study during the pandemic, it was still valuable to begin an investigation into the accumulation of prestige through summer experiences. This context throws the status-seeking of elite undergraduates into the highest relief possible.

Lastly, this research study was an intensive look at a single extreme context by a former participant. As such, this study brings with it the attendant concerns about

[8] As of May 31, 2021, 62.6% of the US population aged 18 years and older had received at least one dose and 51.5% were fully vaccinated (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

potential generalization to other settings and contexts. However, given the exploratory nature of the study and desire to investigate a phenomenon in its more extreme manifestation, this single-site study still has the potential to increase knowledge and pave the way for further (and possibly multi-site) research and understanding.

Chapter Four: Findings

Overview

The goal of this study was to uncover what elite students do with their summers and elicit their thoughts about why they choose particular summer experiences, how they engage in these experiences, and what consequences attend an intensive cycle of pursuing and accumulating high prestige summer experiences. While earlier chapters detailed the "why" and the "how" of this study, I turn now to exposition on the "what" that I uncovered in the course of my interviews with participants. This chapter focuses on the descriptive findings of the study and presents them in an order guided by the open coding sub-categories and axial coding categories that were most central to the selective coding and theory building process described in Chapter 3. Chapter 5 will delve into the interpretation of these core themes and present the theoretical model that explains how elite undergraduates consider, pursue, and make sense of their summer experiences. Chapter 6 will expand the boundaries of the conversation and by reflecting on the significance and implications of the findings and model for students, practitioners, and future researchers.

Participant Characteristics

Thirteen participants scheduled and completed interviews for this study and their characteristics are presented in Table 2. At the time of data collection, four were undergraduates and nine were recent alumni. Women were overrepresented (10 to 3) as were white participants and those from the upper reaches of the socioeconomic ladder. There were two Latina participants, two Asian participants, and one international student from the Middle East, but the sample unfortunately did not have any participants from

other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Participants had been asked to self-report their families' socioeconomic status using a ladder of 1 to 10, with 10 representing a family background with the most money, most education and most respected jobs.

The majors and minors in Table 2 represent a typical swathe of the most popular choices at TIU, with one notable absence of a top-five major (economics). Two participants completed a double major, which is not a common path at TIU, where students wanting to do so must write a senior thesis which integrates both majors. Four participants completed a language citation—an attestation of a student's advanced training in language noted on their TIU transcript—during college in addition to their other coursework. Of those who did not pursue language courses, an additional two participants use a language other than English with their family of origin.

I was fortunate that the participants were universally eager to share their experiences and their time, with six of them happily spending more than an hour on the items in the interview protocol. With interviews that were longer, more personal, and wider ranging than I had expected, I found myself with extensive data. In terms of the "interview as a social gesture," I was aware that earlier researchers based in elite educational institutions had noted that interviews can serve as elite signaling opportunities to demonstrate ease and privilege (Khan & Jerolmack, 2013, p. 17). I similarly found that participants were courteous, keen to provide details and elaborate on points, and apologetic when they felt they were rambling or not articulating themselves clearly enough. Participants also laughed more than I had expected, both when sharing humorous stories from their time at college and when laughing at themselves and "the silliness" of their college thinking.

Table 2

Study Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Class Year	Self-Reported Racial/Ethnic Identity	Family SES Background (1-10)	Major, Minor, and Language Citations
Charlotte	Female	2019	White	8	Social studies, minor in German
Abigail	Female	2020	White, Latina	3 [a]	Environmental science and public policy, citation in Spanish
Emily	Female	2020	White	9	Psychology, minor in linguistics
Erin	Female	2020	White	6	Integrative biology, minor in archaeology, citation in Spanish
Sarah	Female	2020	White	9	Government, minor in educational studies
Steve	Male	2020	White	10	Math and computer science double major
Wendy	Female	2020 [b]	White	9	Social studies, citation in Chinese
Henry	Male	2021	Asian	7	Psychology, minor in computer science
Sam	Male	2021	White [c]	7	Neuroscience, minor in economics
Kristen	Female	2021/2022 [b]	White	7	Psychology
Gretchen	Female	2022 [d]	White	8	Applied math
Mo	Female	2022	Asian	7	Computer science and philosophy double major
Victoria	Female	2023	White, Latina, Xicana, Mexican-American and Nicaraguan-American	10	History, minor in ethnicity, migration, rights

[a] This participant also indicated first gen status.

[b] These participants took a semester off from school.

[c] This participant indicated he is an international student from the Middle East.

[d] This participant took off a full year from school.

Participants' Summer Experiences

Table 3 lists the content of participants' summer experiences, as well as the current position of recent alumni. Certain types of programs dominate the list: summer study abroad, travel, research, and internships. Many of the internships took place in big cities, such as San Francisco, New York, Boston, Berlin, Madrid, and Washington DC. Not everyone traveled, however. Some participants reported that they obtained positions close to home, such as Steve, who secured a software engineering internship at a defense contractor that happened to be within commuting distance of his home in New England. Sarah, also based in New England, found her first summer's development fellowship through her local TIU alumni club and explicitly wanted to be at home that summer as she felt "homesick." Victoria, whose college experience had been dominated by the pandemic and its waves of closures, completed all of her summer experiences from her home on the West Coast.

Not every opportunity that these students applied for worked out, however. Many of them shared that they had spring terms in which they were still struggling to find an acceptable opportunity in March and April, or that the decision-making process was simplified in the years in which they only received a single acceptance after sending out many applications. Emily mentioned that she did not get a consulting internship that she had applied for; Charlotte never heard back from an embassy overseas. Nearly every participant had examples of opportunities that did not work out.

In terms of what participants wanted to get out of a summer experience, their responses ranged from the concrete to the abstract. Many wanted to have some financial independence even though they did have parental support behind them. Building up a

Table 3

Participants' Summer Experiences and Attitudinal Responses

Pseudonym	Summer Experiences Summary	Current Graduate School or Professional Situation	Screening Survey Responses (0=completely disagree, 10=completely agree)		
			Tension [a]	Stress or Anxiety [b]	Happy with Choices [c]
Charlotte	TIU Summer School abroad in Germany (twice); senior thesis research in Germany and personal travel in Israel	Global strategy consulting	10	10	4
Abigail	Unpaid internship conducting research at a national seashore; funded research in China; TIU Summer School abroad in Spain	Unpaid intern for a community solar company; part time food service work; temporary employee for a private high school	10	9	7
Emily	Research fellowship in Pennsylvania; military research laboratory; senior thesis research on campus as part of a funded research village	PhD student at a public university	7	1	4
Erin	TIU Summer School abroad in Peru; research in ecology on campus; senior thesis research on campus	First-year graduate student at an Ivy League school	4	4	7
Sarah	Development fellow at a local non-profit; policy intern at a national non-profit in DC; teacher at a non-profit in a major US city	Research associate at an Ivy League business school	4	10	6
Steve	Software engineering internship with a defense contractor; robotics internship; cryptography research program in Europe	Finance	0	6	8
Wendy	TIU-affiliated teach abroad program in China; internships with two major television networks and a former US Senator	Research assistant to an Ivy League government professor	1	10	10
Henry	Beach lifeguarding on the Jersey shore	Full time job in event development at a fitness nonprofit	8	6	10

Sam	Research at a genetics lab; legal internship in DC; medical school applications and LSAT	First year MD student at an Ivy League school	2	8	9
Kristen	Unpaid internship at a comedy club with a retail job at the Gap; paid internship doing marketing for a small video production company; two paid remote internships with two major television networks	N/A	6	8	8
Gretchen	Coach for College teaching abroad in Vietnam; TIU Summer School proctor on campus and took a class; paid remote internship with a tech start-up; paid hybrid data analytics internship with a food services brand	N/A	8	8	9
Mo	Paid software engineer intern at a tech non-profit; paid software engineering intern at Palantir; paid tech policy research intern at a think tank in DC	N/A	6	10	10
Victoria	Remote summer campaign fellow for Wisconsin Democratic Party; remote summer school courses while working at TIU Extension School Writing Center	N/A	9	9	4

[a] The full prompt was “There’s some tension between what I want/ed to do and what I feel/felt I should be doing with my summers.”

[b] The full prompt was “I experience/d stress or anxiety as a result of figuring out what to do with my summer breaks.”

[c] The full prompt was “I’m happy with the ways I’ve chosen/chose to use my summers.”

repertoire of professional skills was another goal for the summer break. Charlotte felt that her writing and research skills gained during her summer experiences have served her incredibly well in her consulting role; Mo knew that she wanted “hands on keyboard” experiences that would build her technical software abilities. The straightforward career preparation function was evident in in other ways as well. Participants valued the challenge of passing a difficult interview, the chance to develop professional skills in a work environment, and to learn for themselves what careers might be interesting. Charlotte and Henry were looking to the future and realized that the schedule for many of the careers that interested them would preclude any type of summer travel and exploration, so pursuing an experience that allowed for exploration overseas was important before settling down into a traditional job postgrad.

Participants valued the opportunity to take a break from the school year because of the intense academic, extracurricular, and social burden that TIU could present. Summer experiences that let participants go somewhere new, meet new people, spend time outdoors, and enjoy a different environment away from campus were rated favorably in the interviews by participants who pursued them. Erin and Henry praised their respective experiences on an archaeological dig and beach lifeguarding because it was such a treat to spend so many hours in fresh air and sunshine after the school year. Abigail had also been looking for a summer experience that involved travel, but she pointed to the transformational personal growth that she had noticed in peers who had gone abroad after their first year and that she desired for herself.

The last clear category of what participants were hoping to get out of the summer experience involved prestige. Several of them said that they wanted to get a prestigious or

well-paying job after graduation and an internship at a prestigious company would help them to accomplish that goal. For example, Sam explicitly said he wanted his summers to set him up for success in achieving a postgrad plan "on par with TIU."

Expectations and Attitudes

For all of the consistency in their approach to summer experiences once they reached campus, most students seem to have entered TIU college with little idea about this summer phenomenon. Their high school summers had been dominated by babysitting, camp counselor positions, and the occasional one- or two-week experience at academic competitions and conferences. Across the board, participants reported little or no thinking about their college summers before entering TIU. When asked directly about their pre-college expectations, many students said they would have guessed that college summers meant a return home and some type of part time, non-college related work. If they had anticipated any formal programming, they would have expected it to take the form of the fragmented, short-term opportunities that were offered to them in high school. There was a small group of participants with older siblings who had gone to Ivy League schools and expected to follow in their siblings' footsteps with internships and research. Interestingly, even these students were caught off guard by what a "big thing" summer planning and experiences could be. No one reported knowing that consulting and finance were careers before college, even though it was the internships in those fields that they said dominate the campus prestige hierarchy and have the greatest visibility. Gretchen had no parents with US college experience and had this to say: "I didn't know how much internships mattered or even that that's what you're supposed to do before…

Beginning of my junior year, I remember someone said, ‘Oh, do you want to come to this consulting thing with me?’ and I didn’t even know what consulting was.”

Participants reported a wide range of attitudes toward summer experiences and the planning process. As part of the screening survey and informed consent, prospective participants responded to a set of attitudinal questions about their general orientation to summer breaks. Those responses, reported on a scale of 0 to 10 in Table 2, show how wildly different the emotional load of the process was for undergraduates. It is interesting to see that the degree of tension between what students wanted to do and what they thought they were supposed to do did not always go hand in hand with stress and anxiety in setting up their summer experiences. There were students, such as Wendy, who experienced almost no tension between what she wanted to do and what she felt she should be doing but was nonetheless so stressed out and anxious about her summer experiences that she chose to take a semester off and give herself a fourth summer in which to pursue an additional opportunity. Emily offers a good example of the converse—a lot of tension between what she wanted to do and what she felt she should be doing but little stress or anxiety about figuring out what to do. This hinted at the fact that two different processes were happening in sequence: resolving the tension by deciding to do what they were supposed to do and finding and securing an opportunity that met those criteria.

The level of happiness or satisfaction with summer choices was quite high, with a few lower responses that were best understood when participants were invited to speak at length during the interview and provide greater context. For example, Charlotte reported that even with no constraints on her summer plans, she would still enjoy the chance to do

many of the same activities. Some of her unhappiness, Charlotte said, had been driven by peers questioning her three summers of travel and what it would mean for her employability to not have an internship. Emily ended up being unhappy with her summer choices because she felt pigeonholed by her research positions and would have explored other options if given the chance to do it again. Victoria went into college expecting that time with family would be limited from there on out and instead found coursework and internships and summer school all taking place from her bedroom at home, which explained her low rating.

Typical Trajectory of Summer Experiences

Broader beliefs about what summer is for were consistent across participants, who reported that nearly everyone on campus considered it to be a time for career-related exploration or personal travel and growth. They also had remarkably consistent ideas on what the typical trajectory of summer experiences would look like at college: a summer abroad, an internship, and/or senior thesis research. A variation on this might be two years of internships if someone either had opted not to write a thesis or was in the humanities or social sciences and did not need a summer of laboratory research. The concept of a typical trajectory was partly about participants desiring the same experiences as peers and also partly a recognition that the existence of a typical trajectory exerted pressure on them to conform to it. Most participants said they felt like a typical TIU student in how they used their summers because of the high degree of overlap between their summer experiences and this typical trajectory.

The evolution of summers throughout college showed changes with respect to location and complexity, in addition to content. It was acceptable for first-year students to

return home in their first summer in the absence of a more exciting opportunity, but "after that it was kind of assumed that you should know your way around TIU well enough to get someone to pay you to do something interesting" (Abigail). The choices considered typical for second and third summers were something on campus, in a major US city, or abroad.

Participants also related growing complexity in summer experiences as they progressed through TIU. Sarah knew that with how homesick she felt her first year, returning home and obtaining an internship nearby was the best choice for her. This was considered within the universe of acceptable options because she was able to secure funding through her local TIU alumni chapter and the position that she found had a prestigious sounding (if empty, in her view) title. Other participants were quick to acknowledge that living at home was fine that first summer if paired with some type of acceptably high-status activity. Organized study abroad programs were considered another good choice for first-year students and even sophomores because they were highly structured. Conversely, conducting thesis research and securing an apartment to live independently after junior year demonstrated the expected level of personal development and growth for rising seniors about to leave the nest of TIU in one short year.

Staying at home for the summer was otherwise widely seen as far outside the typical trajectory beyond the first year. It signaled to peers that there was a potentially uncomfortable, awkward, or otherwise to-be-avoided reason behind a peer's summer plans. Most participants reported that they had never heard of someone spending the summer at home without some type of side project or non-college related job, but among

those who had, they expressed that they would assume a mental or physical health problem was behind this type of plan. The recent alumni who answered in this way explained that they would have more compassion for that type of choice now with a few years of perspective, but even in college, would try to be sympathetic to hearing about that type of summer plan because it would definitely signal that there was something deeper at play behind the façade shown to peers on campus.

While most participants agreed strongly that they broadly conformed to the typical trajectory, there was a subset who reported that they diverged in significant ways. Henry said that he felt very much outside the norm because of his choice to beach lifeguard, especially for three summers in a row. He said it became clear during successive years that he was unusual for choosing something so unrelated to career exploration and travel abroad and that peers found it surprising that he did not have any variety in his summer experiences. Charlotte felt that going abroad three summers in a row was similarly atypical and peers questioned her decision to do so. Sam reported that he did not meet anyone else who had an undergraduate internship at a law firm. These three participants felt that being outside the trajectory was not necessarily negative, however, because they were engaging in something that was prestigious or unique in its own way. Henry was saving lives at the birthplace of beach lifeguarding, where the role is prestigious in the local community; Charlotte was part of a prestigious exchange program at a leading European university and working on a thesis for which she received reward money; and Sam was the only undergraduate to be part of a large judicial case between a former imperial power and one of its former colonies. Clearly, these participants were not eschewing the typical trajectory to work an hourly wage role in

their hometowns like some non-TIU peers that they had. They were pursuing summer opportunities that set them apart and had caché attached to them.

Counterexamples

There were occasional mentions of counterexamples to the typical summer trajectory. Steve had high school friends who continued to work as camp counselors even though he left that behind when he went to college. Other participants likewise had high school peers at state schools or less selective private colleges who did not share the same beliefs about what a college summer is for and sometimes even had summer vacations. These counterexamples seemed to be too distant from their reference groups and campus setting to be relevant models for alternative ways of spending the summer. Interestingly, even two examples from other Ivy League schools were discarded. Gretchen's high school friend spent her summers while at Princeton coaching swimming at a local country club near her home. Despite this non-TIU peer's counterexample, Gretchen could still not find the freedom to pursue her first-choice summer options, seeing this Princeton graduate as not close enough to her own reference group. A similar story came from Sarah, whose sister at Brown had a less intense summer trajectory living at home and completing museum internships but whose example likewise was not relevant enough to alter Sarah's choices or diminish her anxiety and stress.

A very few were examples from on campus itself. The on-campus examples were friends or acquaintances who had done something completely off the typical trajectory, but not in a way that invited emulation—for example, Wendy's roommate spent a summer at home with "nothing going on" and "had a complex about it for the rest of her time at TIU."

Motivations

Understanding students' motivations to engage in a resource-intensive process to accumulate prestigious summer experiences was central to answering this study's research question. The interview protocol contained questions that would draw out participants' motivations for their summer experience decisions as well as a frame in the virtual card sort activity to capture information on this topic while engaging the interviewees more fully through a hands-on sorting exercise (see Chapter 3). By asking the questions in this way, it allowed the participants to complete a task while talking me through their sorting decisions into "most important," "also important," and "not important" motivation categories. Table 4 contains their responses.

Among the most important motivators were expected career preparation dimensions of summer break, such as the chance to try different jobs and to add meaningfully to a resume. Worries about the future dominated this item on the interview protocol, but worry, stress and anxiety in general also occupied a large portion of the interviews as a whole. Prestige factored into most participants' decisions, which would be expected at an elite institution. In a similar vein, earning academic credit was largely unimportant, another unsurprising finding at a college in which very few students need to make up credits from failed courses. The participants who did reference academic credit had other reasons to name it as a motivator: it was a nice byproduct of their summer study abroad; an appreciated boost to their GPA if they had taken a difficult class since summer courses were seen as easier; a benefit that they received for working as a summer school proctor; or the result of free tuition from the college to make amends for the

pandemic shutdown. Academic credit in the summer was most useful when it was free and alleviated some of the term-time pressure.

Table 4

Motivations that Influence Summer Experience Planning

Factor	Number of Participants Reporting Factor As		
	Most Important	Also Important	Not Important
Worries about post-grad future	9	2	2
Chance to try different jobs	9	1	3
Resume building	7	6	–
Personal development	6	6	2
Prestige	5	6	2
Adventure or fun	4	7	3
Peer pressure	4	5	4
Gaining research experience	4	2	7
Desire to travel over the summer	3	4	7
Building foreign language skills	3	2	8
Need/want break from school	3	1	9
Earning money	2	5	4
Family pressure/expectations	1	6	6
Earning academic credit	1	3	9
Breaking even financially [a]	1	1	–
Ability to train for sport [a]	1	–	–
Challenge myself [a]	1	–	–
Confidence building [a]	1	–	–
People asking [a]	1	–	–
Sense of career direction [a]	1	–	–

Note. Rows do not have the same sum because participants were encouraged to write their own factors if applicable to their experiences. Some also placed a factor in more than one bucket because of mixed experiences.

[a] Participant-generated factor.

Somewhat unexpectedly, most participants said that needing or wanting a break from school did not factor into their summer experience planning. This was despite 12 of the 13 participants talking about how difficult school was, how exhausting extracurricular and social commitments could be, and how they enjoyed new environments. It was possible that this item in the bucket sort became confused with the idea of a vacation. Participants' sense of what constituted a "break" from school was nowhere near the poolside summer break that might be imagined. They instead reported that even when internships or research positions involved long hours and "were a grind," they were still a slower pace than their lives on campus, perhaps because they were devoting themselves to a single responsibility, albeit an intense one.

Students generally mentioned the role of funding at this point in the interview. Interestingly, no participants said that earning the most money they could was important for them. Instead, a different concept related to funding emerged that they called "breaking even," which meant that they did not have a net financial gain but had secured enough backing to participate in the summer experience of their choice. Financial independence and autonomy were either explicitly valued by participants' parents or were something that participants themselves were keen to establish. Money was simply a vehicle for pursuing summer experiences; there was not a goal of ending the summer with more money than they had going into it as long as they could afford housing and food. By and large, there was also plenty of funding to go around on campus from their perspective and those participants who mentioned money getting in the way of a particular experience were few. Abigail said she needed to break even financially by securing adequate funding regardless of where she wanted to go or what she wanted to do

because it was otherwise a non-starter. Emily's parents, on the other hand, discouraged her from a study abroad program because of its expense relative to earning money work in a lab for the summer, which said more about their values than absolute financial need.

Peer pressure factored into this discussion of motivations as well, with many of the participants indicating that it affected their planning or at least their emotional state. For example, Charlotte mentioned on three separate occasions that peer pressure made her second guess or feel less confident about her summer plans, although she did not end up changing what she did. While the peer pressure she experienced did not have an outwardly visible result, it did have a real internal effect in the form of lowered confidence. Gretchen and Emily both found themselves considering consulting because of peers who invited them to events, even though it was not previously on their radar.

There were rich discussions around personal growth during the virtual card sort frame on motivations. This topic emerged as a result of a late addition to this portion of the interview protocol informed by one of the two pilot interviewees, who suggested that "personal development" would better capture the motivation of his reasons for pursuing the summer experiences that he did in college. This proved to resonate with many participants who later placed this in the "most important" category of motivators. Some of them even linked the personal development during their summers to their current resiliency in facing the loneliness and isolation of the pandemic as young professionals coping with new locations and new jobs.

The motivations that generated the most discussion were the two items clustered together at the top: worries about post-graduate future and the chance to try different jobs. Some participants explicitly named that these were tightly coupled for them, with

Sarah's insights representing this viewpoint well: "I'm very, very, very risk averse…. I have to know everything that could go wrong. I have to know exactly what my life could be in 10 years and if I start to feel even slightly hesitant, never mind…so I definitely looked at internships as a way of getting a taste—without having to commit—of whether those fields would be right for me."

Not everyone felt that anxiety or worry was driving the typical trajectory of selecting a variety of summer options. Sometimes students were motivated to make summer choices to get a better sense of direction, using a carefully selected set of three summer experiences to determine what career might interest them. Mo expressed little in the way of worry about the future but rather knew she was interested in technology and simply wanted to explore all sides of it. This led her to a skills-building software engineer position at a nonprofit (supported by a Google fellowship), a similar position with a prestigious private tech firm the following year, and then a digital governance and research internship at a think tank in DC. Steve had a similar approach with his summers spent in research abroad and tech internships, which ultimately led him to rule out a computer science PhD and take a job in finance instead. Sam was deciding between law school and medical school and took summer positions in both spheres before the pandemic hit. These participants found it helpful to supplement the sometimes more limited career exploration possible during the academic year with deep dives into various companies and career fields.

Influences throughout the Summer Experience Process

Students do not make their decisions about the summer in a vacuum. This had been apparent anecdotally to me and my work colleagues in our advising at TIU, and it

came through clearly in interviews with participants. Some of the most influential voices in their summer planning were their family members (parents and siblings); teaching and residential staff; peers in their same academic department and around their residential communities; and a variety of campus offices, including those dedicated to career services and specialty research centers.

Role of Family

Participants brought up their family throughout the interviews because they had a strong influence over pre-college values and beliefs, controlled financial support for some participants, and at times had their own opinions about what students should and should not do with their summer breaks. Charlotte explicitly tied her decision-making to the values inculcated in her by her parents to value travel and education. Emily reported a tension between what she wanted to do and what her parents approved of, which resulted in her desire to travel abroad being overridden by parental disapproval of spending that money on a summer school program when she could pursue research instead. Sam's family pressured him to devote the summer exclusively to preparing for high wage-earning activities like medical school, and Gretchen's family insisted she be productive by holding down an internship instead of focusing intensively on training for the Olympics. The consistent message across participant responses was that families had value systems that they imposed on students.

Another body of data pointed to limited family support or understanding, linked closely with family characteristics. Erin's parents expected her to come home and get a part-time job based on their own experiences at public university. Steve said that his parent did not have the "know-how" to help him as he made summer decisions because

the pressures and context at TIU were so different from his parents' college. However, his brother, who had also gone to TIU a few years earlier, offered an example of what to expect so that the dominant narrative of summer internships, research, and travel were familiar to him. Mo likewise said, "There was kind of a certain point where my problems kind of like became above their pay grade," even though her parents both worked in the technology sector. This suggested that the pressures and tensions at elite institutions might not be similar to less-prestigious ones that can also play a role in the elite occupational pipeline. For Abigail, whose parents did not go to college at all, she had to find other sources of support. Gretchen expressed being in a similar position, with a non-college going mother and a father who went to university overseas. Some of the participants who reported low understanding from their parents also said that justifying their summer choices to their family could be a difficult task.

Family pressures took on different forms but did show some patterns. There were pressures linked to older siblings' careers: Abigail's family already counted more than one doctor and teacher among her five older siblings. This meant that she felt both pressure from her family to do something prestigious and high paying, like those in the medical field, or to do something with a clear professional path, such as the medical field or education. Given her interests in environmental justice work, she experienced a lot of stress and anxiety as she charted a less certain path. For Gretchen, her siblings were also a source of tension. She decided to take a gap year during the pandemic to maintain NCAA eligibility for her varsity sport. Her brother, who did not go to college at all, did not understand: "I even got into an argument with my brother when my brother was like, what are you doing? You're being stupid. You need to go graduate. You need to start

earning money." Sam's family, which had more than one doctor, preferred that he reject a legal internship to focus on pursuing medicine because they saw that as more prestigious.

In terms of family support, participants said that parents ranged from generally supportive and hands off to directly involved in their summer planning choices. Students might use their parents as a sounding board or simply fill them in on decisions they made independently. Henry said his parents trusted him to make good summer decisions since he was smart enough to be accepted into TIU. Victoria, Sarah, and Charlotte all mentioned that their mothers were directly involved in their summer experience process, with assistance ranging from forwarding job suggestions to practicing interview skills. Family members also offered tangible support in the form of a free beach house to live in over the summer (Henry), personal connections to the principal investigator at a research lab (Sam), and an internship opportunity through a mother's coworker (Steve).

None of the study participants reported having a parent who went to an Ivy League school; rather, the common experience was having parents with less elite post-secondary education who had different expectations to what was voiced by TIU peers. Erin explained, "My family didn't have expectations for my summers because they both went to public universities…Maybe they thought I'd just come home and get a part-time job that was like, um, they didn't really expect like crazy things

Interestingly, despite the tensions and occasional bad advice that participants reported receiving from family members, it was common for them to express a desire to spend more time with family if they were given the chance to plan college summers without the pressures and constraints that they faced as TIU students.

Sources of Information and Advice

The second element in the virtual card sort activity was a frame that asked participants to sort various sources of advice and information into buckets, similar to the section on motivations. The goal was to uncover which voices were letting students know what they should be or could be doing with respect to summer breaks. Table 5 shows the helpfulness to students of various sources of information advice as they engaged in summer planning. In general, family members, professors, and peers were most often weighing in with opinions on participants' summer breaks. They are among the most frequently referenced sources in the table but their distribution across all three categories hints at how varied the personal context could be for students. Steve, who otherwise experienced very few points of friction throughout the summer planning process, said that he felt completely ghosted by professors he tried to approach and worried that he was in the wrong, calling himself "too needy" to want their input.

Adding together peers of all kinds shows that they dominated the advice networks for the participants, though they did cluster in the middle of the helpfulness categories. Typically, the most useful peers were those with similar interests who could share ideas, though a few exceptions existed for students who felt pressured by the competition and chose to seek out non-TIU friends with which to discuss summer planning instead. Connecting with peers a year or two ahead was seen as especially helpful because they were not competing for the same spots but could offer recent, relevant advice or maybe even activate a referral system. The low values reported for sources such as romantic partners, coaches, and teammates should not necessarily be taken to mean that those voices are irrelevant in students' summer decision-making process. Rather, it was the

Table 5

Sources of Information and Advice Regarding Summer Breaks

Source	Number of Participants Reporting Source As		
	Most Important or Helpful	Also Important or Helpful	Unhelpful
Family members	6	4	3
Professors	5	3	2
Other TIU offices or staff [a]	5	1	–
Resident tutors	4	6	–
Non-TIU professional contacts	4	–	–
Roommates	2	7	2
OCS office or individual staff	1	6	3
Romantic partner or significant other	1	2	–
Non-TIU peers	1	1	1
Career websites [b]	1	1	–
Student group [b]	1	1	–
Fellow majors [b]	1	–	–
Personal research [b]	1	–	–
Teaching fellows [b]	1	–	–
Teammates [b]	1	–	–
Blockmates [c]	–	6	3
Non-TIU peers	–	2	–
Supervisor [b]	–	2	–
Coaches [b]	–	1	–
Email lists	–	1	–
Friends [b]	–	1	–
House deans	–	1	–
First-year orientation program [b]	–	–	1

Note. Rows do not have the same sum because participants were asked to leave irrelevant sources unsorted and some participants also placed a source in more than one bucket because of mixed experiences.

[a] Four participants gave specific examples for this source, naming an area studies center, an environmental research center, and two mentioned the same political institute.

[b] Participant-generated source.

[c] This term describes the "blocks" of students that enter the housing lottery together but do share a room.

case that few participants had these individuals in their lives. Only Gretchen played sports at a varsity level, and just Charlotte, Emily, Gretchen, and Steve had significant others. Steve did not include his significant other at all in this card sort activity, which is why the row totals only three for that item. He instead emphasized that those peers most helpful to him were all in his academic discipline.

There were a number of participant-generated responses for this item in the interview protocol, which show that in addition to the more central forces at work on their summer attitudes, there were also more peripheral and self-initiated sources of information. For example, Kristen secured internships at two major networks in the entertainment industry by using career websites independently and attending a Viacom info session at the campus career center. Sarah was active on a number of listservs specific to her non-profit and public service interests, which helped her identify opportunities. Wendy was a member-at-large of a public service center as well, and those connections helped her to secure her positions.

I also sought information about any individuals or offices around the participants who were actively not helpful. While most participants did not have that type of experience in the planning process, some did mention this as an issue for them to navigate. As mentioned briefly already in the family section, Sam had some difficulty justifying his interest in law to his medicine-dominated family. This was complicated by the fact that he said they also understood very little about what makes someone a competitive medical school applicant and had argued vociferously that he should spend his summer solely studying for the MCAT. Mo received what she called “horrible advice” that “will close doors” from her mentors in a first-year orientation program. They

told her that grades did not matter and that she should study abroad every summer, but as she put it: “That works if you want a specific set of doors open to you at the end of your college experience, but for the doors that I wanted open, that is horrible advice. I want to go to grad school. My grades do matter. If I want to work at a big tech company, what I do with my summers does matter.” Participants identified additional unhelpful sources of advice, which were largely campus offices and are addressed in the next section with other institutional agents.

Institutional Messaging

During the coding and analysis cycles, I was looking specifically for any sign of a pattern around institutional messaging about summer experiences. This topic came up for most participants during the virtual card sort activity about sources of information because their most frequent interaction with the university around summer planning had to do with concrete programmatic offerings such as listservs, information sessions, workshops, resume and cover letter assistance, and on-campus recruiting. University offices were at their most helpful when they provided these resources. The campuswide career office rated poorly, according to some participants, because most of their advice was so general as to be unhelpful. Abigail could not find advice about environmental issues and was told to consider energy companies. Henry had a minor in computer science but received no advice other than to consider tech recruiting. Multiple participants said that when a staff member hit a wall with suggestions, the next piece of advice was frequently to consider consulting because it would not limit their postgraduate opportunities.

Other institutional sources of information and advice included teaching staff and residential staff. As Table 4 shows, students differed in how helpful they found these sources, but professors and staff ranked just below families in their importance as sources of information and advice. The role of these institutional messengers was a mixed bag of positive and negative elements. Participants said that some academic departments had a reputation for professors pushing academia, industry or research (depending on the field) to the exclusion of other career paths, and they felt excluded from seeking advice if they were in the minority in their department. On the other hand, professors were also a source of advice when identifying opportunities to pursue because they pointed students to particular research labs or study abroad programs. Faculty were also helpful in providing letters of recommendation for program and funding applications. Teaching fellows were noted as more approachable and more likely to have contacts beyond TIU, which Abigail said made them more helpful because it provided an option that other TIU students might not be pursuing.

Nine of the participants had specific examples of how their residential staff had been helpful to them during the summer experience process. Some participants, like Erin, found that resident tutors were helpful in generating ideas about what to do over the summer because they knew what previous class years of students had done. Sam said he benefitted from mock interviews with tutors to feel ready for opportunities that came his way. Charlotte said that resident tutors supported her plans to travel overseas multiple summers and to embrace the fun and adventure elements of her breaks in college, which she said was important to hear when peers were saying the opposite. Similarly, Henry valued a conversation with a resident tutor in the laundry room because that individual

affirmed his choice to lifeguard over the summer, telling him, "'Henry, that's one of the coolest things I've heard…you know, that's what summer should be about." Abigail, Gretchen, Sarah, Victoria and Wendy all reported that residential staff were largely a supportive sounding board once decisions had been made, more "a cathartic thing more than it was an advice seeking" exchange (Wendy). Abigail also offered a downside to the assistance provided by resident tutors, explaining that in her experience, they tended to direct students to fellowships and opportunities that were competitive, prestigious, and nationally recognized. While the students matriculating at TIU might have been the top students in their high schools, there is nonetheless a stratification that takes place at TIU and it resulted in the most visible, top of the hierarchy fellowships and programs going to a tiny subset of students. As Abigail expressed, "Those were always the most daunting things to me, and even when I wanted to talk about them, I was like, but those are going to be the most competitive things on campus. I think that sometimes the things that they were prepared to connect us with and prepared by the university to connect us with were not always the things that would be accessible to everyone."

This emphasis on competitive, prestigious summer opportunities via staff, combined with the ubiquitous on campus machinery that funneled students towards consulting and finance, was seen by many participants as a university stamp of approval for prestigious and high-status occupations. The findings on institutional messaging were important in fleshing out my understanding of the campus context for students within the theoretical model that is introduced in Chapter 5.

Campus Prestige Hierarchy

The interviews revealed a highly consistent paradigm about prestige and status. This broad finding derived from the virtual card sort activity (see Appendix D), in which students were asked to rank a list of possible summer options from most to least prestigious based on prevailing attitudes on campus. The card sort served as a conversational tool, while simultaneously providing participants' numerical rankings of the importance of different prestige factors in their choice of summer experiences. Some items included a prompt for more information to spur discussion of specifics related to the hierarchy. For example, the "travel" stem included the prompt "does where matter?" and internships drilled down with "which are 'better' than others?" These additional questions probed for more detail and participants provided quite a bit as they completed the activity. They were also provided with an editable option that some chose to use (for example, two participants mentioned a specific competitive summer research village) but some left untouched. While the research option included in the activity referenced senior thesis related work, some participants chose to edit that item to make it more specific and reflect other research activities as well.

Appendix F contains all 13 prestige hierarchies from the virtual card sort activity to demonstrate the consistency of campus norms around prestige and status. Taken together, it becomes apparent that a powerful if unspoken narrative is dominant on campus: prestige matters greatly and there is huge consensus on what counts as prestigious, namely internships in consulting and finance, senior thesis and other independent research, and being abroad. It also illustrates visually the physical and social distance that separates some summer experiences in terms of prestige. Six participants

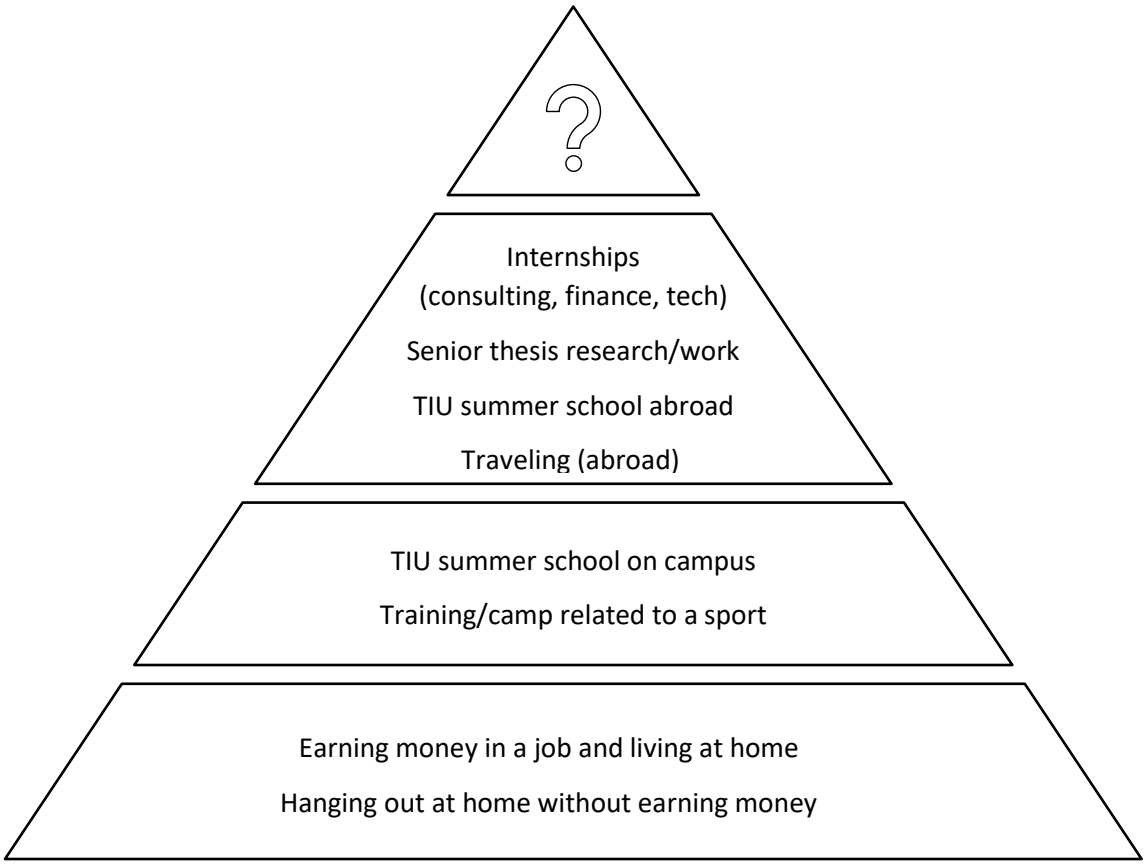
even chose to use groupings with deliberate spacing between them because they saw an important distinction among discrete tiers of experiences. A number of participants expressed that it was easy to group the top and bottom experiences but that some of the middle ones were harder to gauge because their prestige was affected heavily by other conditions, such as group membership (summer school on campus was particularly sensitive to this in participants' responses). Additionally, participants said that assigning a specific numerical ranking was difficult but that they were confident about the relative groupings of top and bottom. One participant (Victoria) even drew a sword on her card sort while we were talking, explaining that it helped to illustrate that the top internships were a double-edged sword, counting as prestigious in many circles but as grounds for criticism and judgment in the student organizing circles in which she socialized.

There was broad consensus about the rankings of summer opportunities, as seen in Figure 1. The top of the hierarchy typically included internships, research, senior thesis, and TIU Summer School abroad. Eleven of the 13 participants ranked internships as most prestigious, with eight of them specifying that consulting, finance, and tech were the top of the internship hierarchy. Emily, whose own background was in the social sciences and laboratory research, put internships first and explained, "Honestly, I feel like that's number one and then everything else is the same." The two participants who did not rank internships as top interestingly both put it third behind published research and travel (Sam) and senior thesis research and TIU Summer School abroad (Sarah), which demonstrated remarkably similar thinking even in the alternative camp. Senior thesis research and work was ranked as next most prestigious by nine participants. TIU Summer School abroad was generally third, fourth, or fifth, rounding out either the top prestige

group or heading up the middle section. Summer school on campus was consistently rated as lower in prestige than its overseas counterpart, sometimes right behind in the ranking and at times several spots lower. Being at home was in the bottom for everyone, with some participants explaining that the idea of someone hanging out at home without earning money or even doing an internship was something hard to understand because that had never heard of it.

Figure 1

On-Campus Summer Experience Prestige Hierarchy



A central concept that participants explained is that there is always a hierarchy within the hierarchy on campus. For any given summer experience, they could easily provide an example that would be more prestigious. The capstone of the pyramid in

Figure 1 there depicts a question mark to represent the fact that the top could never be definitely stated. Gretchen provided examples of which sports would be considered more prestigious; Mo offered the names of technology firms that had a reputation for more difficult interviews and were therefore considered more prestigious. Many participants specified companies whose internships topped the hierarchy in their respective fields (such as BCG, Bain, and NBC) despite not being in those industries themselves. Travel was likewise broken down into more and less prestigious, with destinations abroad pipping domestic ones. Abigail explained what she saw as the campus norms for travel: "TIU summer school abroad was I think the least prestigious version of studying abroad you could do because it wasn't research abroad, you didn't get funding for your research work, and it wasn't thesis work, so it wasn't like you really were doing serious research and also studying abroad. And it wasn't for an internship." Sam concisely summed up this phenomenon: "There's always something better to do." No participant ever offered an example of the most prestigious thing to do based on campus norms, since they could always qualify it in some way to elevate it further.

During this activity, participants also began sharing more about the theme of different tracks for different groups on campus. They placed some experiences outside a ranked hierarchy into a separate group altogether. Some participants classified athletes who spend summers involved in training or camp related to a sport this way, explaining that to be good enough to play a varsity sport at school meant you were "legit" and that was prestigious in its own way but also distinctly different than the track that everyone else was on. In a similar way, those who spent their summers at home without employment or internships (in a non-productive, non-career focused manner) were

considered to be in a different category altogether. While some said there was a stigma or shame around this decision, others clarified that there was also generally assumed to be some medical or mental health reason that would take this individual off the path that others were on and place them in a different group with different expectations about the "right" way to spend their summers. It was interesting that this categorical thinking was so clear to see in current undergraduates and alumni. There was a level of awareness about the "right" or "done" thing across all majors, so that computer science major participants could still speak about what would be considered typical for a pre-med student and a humanities major could name the most prestigious consulting and finance companies.

Signaling Function

Many of the elements that made a particular summer experience more desirable or more prestigious than others had to do with the signaling function that it served for students beyond the content of the activity itself. Some of these examples and an explanation of how they signal prestige are listed below:

Travel. Non-academic, unstructured travel was generally not seen as prestigious when discussing the campus hierarchy of prestige. However, it was interesting to note that multiple participants did make a point of explaining that such travel was a marker of privilege. Being able to spend the summer in a non-career focused way was a signal of class background and family capital. Abigail gave an example of students that she had known on campus who lived at home without earning money for the summer but that it was always in the context of someone whose family had a second home or already lived

in a desirable location (e.g., Manhattan, Paris) and could spend the summer traveling for personal growth and exploration without budget restrictions.

Senior thesis. This type of summer experience was universally rated as near the top of the prestige hierarchy. There were some who did mention that thesis writers could be a bit pretentious about the fact that they were doing one, but nonetheless, participants remarked that being able to talk about working on your thesis was always a solid, dependable answer for how you spent your summer. Not everyone on campus rights a senior thesis that it is required for joint concentrators and for anyone pursuing the honors track in their department. There are even some concentrations to which you must apply (such as social studies) and in which everyone must write a thesis. Therefore, being able to reference your summer spent on researching a senior thesis was a way to signal to peers and reinforce your higher status of having attained a competitive major.

Athletics. Spending the summer training for your sport could be prestigious if it allowed you to reference your team or individual success in later conversations. For example, if you were an internationally ranked athlete or, as was the case with one participant, could have been training for a spot at the Olympics. It was a less universal observation, but some participants did mention that being part of a more recognizable team on campus was also seen as more prestigious, and explicitly mentioned team gear like backpacks, as something that could signal what team you were a part of.

Influence of Consulting, Finance, and Technology Internships

A subcategory that filled quickly with codes and examples from participants was the influence of the consulting and finance internships on campus. To a lesser extent, tech positions also had some role to play, but the fact that much of that recruiting process

happened outside the institution (student referral pipeline, summer application timeline) it did not exert pressure on uninterested students in the same way. As was seen clearly in the prestige hierarchy activity, participants of all majors and minors identified internships with elite professional service firms as the very top of the pile. These were considered prestigious for a variety of reasons: they offered high pay; brand name internships were a proxy for intelligence or competence; they had clear pipelines in college; they led to full-time return offers; most prestigious post-graduate jobs required these types of internships; and consulting was recommended by on-campus offices as an option that would look good on a resume and be least limiting after graduation. Consulting was reported to be an influence for a majority of the participants. It offered all of the advantages mentioned but had more flexible entry than the skills needed to progress through interviews for finance (which required significant mathematical grounding) and tech positions (which involved concrete coding skills). Consulting could draw from, and influence, a much wider pool.

Participants had a plethora of examples to highlight the prevalence of these career fields on campus. Many examples occurred with one hundred feet of students' dorm rooms, right in their residential communities. Consulting and finance were highly visible because their recruiting events were advertised via door drops right under the doors to their rooms, on table tents in the dining hall, and over email lists. Students had to dress up to attend events and this unusually business-like attire prompted questions from peers. Sometimes students would also just invite peers so they could attend with someone they knew, which is how Gretchen said she "was opened up to this whole world" of which she was previously ignorant. Some residential staff had worked in these fields before pursuing graduate school at TIU or were even planning to return and shared freely about

their work background. Some TIU Residential Community staff even offered free interview workshops to members of the community in common spaces, which served to both amplify the industries' profile in the community and reinforce implicitly that authority figures sanctioned these careers. Examples from beyond the residential communities also abounded. As already mentioned, career services staff suggested these fields to students during one-on-one advising sessions and advertised their campus-wide events on their website and over their official listserv. The recruiters who came to campus for the interview phase were frequently alumni still known to current students, a ploy which reinforced the inevitability and acceptability of the pipeline. Abigail captured how pervasive this influence was and the helplessness it engendered in her: "It feels like it's just the underlying sort of current that TIU is leading you to is consulting, so if you've been fighting against the current for so long, at a certain point, it gets exhausting and you're like, 'Ugh, maybe I'll check it out'… It seemed like the most like sure path you could choose was consulting."

There was some pushback on campus against the dominance of this narrative, however. Victoria spoke about McKinsey's recommendations on immigration as "horrific" and said she would never be interested in corporations so inextricably linked to "terrible, horrible things." She added that her student groups on campus likewise were cynical about consulting, finance, and tech. One day, a peer tried to publicize a Lyft information and meet-and-greet session over the ethnic studies coalition list and was met with open scorn instead of interest. Sarah said despite the "big bucks" she would never have considered consulting and finance because of the potential to "do active harm." Kristen was grateful that she was privileged enough not to be tempted by the lucrative

consulting and finance offers because money might be the only real draw for her to an industry with which she otherwise fundamentally disagreed.

Costs and Trade-offs

Participants were asked to share their views on whether students face any costs or trade-offs in their accumulation of these prestigious summer experiences. Many reported that there was some element of a time or financial cost. The time costs figured prominently during the early parts of the summer planning process, in which students are investigating and identifying possible opportunities, applying for open positions, and sometimes completing additional rounds of applications and interviews for funding. The financial cost was referenced by participants who pointed out that the case study materials for consulting and finance jobs can be an added expense and any MCAT test prep materials can cost students significantly as well.

There was also a tangible social cost to pursuing the summer experiences. Some participants localized this to the campus, with one telling of a roommate who consistently "flaked out" on her and canceled dinner plans and other social engagements last minute because of stress around writing additional cover letters or preparing for interviews at the last minute. Other participants talked about the social cost of students who exist in an elite campus double during the academic year only to spread out around the world over the summer while still somehow remaining in an elite microenvironment with fellow students, faculty members, or alumni. Erin mentioned that it is a shame that students do not have the opportunity to either engage with their home communities or to experience the real world in the communities in which they spend their summers, since they are instead part of a smaller elite bubble wherever they are go. Yet another participant

(Sarah) took this concept even further and said that students give up their youth in the quest for these types of experiences, sacrificing the fun, adventure, and exploration that have traditionally been a college summer rite of passage. Henry was unusual in that he did not have to face this trade-off, and he was grateful that his parents understood that he wanted to spend his summers doing something active and meaningful (beach lifeguarding) before joining the workforce. Steve likewise did not perceive trade-offs, partly because he expressed that travel was in his view the most common thing to be sacrificed in the pursuit of summer internships, but he was not drawn to it in particular.

Stress, Anxiety, and Uncertainty

Some costs and trade-offs were not about externals such as time or money but about the impact to internal states. The tightly related themes of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty cropped up at various points in the interviews depending on how participants had experienced them. Summers were generally considered an opportunity to try out different jobs and career fields, a complement to the term-time exploration that some students engaged in with research, laboratory position, or on-campus jobs. Uncertainty about what to do was so daunting, however, that a desire to ameliorate it overrode students' personal interests. Most participants reported that they were tempted by experiences that offered up a clear sense of career direction or had an established on-campus pipeline, such as consulting or finance, even if they were not particularly interested in it or had only learned what it was in college. The sources of the uncertainty that caused stress and anxiety were numerous: whether you could locate an acceptable summer experience at all; whether you would be accepted or rejected from a given summer experience; whether you could secure funding to participate in the summer

experience; and whether peers would think that your experience met the threshold of acceptability when you recounted it.

Participants reported that having too many options to balance was stressful and could lead to decision paralysis. Not having enough options was also a problem, leading to second guessing and anxiety that you would be left without an acceptable summer experience. It was generally easier for students to implement a plan than it was to generate ideas about what to do – that was by far the more stressful part of summer planning. Emily, who turned to research all three summers because she said it was familiar and worried that she was not good at other things, said the uncertainty was pervasive among those she knew: "I would say, 'I don't know what I want to do.' Everyone was like, 'Yeah, I don't know either.' It wasn't like anyone was like, 'Oh, talk to this person' or 'I found this thing helpful.' There was never a helpful thing." Having a clear academic pathway such as senior thesis research (Erin) or pre-med requirements (Sam) was a protective benefit for some participants. Those tracks, along with the on-campus recruiting pipeline for finance and consulting, could mean less stress during the summer planning process because they had a clear path to follow. This was despite the extra academic demands of a thesis or pre-med requirements, and regardless of the longer hours that interns in consulting and finance were expected to work over the summer compared to other fields. This might explain why the amount of stress participants experienced did not relate to the difficulty of their summer program or internship, but rather related to the mental load experienced by the individual throughout the process of looking, applying, and retelling.

Stress and anxiety also resulted from the convergence of academic and summer planning timelines, with many weeks in which papers, exams, and summer applications overlapped. Winter break could generally not be devoted to relaxing and recharging in between semesters, as students needed to devote time and energy to working on summer applications. Charlotte felt that her coursework was always heaviest during the weeks when her peers were finalizing summer plans, leaving her feeling behind the ball and still worried about classes. Abigail put it very clearly: "I found planning for summers to be one of the most stressful parts of the year." Wendy's take on the situation was quite dire as well: "I think there's some very unpleasant campus dynamic around the times when people are searching for jobs. Early fall everyone's stressed constantly. And it's not because we have papers, it's because we're looking for internships and then, you know, midterms come around and then finals. People are just constantly stressed. You'd hope that there is some time during the year that people could just enjoy being college students." The prevailing opinion among the participants, however, was that this year-long cycle of stress around summer experiences was inescapable.

Tension between the Ideal and Reality

There were also more existential costs that students faced during the summer experience process, represented by the many examples they provided of the tensions between an ideal and the reality of that experience or phenomenon. For example, Mo had seen in her orientation program that while it was wise to avoid stressing out first-year students with a realistic depiction of the stress and striving around college summers, this came at the cost of preparing them for what to expect in later years. In general, participants noted that there was a tension between the idealized college experience of

exploration and the reality of grades and career preparation. There were skills that could be gained in an internship, but they might come at the cost of personal growth in a different type of summer experience. At times, participants said that they misjudged the skill-building value of internships and did not end up gaining the professional experiences that they expected. Steve had a lackluster time with a robotics internship at a top tech company; Emily was stifled and bored in a military lab; Sarah had a position that sounded prestigious because it came with the label of a "fellowship" but was simply non-profit work in an understaffed office. Rather than crowing about the good fortune of doing little work that receiving a prestigious name on their resumes, most participants expressed disappointment at learning that the closed-door version of so many summer experiences was less fulfilling than they had anticipated.

A number of participants described their views on summer experiences as "cynical" (Sarah, Wendy) because of the distance between the ideal and reality. The fact that the resume view of summer experiences could seem fancy or prestigious when in reality most college internships seemed to participants to be at least a little bit meaningless led them to view others' recounting of their experiences with some skepticism at times. This was seen in Wendy's disbelief about the social media posts that peers would make about their summers, and Sarah's awareness that a peer who bragged about his top government internship was in reality not well-liked by his supervisor. Participants had learned over the course of their time in college that the views from the inside and the outside of summer experiences, particularly internships, were often two vastly different perspectives. Some of this suspicion and cynical distrust bled over into the full-time job search, as well. Charlotte felt that companies who claimed to want

creative, liberal arts majors were generally paying "lip service" to TIU undergraduates, and Steve was disappointed when his finance position did not end up requiring the high-level mathematical skills that he had enjoyed developing in the classroom. Appearances and reality diverged quite harshly for some of the participants. In general, most of them reported experiencing some type of tension between their expectations and their actual experiences, but the trade-offs associated with aligning themselves with the dominant pathway still typically conferred considerable rewards.

Surprises and Discontinuities

There were some surprises and discontinuities that appeared in the interviews. I had expected that parents would play a more active role throughout the summer planning process given what I had seen in the literature. However, Victoria ended up being the only participant who fit that narrative. She said that her parents are "a little over supportive" and were eager to discuss application over Zoom when she was on campus in spring 2020. She noted that their investment in being supportive of her is a "not insignificant factor in what I've been doing my whole life." The majority of participants said that their parents were generally supportive but not actively involved. Partly, participants explained this as partly stemming from an inability to relate to the summer planning process and lack of knowledge about what counted as acceptable, useful, or prestigious (as in the case of Gretchen, Abigail, Mo, and Sam). For some participants, the hands off parenting up approach was a mark of trust in their children. Henry said his parents were inclined to trust him and his sister to control their own decisions because they had demonstrated that they knew how to get into college. Gretchen said that in the case of her father, the supportiveness was so distant as to become a negative: "My dad is

just kind of very removed…so he's just kind of by his own choice, not really been super involved."

Personal growth as a topic was mixed. Some participants rated it as greatly important while they were planning their experiences or retrospectively recognized it as the most important part of college. Henry said that he was a different person as a result of his college summers; Steve, by contrast, said he was not sure what that phrase would mean in the context of summer experiences.

Steve's experiences presented other surprises and discontinuities as well. He was the single participant who did not report experiencing stress or anxiety throughout the summer planning process. Even progressing through technical interviews for his internships and full-time finance position, he reported that he felt confident about his comprehension of the material. I really probed to see why he found the interviews less stressful than I had been hearing from others in the study pool, and he referenced an algorithms class that he took. He said that he had found the course material easier to master than some of his classmates, so a firm grasp of the academics behind the interviews helped him. Steve said that it was also hard for him to remember how he felt about the various topics and prompts throughout the interview process. If given the chance to return to college and do his summer breaks over again, he said he would not change his plans that would just select internships with better organization and more interesting and fulfilling tasks. A stark contrast to every other participant, he said that he would not travel without constraints because it is something that sounds good in theory but that he does not act genuinely enjoy. As will become clear in Chapter 5 when I discuss the theoretical model, Steve might be an example of an undergraduate who had a

personal context that made him unaware of or immune to the pressures facing others on campus.

Comparison Group Findings

The comparison group was comprised of 25 undergraduates from a leadership course at the Most Selective College (MSC) campus. The school is not as selective as TIU but still enrolls a competitive student body and provides an academically rigorous college experience. MSC is also a Division I school, offering roughly the same number of varsity sports as TIU. They are also similar in their geographic locations, as they are situated in the same major metropolitan area in the United State. The architecture and landscaping on their campuses is not in the same style but both schools convey a sense of history, permanence, and financial health with their stone buildings, grassy quads, and frequent capital improvement projects. Some basic descriptives about this group appear in Table 6. Participants were asked to self-identify the socioeconomic status of their families using the image of an SES ladder with 10 steps, on which Step 1 would be the least education/money/respected jobs and Step 10 represented the most education/money/respected jobs. The responses from participants are shown in Figure 2. The data show that the MSC students were more diverse on measures of gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status than the TIU participants. However, given that neither sample made claims to representativeness, this is simply something to be aware of when reading through the findings. The presence of 12 varsity athletes in the MSC data set is also notable and resulted in quite different perspectives and pressures.

Table 6

Sociodemographic and Academic Characteristics in the Comparison Group

Characteristic	Full Sample	By Class Year		
		2022	2023	2024
Gender				
Female	19	8	5	6
Male	5	5	–	–
Gender queer [a]	1	–	1	–
Race/Ethnicity [c]				
Asian	3	3[b]	–	–
Black	5	4	1	–
Latino/Latinx	3	3	–	–
Multiracial	1	1[d]	–	–
White	16	5	5	6
Major [e]				
Applied psychology	8	3	5	–
Communications	6	4	1	1
Economics	1	1	–	–
Education	4	–	2	2
Finance/business	3	3	–	–
Marketing	1	1	–	–
Political science	2	1	1	–
Psychology	2	2	–	–
Undeclared	3	–	–	3
Minor				
Applied psychology	4	4	–	–
Communications	2	–	–	2
English	1	–	1	–
Leadership/management	5	3	1	1
Marketing	1	–	1	–
Special education	2	–	2	–

[a] Participants were invited to self-report their preferred term.

[b] Two of these participants additionally identified as international students.

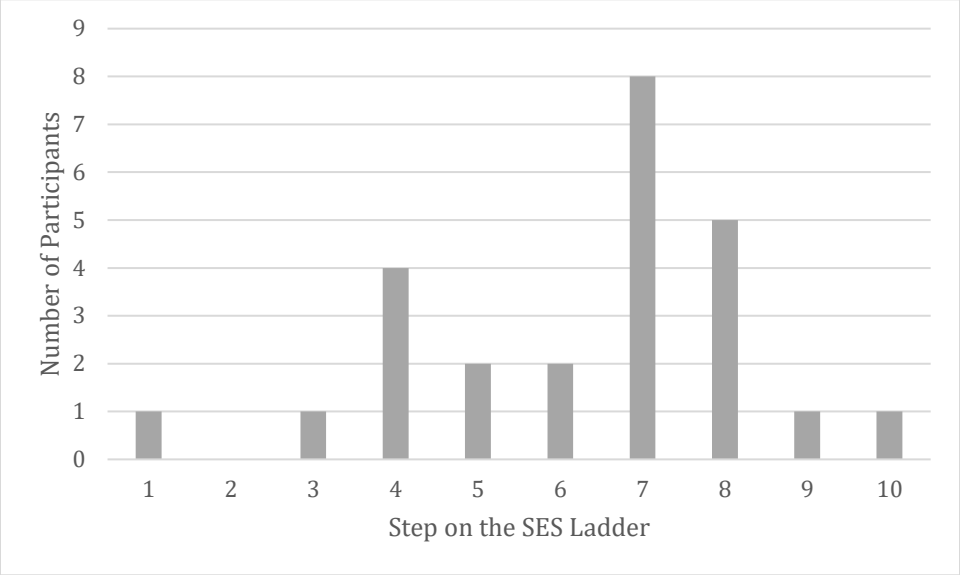
[c] Participants who specified multiple identities appear in more than one row.

[d] This participant chose to self-report as multi-racial without specifying further.

[e] Many participants reported double majors.

Figure 2

MSC Participants' Self-Reported Socioeconomic Background



MSC Students' Summer Experiences

The students at MSC spent their summers in a variety of ways. Some common patterns emerged, with subsets completing internships, working non-college related jobs, traveling to see family, and spending time with friends. Two students went to China, while other travel was within the United States. Four participants spent their summer free time at the beach in between other commitments. Interestingly, two participants mentioned that they and their families spend the summers on Nantucket. While this would seem to indicate a certain status level for their families, both of those respondents also said they worked in food service over their summer breaks. The student athletes said that their summers involved summer school and athletic training. Only six participants completed an internship during their time at MSC. This was in stark contrast to the participants from TIU. It was much more common to work in a regular hourly wage job, with participants mentioning food service, grocery stores, pool lifeguarding, retail, and babysitting. The locations of these summer experiences were also quite different than

those seen in the TIU data. Most MSC students returned home for their summer break, with a focus on saving money for the new school year. Two exceptions were a student who clerked in a law office near home for two years before taking a full-time internship in Boston and another who moved to Seattle for an internship "and used it as an opportunity to explore a different part of the country."

Toward the end of the survey, I also asked the MSC students to share what they would do differently during their college summers if they were not facing any limits or concerns relating to family expectations, money, prestige, or security about the future. The responses to this prompt tracked very closely with the TIU participants, with travel ("see the world"), fun experiences with family and friends, and time devoted to volunteering and other interests dominating participants' reflections on what would be most desirable. The hobbies that they wanted to pursue in the summer included reading, writing, and language building. Proposed volunteering projects ran the gamut of teaching young children to running anti-discrimination seminars to fight hate crimes again Black, trans, and sexual minorities. The overall tone of the responses reflected an emphasis on being actively engaged in passion projects and personal growth opportunities.

Motivations

One of the clearest divergences from the main study findings was seen in the motivations that influence the comparison group's summer planning decisions. The MSC participants work given a list of factors and asked to sort them into three categories within the Qualtrics survey: "most important," "somewhat important," and "not important." The results of this question are seen in Table 7. The high number of athletes in the MSC sample explains training for a sport appearing so high in the list, especially

Table 7

Motivations that Influence Comparison Group Summer Planning

Factor	Number of Participants Reporting Factor As		
	Most Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Earning money	21	3	1
Adventure or fun	16	7	2
Needing or wanting a break from school	16	7	2
Wanting to travel	12	11	2
Resume building	11	12	2
Training for a sport	10	2	13
Family pressure or expectations	8	12	5
Pressure/worry/uncertainty about the future	8	10	7
Gaining research experience	2	12	11
Peer pressure	2	8	15
Prestige	1	18	6
Earning academic credit	1	15	9
Building foreign language skills	1	5	19

given that many of the participants were on athletic scholarships and needed to prioritize their team commitments. One of the most glaring differences was the preponderance of responses that ranked earning money as most important. Whereas the TIU participants had largely been interested in breaking even so that their summer experience did not cost them money, the MSC students were almost universally concerned with earning enough money for the following school year. This does, however, tally with the findings in the previous section that most of their summer experiences were typical non-college jobs. MSC has a high percentage of students who pay full tuition, so this finding should not be interpreted as a statement about the broader student population. The self-reported

socioeconomic status data in Figure 2 likewise disputes this. Rather, in combination with the low rankings of gaining research experience, peer pressure, and prestige, it instead seems likely that there is simply a quite different campus culture around the best way to use a summer break.

Sources of Information

MSC students reported a fairly even mix of people and offices as being "most helpful" and "also somewhat helpful" when they planned their summer breaks. There did not seem to be a clear pattern or trend in which sources were particularly helpful, as nearly all participants placed the possible choices in one of those two categories. Of note, however, was that fewer than half of the respondents received unhelpful advice. This could be because they found the act of placing a source in the unhelpful category on a survey is perceived as more negative than discussing it during an interview and getting the chance to explain their reasoning. These unhelpful sources were largely friends who did not attend MSC and institutional agents (professors and students services or other staff). Without a follow-up with these students, it would be difficult to know with certainty why they found those sources unhelpful, but it does align to some extent with the TIU participants' perceptions. Perhaps MSC student affairs and career center staff are also offering narrowly tailored advice.

The survey asked MSC students about the messaging they receive around summer breaks and how it had influenced their thinking. Most said that they felt the dominant message was that summers are for work, with little time left for exploration, family, or personal development. Sometimes this messaging took the form of emails advertising classes and internships that were helpful for resume building and career preparation.

They said the emphasis on work to the exclusion of pursuing other passions was "sad" and the reality of internships once they gave into the pressure and tried them was "disappointing." For some students, they saw the content to be closely tied to college summers and the important of getting a jumpstart on their working life. For others, the significance went beyond their time at MSC and said more about what society values broadly in its citizens and workers:

> The messaging about how college students should spend their summers emphasizes that in our Western society, there really isn't any time for breaks. It trains us to know that we will never have another traditional summer break and two weeks' vacation a year on the job is the best we can be. I think it's a bit sad that we aren't told we deserve more time off to slow down and focus on "less important" things.
>
> —MSC communications major, class of 2022

Summer Expectations and Norming

While the MSC campus norms around summer experiences seem to be different to those seen at TIU, it was clear that some common values and beliefs do exist in student culture there. Fourteen participants reported that summers should be for relaxing, given how busy and hectic the school year could be at MSC. One said, "Summers are supposed to be for relaxation and spending time with friends and family," and another directed that summer is the time "to go to the beach." Comments about career preparation or exploration came from 12 participants; for example, that summer is for "getting more professional experience/advancing your technical skills." One participant reflected that this career emphasis was a change from the previous way of doing things: "I think they

were originally for breaks from the rigor of school but now they are used as resume building opportunities."

Some of their expectations of what summer would be like were similar to those seen in the TIU students, with many commenting on the fact that they expected college summers to be spent with friends and family with weaker emphasis on career preparation. The high number of athletes in this group meant that many also reporting expecting to devote a considerable portion of their summers to training in college, which was borne out by their subsequent MSC experience. A female participant in her final year had this to say about her pre-college expectations, which was generally reflective of others' experiences: "In high school, my summers were much more planned for me by my parents. I expected in college to be working more in the summers and have more structure. I think that this would've been the case had COVID-19 not hit, but since that has impacted all of my summers except my freshman year one, there has been a lack of stability in the world of jobs and internships."

Many students reported thinking that the typical MSC student spent summer positioning themselves for the labor market with prestigious internships and that there is a "rush" to secure these types of experiences to be ready for the future. Another common narrative was the combination of internship, work, and travel. One participant specified that for different majors the pressure to obtain a certain type of summer offer was heightened: "I am a Psychology major, so there is more variability in post college plans, and less pressure to land an internship at a 'big name' place as opposed to students in [MSC's school of management] or applying to medical or law school." A sizeable number of participants wrote about having summers filled with non-career related jobs

(such as retail and service industry positions) and the effect it had on them: “Compared to other MSC students, I feel as if I am a step behind in my career since I have been getting jobs instead of internships in my field.” There were also, as has been noted before in the findings, a lot of responses that related to students’ athletic commitments. Their teams often required them to be on campus all summer and training occupied most of their time. Some of the only viable options to pair with athletics seemed to be fitting in a class or finding a regular hourly wage position.

MSC students fell into two clear groups in terms of sharing summers plans with peers: those who actively discuss it with others and those who avoid it. The latter explained that it was because they felt it was not their business, they pursued the same experiences as peers anyway, or it could be a pressured situation: “I do not talk to my friends about summer plans or advise others. I believe some people get very stressed and take their internships as a reflection of their status, so I stay away from these conversations.” Those who choose to broach the topic of summer planning with friends and other peers said that it was a way to brainstorm, encourage, and share knowledge. It was often described as an information sharing exercise. There was not a sense among the responses that students are perpetuating a specific narrative around summer experiences. However, one senior’s thoughts hint at the productivity culture that was so prevalent at TIU: “I mostly talk with friends, both MSC and non-MSC students because we tend to all be going through similar things (e.g., searching for a summer internship). I wouldn’t say we try to influence each other but we definitely encourage each other to try to find something ‘productive’ in whatever way that may be.” Indeed, the word “productive” only appeared three times in the entire body of survey data (and “unproductive” once).

This was an important difference in the two campus contexts with respect to summer experience culture.

Pandemic Effects on MSC Students' Summers

MSC students saw positive and negative effects from the SARS CoV-2 pandemic, a point of convergence with the TIU findings. Students offered constructive takes on the rise of remote internships: "The pandemic has expanded virtual opportunities while also making it more acceptable to stay home during the summer…[it] has really hammered home how important workplace flexibility is for a future job." This was a notable overlap with the TIU responses, which similarly remarked on the adjustment to expectations about being at home during the summer. The senior who shared this insight was also demonstrating a lesson learned for her future career wish list. Some summer jobs and activities were unaffected by the pandemic because they were outside, such as outdoor athletics and one student's position as a camp counselor. There was an even a participant who found employment because of the pandemic, taking a remote job as a contact tracer.

Some of the difficulties that arose from the pandemic related to internships. Many students had their in-person positions switched to remote ones. One participant said that it was especially difficult in an organization that did not seem to value personal interactions. Getting acclimated to workplace culture was also a challenge with virtual roles. Other opportunities were cancelled altogether, such as an internship at a state legislature that could not accommodate remote interns. There were also students who could not find a job at all and instead filled their summer with other activities. Respondents also reported upended travel plans, which affected leisure travel and study abroad programs.

Chapter Five: The High Prestige Summer Experience Model

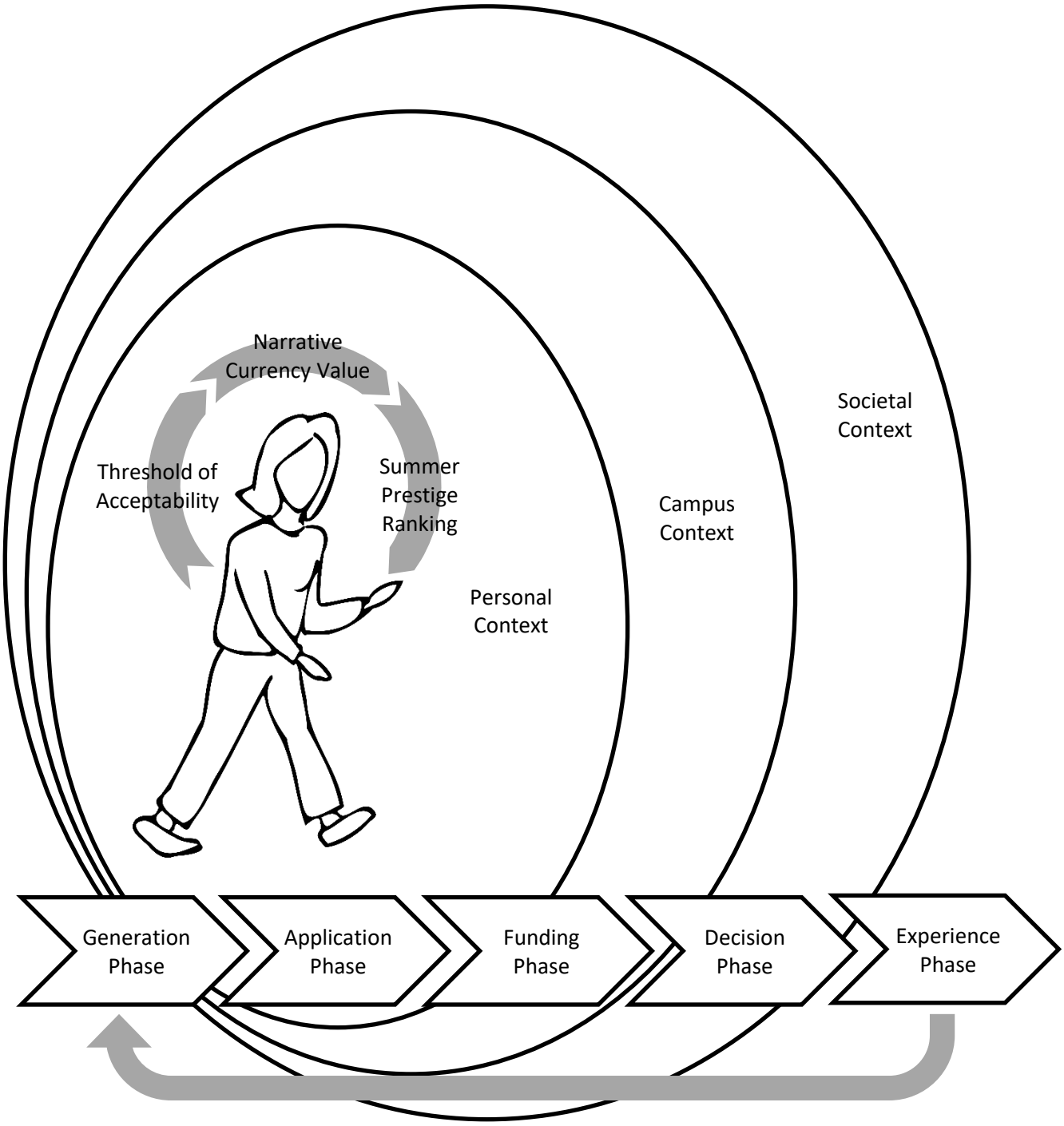
Introduction to the Model

This chapter takes the findings from Chapter 4 and weaves them into a model that explains how and why undergraduates at an elite university pursue prestigious summer experiences during each of their college breaks. It provides a framework for understanding the steps of the decision-making process, the mental models and norms that students use to evaluate opportunities, and the mediating factors that shape the experiences of each student walking this path. The rest of this chapter goes into the components of this model in greater detail and shares participants' insights in their own words, but a brief overview of the model here helps to orient us.

The model shown in Figure 3 is comprised of three key elements: the five phases of the summer experience process, the mental models influencing decision-making at every turn, and the multi-layered context of mediating factors that shapes the process for each student. Students at this elite campus travel along the path of the Summer Experience Process beginning in their first year on campus. They go through each of the five phases in sequence, each with its own goal and attendant tasks and strategies to accomplish it. They experience the consequences—positive and negative—that arise from each phase of this process as well. As they evaluate their options, make final decisions, and measure the summer experiences of TIU peers, they cycle through three mental models shaped by the norms, values, and beliefs on campus. Students weigh each summer decision by asking themselves whether the opportunity meets the Threshold of Acceptability; deciding what the potential Narrative Currency Value for that experience might be in the lead up to the summer and when recounting it afterwards in the fall;

Figure 3

The High Prestige Summer Experience Model



and assigning a Summer Prestige Ranking to various options to determine which among them would be the most prestigious according to their peers. If they are graduating seniors, then they exit the process with graduation and enter the sphere of postgraduate life. Otherwise, students begin the cycle anew, incorporating the previous summer's experiences into their decisions. This five-step process occurs within a complex, interconnected environment for every student, however. Personal context and characteristics, the TIU campus context, and the broader societal context of macrolevel trends and events are all mediating factors with the potential to amplify or mitigate positive and negative elements of students' Summer Experience Process journeys.

The Summer Experience Process

While this appears in Figure 3 as the condensed form of simply phase titles, Table 8 depicts the details of each of the five phases that students go through in this process. It captures the codes relating to participants' goals at various stages of the process, the tasks and strategies that they employ, and the consequences that they experience as a result of their actions. A clear understanding of the planning process for elite undergraduates contemplating the best use of their summers is foundational to understanding the more abstract, sociological phenomena that they are also navigating. By breaking down what can seem a monolithic process into five discrete phases, I am able to tease apart the different themes and categories that were present at various times. As will be discussed further in the concluding chapter, there are several implications for practice and policy that can be derived from a better understanding of this process alone.

Table 8

The Summer Experience Process

Component	Generation Phase	Application Phase	Funding Phase	Decision Phase	Experience Phase
Goals	Identify summer opportunities	Submit applications and complete required interviews for desired summer opportunities	Secure funding for a summer opportunity by submitting an application to a funding office or organization	Decide which summer experience to accept	Complete an eight-to-ten-week experience
Tasks/ Strategies	Searching school-specific listservs and career websites; info session attendance; cold calling and cold emailing; coffee chats and informational interviews; peer knowledge sharing; peer and alumni referral networks; advice from professional network, teaching and residence staff, and family members	Info session attendance; filling out applications; writing resumes, cover letters, and personal statements; soliciting recommendation letters from teaching and/or residence staff; interview preparation; interview travel	Info session attendance; filling out applications; writing resumes, cover letters, and personal statements; soliciting recommendation letters from teaching and/or residence staff; interview preparation for some competitive opportunities; post-experience requirements (e.g., blog posts, reflections, event attendance with donors) Students who have secured an all-in-one summer opportunity bypass this step	Following up on applications and funding requests; weighing available options; hedging bets for the future; building in contingencies; practical/logistical considerations of funding and housing	Essential day-to-day component of the chosen experience (e.g., classes, travel, internship requirements); social or community "extracurricular" elements; balancing additional paid work to supplement funding or unpaid work to supplement low prestige score
Consequences reported by participants	Stress, anxiety, loneliness, mental load, tension with family or peers	Stress, busyness, time/money/social costs, decision paralysis, tension with family or peers	Stress, busyness, time/money/social costs	Second guessing and loss of confidence; rationalizing and justifying decisions; tension with family or peers	Satisfaction; accrual of regrets; rationalization; personal growth (e.g., agency, autonomy, confidence, etc.); clearer sense of career direction; shapes next summer's choices; job offers

Goals

Participants had specific objectives that they were trying to accomplish at each phase in the process. The identification of these different goals makes it easy to see why a variety of strategies would be employed throughout the planning timeline. Students begin by attempting to identify the most relevant summer opportunities that match with their academic and preprofessional interests (Generation Phase). This begins in the fall, earlier for certain fields such as finance and consulting and later for positions within the humanities. During the Application Phase, students have already narrowed down the broader list of possibilities and find ways to fit up to 10 applications into their academic workload. Writing cover letters, fine tuning resumes, and practicing for interviews all take time and must be squeezed in around academic and extracurricular commitments, which many participants said they accomplished by using their winter break as a work period instead of a vacation.

A Funding Phase follows for many students in February and March as they seek to secure money that will allow them to break even financially over the summer, with many of the on-campus funding opportunities providing stipends of $4,000 to $5,500. Some students are able to bypass this step completely if they have applied to all-in-one opportunities that come with their own funding, such as consulting, finance, and technology internships. The Decision Phase entails deciding on which experience to accept, assuming there has been more than one offer to come through. The process ends with the Experience Phase, in which the student completes the summer experience about which they have been thinking and talking all year long.

Tasks and Strategies

Students have a lengthy list of tasks in each phase of the Summer Experience Process. The more opportunities that a student is considering, the more tasks that need to be accomplished and the greater the workload. However, as participants reported, there was a fine balance between applying to enough opportunities that you were assured an acceptable one and applying to few enough that you could still manage the extra burden on your emotional well-being, academics, and social life.

The strategies listed in Table 8 appeared consistently across the 13 interviews, though there was variation in how comfortable participants reported feeling with the skills required. Some said they were aware of strategies like cold emailing because of peer examples; others mentioned that family members had made the suggestion. Abigail, a first-generation participant, mentioned that her TIU legacy roommate sat down with her at the computer and physically wrote summer emails on her behalf because it was knowledge that Abigail lacked but her roommate was happy to share. Gretchen, Mo, Wendy, and Victoria were notable for their use of personal connections at various stages in the process, including peer referral networks, alumni networks, informational interviews, coffee chats, and proactively seeking out in cultivating mentor relationships in their summer workplaces and on campus.

These tasks and strategies were sensitive to the mediating factors explained later in this chapter, as Abigail's example demonstrates. A student's level of family resources and social and cultural capital could make the process move more quickly and more smoothly, as was the case for Steve, who got his summer robotics internship at a top tech company through his mother's contacts.

Consequences

Participants were asked directly in the interview protocol about how much time and effort the planning process took and what general trade-offs students faced for summer experiences. Viewed broadly, it was clear that the time, financial, and social costs were actually consequences flowing out of the process and strategies of the entire summer experience phenomenon. There were also a number of more abstract gains and losses through the process that needed to be folded into this category.

The consequences that participants reported were almost universally negative, as is reflected in Table 8. The biggest burden in the earlier phases was the mental load and emotional strain brought on by uncertainty. Interestingly, many participants reported feeling loneliness during the Generation Phase. It was alternately worded as "[I] didn't really know where to turn" (Emily), "I felt kind of alone in it" (Gretchen), and "I really felt like I was on my own a lot of the time" (Wendy). Due to the presence of a "hierarchy within the hierarchy" phenomenon on campus, which dictated that there is always something better to do and something more prestigious than the option in front of you, the Application Phase could be stressful for students who were not on a clear, pre-set path like pre-med or consulting/finance. Because the possible scope of acceptable options was so broad, decision paralysis could set in.

As the time commitment for the tasks in the middle phases mounted, participants frequently had to make choices between social activities, academic and extracurricular commitments, and fitting in summer planning work. When it approached time to make a decision, participants engaged in a complex series of rationalizations directed toward themselves and justifications directed toward well-meaning but uninformed or

unsupportive family and peers. Sometimes this was simply a conversation with parents that, as Mo explained, helped her to feel clear and confident in her own decisions after she had won her parents over to her choice. For other participants, peers might either weigh in with concern that a given summer opportunity would hurt employability (Charlotte) or family members might criticize the choice (Sam). This tension with family and peers occurred in earlier phases of the process as well. When investigating possible options, Emily had identified a study abroad program in Italy that offered relevant neuroscience and psychology courses but, she shared, "So, freshman summer I did want to travel, but it was the program costs money and my parents were like, 'Why would you choose that when you could do research?'" Kristen reported that the sense of competition could be so uncomfortable with close peers who had overlapping professional interests that she frequently hid what she was considering and avoided discussing it with them.

The final consequences, which emerged from the experience itself, tended to be the most positive. Many participants reported a sense of fun or adventure linked to their summer travel; personal growth and the ability to deal with challenges were other frequently referenced positive consequences. There were also tangible gains, such as money earned over the summer and full-time job offers that provided a longer-term sense of financial security. The few negative reported consequences from summer experiences included boring or unfulfilling job responsibilities and unpleasant living accommodations or difficult summer roommate relationships. The most negative consequence from a summer experience was reported by Erin, who revealed that the involvement of a professor later sanctioned by her university for sexual misconduct and sexual harassment had tainted her views on her summer abroad under that professor's supervision. While

she said she did not have any negative experiences with that individual, it had made her wary and distrustful of the department after the investigation revealed that other faculty were aware of his actions and had continued to let him chaperone first-year female students on study abroad programs.

There were also some regrets reported by participants that arose from their summer experiences. Emily wished she had been able to experience the "traditional" consulting or finance summer internship; Abigail would travel to Latin America instead of Spain if given the chance to do it again. Charlotte would have worked in an embassy, and Mo, Sam, and Sarah would all have traveled abroad. Steve said that he would have appreciated more organized summer internships with more interesting work. Volunteering was also voiced by a number of participants as an avenue they would have pursued without the constraints of prestige, career preparation, and peer pressure.

Threshold of Acceptability

One of the concepts to emerge in the interviews was the existence of a universe of acceptable summer choices for TIU students. While this appeared in all of the interviews to greater or lesser degrees, it was during the prestige hierarchy virtual card sort that Charlotte expressed the idea completely:

> And then I would say TIU summer school on campus and that's because a lot of the pre-med students do organic chemistry and I think, again, it's one of those things that people say, "Oh, that's acceptable" or, "That's something people do." And it feels okay. It's just all about wanting somebody to tell you that it's a useful way to spend a summer. And so taking organic chemistry—even though objectively is not that interesting

> or special because it's part of that pre-med track and a lot of people do it—it's like, "Okay, that was a good use of your summer" … It goes along with athletics. Again, maybe if you've been playing a sport your whole life, doing it another summer isn't that challenging or special, but it feels like it's something that is just fine because you're so focused and you're an athlete and you're doing the thing that you should be doing.

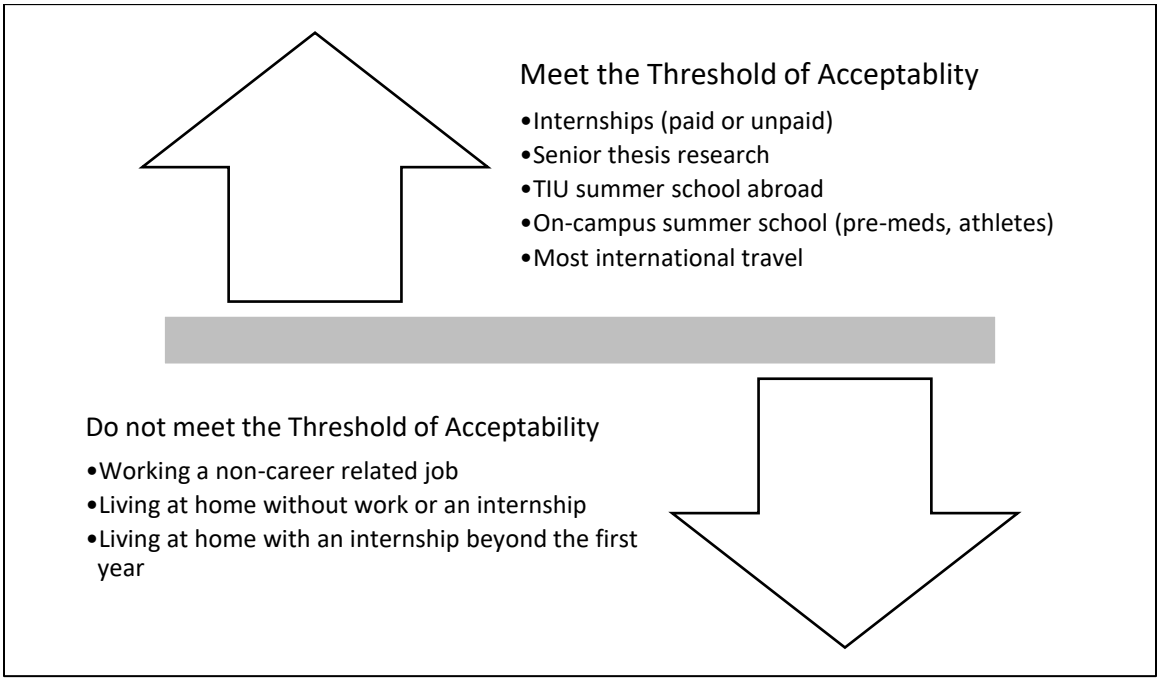
Participants reported that certain summer experiences were "good enough" or "acceptable" for the campus setting and others were not. Charlotte was "devastated" to not gain admittance at first to a summer abroad program but felt great relief once she got in later in the cycle because it met this threshold. Abigail described it as "reaching a certain bar" and explained that she was not interested in being competitive with peers so much as feeling she could "justify [her] space there" and be at the same level as her peers. The broad consensus was that it was most important to meet a threshold and be acceptable to peers; standing out, having a unique experience, or doing the most prestigious thing possible were not pursued with the same energy. Figure 4 puts some of the acceptable and unacceptable options into relation with one another.

Acceptable options included summer school abroad; summer school on campus for athletes or pre-med students; summer internships of nearly any kind; and international travel. An unpaid or underfunded opportunity might pass the threshold if completed at a prestigious organization that would be recognized by listeners. Mo had friends in the arts and had examples of what acceptability looked like in other fields: "They will spend the summer putting an album out or something, they will still have something very real to show for their summers even when it's not something as structured as tech consulting."

Unacceptable options included going home and "relaxing" (Sam) or any type of returning home after the first summer. One interesting example mentioned by more than one participant was the role of White House intern. Steve and Sarah both explicitly referenced that while that role might be otherwise prestigious it would not be acceptable or "cool" because of the administration in office when they were undergraduates.

Figure 4

Summer Experiences in Relation to the Threshold of Acceptability



A common thread among acceptable options was the degree of productivity that the opportunity represented. Gretchen said that in her peer groups, "There's always kind of this pressure of, well, what are you doing? How is it productive, you know? And I guess maybe not to say you have to be having the top internship or something, but can you validate what you're doing?" Mo's mention of putting out an album is another oblique reference to this focus on having an output of some type. Prestige was mentioned

largely as a bonus but not necessarily related to acceptability, which had a stronger emphasis on productivity.

This concept of determining what the bare minimum was to be accepted on campus did show some time effects. Participants reported that the expectation was different after the first year of college. Students could return home that summer largely without stigma provided that they had some type of unpaid internship (at the minimum) lined up. Later summers did not have this type of free pass and acceptability was dictated more strongly by location. Additionally, the pandemic had made some previously unacceptable options less stigmatized for the summer of 2020, something Gretchen elaborated on. In a similar vein, Mo shared, "I think after the pandemic, a lot of people realized, wait, this is not so bad, and I can save a lot of money and I can live at home. So yeah, I think it used to be less cool before the pandemic."

Erin clarified that all of this discussion about acceptability was strongly mediated by participants' contexts and reference groups: "You have things that you should be doing or that you feel like you should be doing given, you know, your goals or the community you've put yourself in." This explains why summer school on campus was only acceptable if someone had a good reason to pursue it, such as summer athletic commitments that kept them close to campus, or an extensive list of pre-med course requirements that could make knocking one out over the summer a desirable option.

The Threshold of Acceptability is therefore a binary measure of "yes" or "no" that answers whether a given summer experience would be perceived as "acceptable," "enough," "good," the "right thing" to do with a TIU summer. This was a question that students asked and answered early in the summer planning process to weed out the

opportunities that they would apply to, though institutional vetting processes meant that many of the options that would not pass muster were not even offered to students.

Narrative Currency Value

> Someone can tell you one story and you remember the details, you know? I think that's just how we're wired…especially if you're just getting to know someone, these stories help you figure out who is this person, what is that story telling me about them? What does the fact that they're telling me this story tell me about them too?
>
> —Henry

The initial germ of this idea—the "retelling" of summer experiences to peers—first appeared during member checking with Charlotte. During the virtual card sort activity about motivations behind summer planning and decision-making, Charlotte commented on the value of ensuring a good post-summer story: "I definitely think it's a factor, and it's sort of sad to admit that, but it is. And I think where I was on this scale is the international stuff was interesting enough that people would let it go… I do think people think pretty concretely about what they're going to tell their friends they're doing." Charlotte elaborated on the idea of wanting to share something that appeased the listener enough to forestall further questions or comments. She felt that her summers overseas, either in structured academic programs or doing independent thesis research and personal travel, were interesting enough to avoid judgment from her listening audience and simply elicit generic approval of "abroad is cool" instead of questions about how she was positioning herself for a career. Charlotte was wary of judgment because

she reported being on the receiving end of comments from well-meaning close peers who worried that she needed internships to avoid limited employability senior year.

The term Narrative Currency Value captures several important elements of the category—the act of recounting an experience, the value placed by listeners on the experience through the act of retelling, and the concept of a market of stories and experiences exchanged among peers on campus. I checked the formulation of the concept with a later participant, Henry, who responded: "So yes, I do think there's a currency—I like that term—of, you know, gaining value just by little snippets or stories that you have from what you do."

Narrative Currency Value emerged as a continuum measure of a summer experience's ability to be reframed and recast as "good" stories to peers. Experiences with limited narrative value might be something like working in a non-college related job at home, especially if a student lived in what was considered an uninteresting location. Something with a middle position on the continuum might include an internship at Google because it is prestigious enough to name drop but, as Henry explained, there is also an assumption that everyone knows what an internship at Google looks like. The highest value experiences were those that allowed for repeated retelling and reframing of unique, humorous, or prestigious stories. Abigail retold getting lost in China to work peers, for example, and Henry shared stories about pulling swimmers from the ocean and saving their lives with CPR. Such stories about a summer experience could serve signaling functions to convey coolness, uniqueness, status, or prestige.

The timing of the narrative currency phenomenon peaked throughout the early fall as students returned to campus and reunited post-experience with roommates, friends,

and peers in the dining hall and in class. Icebreakers for discussion sections of fall classes often asked students to share what they did with their summers, which one participant described as a stressful moment every time. The initial fall meetings of clubs and activities also often had this exchange play out as well. Being able to retell their summer experience in an acceptable way was important to participants to fit in. Erin connected it to the earlier concept of acceptability, naming it as important to be "able to come back in the fall and share an acceptable experience… tell[ing] people about what you did and not feeling like you wasted your summer." As Sarah explained, "You want to be able to report back about what you did in a way that you won't be embarrassed about, which to me didn't mean it had to be a prestigious thing or anything. It just meant I have to have done something productive that can fit into the story of my life."

The act of telling others about summer experiences again became important before winter break because students were in the Generation Phase and identifying opportunities for the coming summer and letting peers know what they were considering. Some participants reported that they asked themselves how they could recount a given experience during the Application Phase to decide whether it was worth applying at all. Could they spin it into a good story? How would it sound to other students? How would they pitch it on a resume?

Although audiences for the retelling could be varied, on-campus peers were the most important because the status of one's narrative in this group allowed for social positioning. Abigail saw summer stories as crucial to everyday peer interactions: "At least to me, it wasn't for what could be pitched to a job later. It was literally just for catching up with other people at TIU…the social aspect of it was where the pressure

came from. It was just having something interesting to discuss when you sat down in TIU Residential Community dining hall." Doing something unusual that invited follow-up questions also gave participants more "conversational space," to use Henry's words. He felt that peers typically only gave each other ten words or so to describe their summer experience and impress one another, but high narrative value would result in a longer dialogue and social gains for the individual with the noteworthy stories to share.

Some summer experiences even had a narrative currency beyond the campus setting. Henry shared that the interview for his current job involved a discussion of working to deadlines and performing under pressure. He drew a connection to beach lifeguarding for his interviewers, telling them, "If the deadline is someone drowning, you know, you really cannot get to that deadline, you've got to get there before then." Charlotte talked about her travel in Germany in the interview for her consulting job and appreciated that they saw it as a value instead of a liability that she had spent so many of her college summers traveling. Sam enjoyed his research experience on its own merits but also acknowledged, "That experience was great, you know, for later on in medical school talking about it." The ways in which they could recount their experiences informed participants' choices at every step of the process.

Summer Prestige Ranking

Concepts that clustered around the prestige hierarchy and peer body of knowledge coalesced into a category that constituted the final important cross-case them: Summer Prestige Ranking. As already described, it was clear that there was an acceptable way to spend your summers and it was important to clear that bar. Beyond the Threshold of Acceptability, however, it was possible to increase this baseline acceptability score with

prestige points of a sort. The consistent responses to the prestige hierarchy item in the virtual card sort yielded the baseline prestige score of summer experiences as was seen in the previous chapter. Where the concept evolved, however, was tying this into the other ideas of a "hierarchy within the hierarchy" that participants consistently highlighted when I probed for more specifics on the items. As Sarah explained during the prestige hierarchy virtual card sort activity, "Depending on what you studied, I think people would respect that you were at the top of whatever you were doing." She went on to give examples of top options for computer science and government majors. Other participants were similarly able to speak fluently about the ranking within fields not their own.

Participants contributed thoughts about what was more or less prestigious throughout other portions of the interviews as well. Collating their thoughts into buckets or dimensions of an experience, I was able to identify the characteristics that could raise or lower the prestige value of a summer experience. Table 9 lists these dimensions and their relative prestige as reported by participants. Again, there was an agreed-upon hierarchy of prestige associated with different kinds of experiences (see Figure 1) but also scope within each category for further differentiation of prestige and status. Beyond the general categories, students would weigh dimensions of a possible summer experience by the value characteristics of each. For example, the consensus was that an internship was at the top of the campus prestige hierarchy of summer experiences and would have a high baseline starting score. However, if students were deciding between two different internships, then weighing the relative value of the characteristics in Table 9 would help them to distinguish between the higher and lower prestige options and make a final decision. Selecting the Google London office would be more prestigious than the

Cambridge location of the same company because it was overseas. TIU summer school abroad would be more prestigious in Venice than taking organic chemistry on campus.

Table 9

Summer Experience Dimensions and Their Effects on Summer Prestige Ranking

Dimension	Higher Value Characteristic	Lower Value Characteristic
Location	International	Domestic
	Big City	Suburban
	Living independently in an apartment	Living at home
Research	Senior thesis	Research designed by someone else
	Published research with a lab	Unpublished research in a lab
Funding	Funded	Unpaid
	Higher pay	Lower pay
	Named fellowship	Regular funding pot
Name recognition	Brand name company	Unheard-of start-up
	National organization	Local organization
Competition	Application required	No application required
	Rigorous interview process	No interview required
Travel	Involves travel to another location	Involves staying on campus
	Independent travel	Travel as part of a group
	Unique means of transport	Conventional transport
Summer school	Summer school abroad	Summer school on campus

Henry expressed this succinctly: “Going abroad’s always cool. Why stay on campus if you can go abroad?” An easily recognizable tech company would be better than a start-up that no one had heard of and needed to be continually introduced. This led at one point on

campus to the trend of students referring to their summer internship companies as “the Uber of” some other industry as shorthand for explaining their position and a way of capturing some prestige by borrowing a more recognized name. Securing funding for a summer experience was more prestigious if you had to compete with others and “win money” (Abigail). One of the most recognized fellowships on campus at TIU even held award and reunion celebrations each semester, which gave recipients an opportunity to continue referencing their prestigious summer funding source long after the actual experience.

Examples of participants making decisions according to the Summer Prestige Ranking abounded, such as Steve opting for research in Switzerland over a domestic location, Sarah’s choice to work at a national organization, and Mo targeting brand name, recognizable tech companies over start-ups during all three of her college summers. Sam chose his first-year research position because it was “a very prolific” and “very strong lab in terms of their academic output.”

Summer Prestige Ranking, then, functions for students as a mental measure of how prestigious various summer experiences rank in relation to one another according to the values shared by peers on campus. It can function as a means of assessing which summer experience to pursue if deciding among multiple options. However, it can also be an outward facing tool that gives students a way of valuing and ranking peers’ summer experiences.

Mediating Factors

As explained in the overview of the model, the five-step Summer Experience Process does not occur in a vacuum, and participants spoke at length about the ways in

which internal and external factors influenced theirs and others' experiences. Their actions and interactions are mediated by their surrounding context on three levels. There is the direct personal context and perceptions, the campus context of TIU, and the broader societal context of macrolevel trends and events. Table 10 shows the three levels at which mediating factors are at work, some of the factors within each level that appeared in the course of the 13 interviews, and some examples in participants' own words that illustrate the impact. These three concentric elements can activate, amplify, or serve as protective factors for the students in the center: personal, campus, and societal.

Personal Context

Personal factors have the closest, most immediate impact on the student. These can range from individual characteristics such as personality traits to citizenship status. Some participants shared characteristics that made their time at TIU more difficult. Sam described his identity as an international student from Iran as "an invisible disability" because of the limitations and burdens that it placed on him throughout his college years. Unable to access the same types of experiences as his US-born peers because of restrictions on his legal work status, Sam chose to focus on what he could do and leaned on the university's international office for assistance with visa requirements. Abigail found that her first-generation college student identity put her at a disadvantage when generating ideas about summer experiences and having the confidence to compete for funding. Without parents to advise her, she needed to use older siblings as a resource instead. Victoria had a medical condition impacting her: "I had finally been diagnosed with ADHD, which was helpful getting accommodations in my courses, but not really for stuff like summer programs." Juggling multiple deadlines was demanding and she said

Table 10

Multi-Layered Mediating Factors on the Summer Experience Process

Level	Factor	Participant Examples
Personal Context	Individual characteristics	"I hate not having anything to do" (Emily)
	Family background	"I think that I have also been pretty resilient in not letting a lot of these influences really get to me … I think I've done a good job of doing the things that I actually want to do" (Kristen)
	Demographic markers	
	Salient identities	"Since our parents hadn't gone to college, it was like we were kind of our only resource" (Abigail)
	Citizenship	
	College major and minor	
	Closest relationships	
Campus Context	Competition and peer pressure	"I think it's the comparisons that you make between yourself and other people, even when you know you shouldn't" (Victoria)
	Body of peer knowledge	
	On-campus recruiting machinery	"The reason I had so much imposter syndrome and the reason I felt like I needed to get a big tech job to prove myself is because there's so much peer pressure and so much of just the social construction of those jobs" (Mo)
	Teaching and residential staff	
	Department culture and professional orientation	"Once I brought my resume in and she made me really feel like my resume was all wrong" (Kristen)
	General campus climate of stress and struggle	"I think it's compounded by just the regular stress of academic work. It sometimes would feel like the week everyone was figuring out summer was the one week you had a midterm and eight papers, and you just felt so behind" (Charlotte)
	Pressure to fit the pattern of the typical summer trajectory	
	University staff and offices	"I think we are all struggling…I think for the most part, everyone is filling their schedules up to the brim" (Victoria)
	Benefits and burdens of TIU affiliation	
	Prestige hierarchy	
	Productivity culture	
Societal Context	Naming of privilege	"Obviously TIU as an institution is built on their wealth, so it was a really weird environment… people would be like, 'Oh, you have to do everything on merit, it's not about your parents' wealth.' But obviously nothing is that way at TIU" (Sarah)
	Ethic of meritocracy	
	Social reproduction	"COVID gave me the perfect excuse to take a summer off and work on my med school applications" (Sam)
	Status groups	
	Class consciousness	"Adventure/fun was a consideration that the pandemic kind of destroyed" (Mo)
	SARS CoV-2 pandemic	
		"It ends up being the norm across class differences… Low-income kids are going to try and break out of that low-income bracket and then the high-income kids maybe already know how to do that path or have the tools to do really well in whatever field makes it easier to get that interview" (Abigail)
		"I have realized more and more my socioeconomic and class privilege" (Victoria)

that more than one good opportunity passed her by because completing applications on time was challenging for her.

Campus Context

The campus context level arose out of the categories and subcategories that related to the general campus climate, peer pressure, competition with peers, and subcultures and their values on campus. Participants had a lot to say about the ubiquitousness of stress, struggle, and anxiety on campus. Sarah made the point this way: "TIU is about academics, where there's this underlying sense that you need to be worried all the time, that if you're not stressed, you're not trying hard enough. And it kind of reminded me, I think they called this swimming duck syndrome at Stanford, where you have to keep paddling under water. But at TIU, you have to paddle above water. Everyone needs to know you're paddling, or it's like, what's the point?"

The need to demonstrate that you were "paddling" or working hard was closely related to the dominant productivity culture on campus. Many participants emphasized throughout their interviews that a valorization of "productivity" highly influenced their choices around summer breaks. Kristen talked about being resilient and resisting the pressures to conform to the high-status internship culture, which she had also called toxic and unduly focused on money-making and round-the-clock productivity. Gretchen said her peer groups expected everyone to be doing something productive to justify their space on campus. Victoria saw a connection between this trend of overinvolvement in the name of productivity and stress. She said, "I just feel like a lot of people just haven't reached their burnout freaking points, and I feel like I kind of really have." Victoria took a step back from her formal leadership positions and trimmed her extracurricular

commitments. Interestingly, she still mentioned four groups in which she participates but this nonetheless represented an effort "to kind of chill out a bit more."

Wendy pointed out that it was difficult to disentangle the roles played by students and campus context in creating this atmosphere: "That might also be the nature of TIU students. I don't know how much of it is driven by the school versus the qualities of people who end up at a place like TIU." As Wendy's observations highlight, the type of individual who is accepted into and chooses to go to TIU might very well be different than the average undergraduate. There is also, buried in her comments, the idea that students and campus culture have a reciprocal relationship. High-intensity, high-pressure approaches to academics and extracurriculars were being co-created on campus by students and institutional factors.

Another important facet of the campus context was the awareness of how TIU admission and access to its resources was such a privilege that it weighed on students and affected their summer decision-making. Many participants voiced a concern that some choices might be a "waste" of a summer and the TIU name, which aligns with findings at other elite campuses (Deresiewicz, 2008, 2014). Erin and Charlotte both explicitly referenced not wasting the three summers that students have at TIU to secure an opportunity that would be closed to other undergraduates: "You just have three chances to access these resources, so why would you waste one of those opportunities by, you know, working at home or doing nothing at home (Erin)?" This helps explain why shame and embarrassment were the emotions associated with returning home for the summer after sophomore or junior year. Sam agreed with others' assessments, "I think that the

predominant narrative would be, 'Oh, you just wasted your time.'" It was seen as a misuse of the TIU affiliation that they strived so hard to get.

Those attuned to the privilege of being at TIU also often commented on the arbitrary and socially constructed nature of the prestige hierarchy on campus. Wendy pointed out, "I think it's just a bit arbitrary how much weight we put on each of these categories." Henry said that even as peer examples gave him ideas about what to do, he found himself questioning their value: "I think just seeing people do things that you perceive as better, which when you think about it, there's no reason why that's actually better, you know?" For Sarah, she could both recognize the influence of peer reference groups but still succumbed to the emotional toll: "We worry so much about these abstract things that aren't necessarily important, but which seem very important when you're in a certain milieu."

Societal Context

The societal context connects clearly to the bodies of literature discussed in Chapter 2. While not all students seemed able to identify these sociological forces affecting their lives at TIU, those who could spoke articulately and at length about meritocracy, social reproduction, class consciousness, and privilege. Kristen and Wendy spoke quite a bit about privilege and their family resources—completely unprompted—when discussing the types of summer experiences that they considered. Kristen identified privilege as something she is aware of as a force that allowed her to pursue what she is passionate about and what makes her happy (work in the entertainment industry) rather than needing to prioritize securing a salary that could help support her family. Sarah acknowledged that even the opportunity to explore her interests so freely in college is an

indicator of privilege. Mo said she noticed that there was even a pushback against some displays of privilege: “Traveling, I think if it’s not work-related traveling, then it’s not that prestigious, and it’s maybe seen as kind of frivolous or like a marker of your privilege that you can travel instead of having an internship that summer.”

The pandemic of course was front and center for many of the participants with its rippling effects into every corner of society. Younger participants still in college during the pandemic noted that it affected their own summer experiences and altered their thoughts about post-graduate employment. Because of the mass closures of offices and contraction of the economy, many summer opportunities were canceled completely, some were switched last minute from in person to virtual internships, and funding dried up due to a reluctance on firms’ part to pay for virtual work. The pandemic upended travel plans for pleasure and for summer work.

An unexpected benefit for some participants was that the pandemic had lowered the threshold of what would be considered an acceptable or useful way to spend a summer and allowed them to let up on the pressure they had placed on themselves. Sam said it was the perfect excuse to focus 100% on medical school applications instead of needing to obtain some type of research position or internship on the side as well. The pandemic also normalized earning money while living at home, which helped to balance out the way it simultaneously narrowed the job market.

Older participants, recent alumni from the classes of 2019 and 2020, reported that the pandemic was affecting them as well. For example, Emily selected her PhD program based on their openness to remote work and their public safety measures, in combination with other factors like faculty mentoring and stipend amount. Sarah took her first job

even though she had serious reservations about her would-be boss because she worried there would be no other offers coming (and her concerns were borne out after starting the position, which she only held for a year before moving on). Abigail took a summer fellowship designed for undergraduates after graduation in the absence of the public service and environmental justice jobs that had been her first choice. On the other hand, pandemic life bore some similarities to difficult summer experiences from college that bolstered their coping skills. Erin reflected on how her summer in a miserably cramped office with no windows and an apartment with absent roommates had been a training ground for living alone, dealing with unhappiness, and feeling unsettled. Thinking back on the skills she had learned and how she managed then were helping her in new life and new graduate program, dealing with the loneliness of pandemic living as a recent graduate.

Chapter Six: Discussion and Implications

Introduction

Having described the findings and derived a model from the grounded theory investigation, this final chapter views the findings through the lens of the original research questions and key bodies of related literature that were presented in earlier chapters. I will also discuss the implications of this research for higher education, address the limitations in this study with suggestions for further related efforts, and recommend directions for future research into the summer prestige-building activities of elite undergraduates.

A Return to the Research Questions

The goal of this study was to shed light on a previously unresearched phenomenon—the high prestige summer experiences of elite undergraduates. In my years in residence life and academic advising, I had noticed a trend of increasingly complex decision-making about the best way to make use of a TIU college summer. Students were juggling 8 to 10 applications at a time, piling extra work on top of an already rigorous academic load. In my years as a teaching assistant on campus, I frequently had students absent from discussion section meetings at night because they insisted that going to an information session about consulting and finance opportunities was more important for their long-term careers then whatever I had planned to present to them. This study was an effort to understand the stress and anxiety that were anecdotally evident in my work and the priorities that my former students were expressing with regard to future employment.

The broad research question that formed the central axis of this study asked how elite undergraduates receive, understand, act on, and create messages about high-prestige

summer experiences. Three sub questions guided this research study as well. With the first, I wanted to know how students described the experience of considering, pursuing, and participating in high-prestige summer experiences. The Summer Experience Process detailed in Table 8 of Chapter 5 answers this question thoroughly. Students move through discrete stages of a process with goals, tasks and strategies, and consequences flowing from their actions in each phase. The characteristics of the process were described consistently across participants regardless of major or career interest. While some of the specifics, such as application timeline, differed depending on the type of summer experience, the process and its attendant burdens and benefits was a strikingly common experience for the study participants. The number of times that participants referred to roommates, friends, or more distant peers feeling the same emotions or facing the same costs suggested strongly that the process delineated as part of this theoretical model is not simply an artifact of sampling and is presumably shared by other students at this campus who were not part of the study.

The second sub question was concerned with the source, content, and stance of the messages that elite undergraduates receive about high-prestige summer experiences. I not only wanted to identify these messages. I also wanted to understand how students internalize them as normal and necessary. In some ways, institutional signals were the easiest element of messaging to isolate and understand. Whether intended or not, the well-developed structures and information systems that supported the most prestigious and most competitive summer opportunities on campus sent a clear signal to students that those were the brass rings to grasp. Some participants gave staff members the benefit of the doubt and suggested that advice to consider consulting and finance (even for those

who came to campus offices seeking help with other career fields) was nothing more than an effort to assuage undergraduates' fears about postgraduate employability. The other messages that students were hearing and internalizing were best captured by a phrase that one of the pilot interviewees, Cassidy, used to describe these norms, values, and beliefs—"it's what's in the air." Most participants had no idea what consulting meant, or that finance was a career, until they reached TIU's campus. However, that did not stop them from rating internships in those fields as the most prestigious by the time they were participating in an interview with me. There is clearly a dominant, nearly monolithic understanding on campus of what counts for status and prestige. Money, name recognition, "winning" funding or internships on your own merit, and productivity were coming through loud and clear for participants.

The third and final sub question for this study looked at how undergraduates participate in the creation and transmission of the campus narrative around high-prestige summer experiences. The findings showed that this related closely to the research question of how students learned about and internalized messages about worthwhile summer experiences. Students on campus were perpetuating this cycle of summer prestige accumulation in a variety of ways. Their robust student referral networks for internships at first glance seemed like a resourceful way of assisting like-minded students. However, they also had the effect of transmitting one class year's norms and values down to the next in an uninterrupted fashion. Networking with alumni had a similar consequence. Even apparently innocuous conversations in the dining hall at the beginning of the fall semester became a battleground for what matters and where a student was positioned socially relative to their peers. Without the "right" summer

experience to share, students could be subject to shame, embarrassment, or loss of confidence. The messaging was so loud on campus that it drowned out the voices from non-TIU peers, even those who were also attending Ivy League schools.

To return to the main research question, then—how do elite undergraduates receive, understand, act on, and create messages about high-prestige summer experiences? They are remarkably perceptive about the types of experiences that make it through the TIU sieve and are offered to them at the campus career center, over listservs, and through school-specific career websites. Like many outside the TIU bubble, students use money and name recognition as proxies for intelligence, legitimacy, and competence. Consequently, the types of work that are referenced as important or prestigious in the real world (such as the elite professional service firms) end up being likewise prestigious on campus. Far from a complete adoption of societal views about prestige, however, students have some campus-specific views about what other summer experiences would count as acceptable. For TIU students at a research university with a global reach, travel and worldliness are unsurprisingly highly valued. Senior thesis research, likewise, is prestigious because of its self-directed nature, the way it keys into the academic nature of college itself, and the opportunities it presents to students to signal prestige through travel or funding. Students can therefore take these values and beliefs with them as they move through the summer experience process, completing their to-do lists and meeting their objectives as high school trained them to. They use the norms that their campus life has inculcated in them to make and evaluate their decisions each step of the way as they accumulate summer prestige.

Discussion of Findings

While the phenomenon under investigation was itself understudied in the literature, the findings of this research nonetheless showed many points of connection with related bodies of literature. Social reproduction, meritocracy, and status groups could all be discerned in participants' experiences and words.

The transmission of social, cultural, and financial capital from one generation to the next is a documented force in elite institutions of all kinds (Bourdieu, 1985; Kamens, 1974; Karen, 1990; Trow, 1973). As would be expected, it also plays out at TIU among the undergraduate student body. Charlotte explicitly referenced social reproduction and the cycle through which parents in "intense" jobs pass along knowledge to their children at TIU who in turn disseminate that to peers. Sarah discussed the "hypocritical" climate on campus in which high socioeconomic status students tried to signal a lower status to avoid what she termed peer "scorn." A number of participants showed a keen awareness of these sociological forces underpinning their TIU and summer experiences. Some were troubled by the inequity of summer experiences on campus and questioned the arbitrary nature of the prestige hierarchy that they bought into during their student years. Some also pointed out how unfair it was that in a job market saturated with college degrees, they were able to leverage their TIU affiliation to get a leg up on less elite college students at other campuses.

Closely related to these observations were discussions about merit. Nearly all participants indicated that a summer experience or funding source that required a competitive application and interview process was more prestigious. Particularly high status would be an opportunity for which you had to beat out other TIU students,

meaning that you not just "won," but that you beat out your on-campus peers. Of course, it is evident that for most students at a school like TIU, there is a limit to the degree to which they can claim that it is pure meritocracy instead of accrued family capital helping them to compete. As Sarah explained, "You have to do everything on merit, it's not about your parents' wealth. But obviously nothing is that way at TIU."

Weber's (1921/2010) writings on social honor and status groups (*Stände*) was another body of literature with echoes in this study's findings. Time and again, the participants expressed in interviews that an acceptable path was based on group membership. Athletes could stay on campus and take summer school courses while working as a proctor because it was appropriate for them to state close to training facilities and teammates. The same summer path would be looked at with raised eyebrows if it were a psychology or economics major not on a varsity team. Pre-med students were likewise expected to pursue slightly different summer opportunities because they had a different set of benchmarks against which they measured their status. Students' status or reference groups varied depending on their personal context, with teammates, close peers, siblings, romantic partners, and summer coworkers all playing a role for participants. Some even found themselves code-switching as they moved between groups, such as Henry spending his summer in a beach town that valorized lifeguarding as prestigious but then returning to campus and needing to spin his stories in a different way to be meaningful in the campus context that prioritized corporate internships and a diverse portfolio of summer experiences.

An interesting twist on the concept of reference groups, however, emerged within participants' thoughts on the campus prestige hierarchy. Their elaborate descriptions of

the hierarchy within the hierarchy at every level of the pyramid in Figure 1 demonstrated strongly relativist thinking about prestige (see Chapter 4). This presents elite students with an impossible task because no amount of striving will lead them to the top if they and peers can always generate an example of something better.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings in this study present several opportunities for policy changes at elite educational institutions and programmatic changes for student affairs professionals. One of the biggest takeaways when examining the campus context for participants was the outsize role that consulting, finance, and technology companies play in their thinking about the best way to spend a summer break. My conversations with career service staff made it clear that this is driven in large part by companies themselves, but that does not mean that colleges and universities are passive bystanders to this inculcation of norms and values. Perhaps this presents an opportunity to highlight less traditional summer experiences among highly successful alumni or other public figures, provided they are recent enough examples for current students to view them as credible. There could also be measures to ensure that campus access for these industries is no freer than that granted to other career options in public service, education, and the social sciences. Efforts to mitigate this outside influence are important given the pressures and anxieties that these industries exerted on students of many majors and career interests in this study.

Some of the implications for higher education practice relate to this professional influence as well. So many of the participants explicitly said they were not interested in the content of consulting and finance internships that were nonetheless drawn by the attractiveness of a clear pipeline that took place on campus, came with funding already

attached to the opportunity, and had an array of info sessions, workbooks available for purchase online, and even undergraduates' student groups supporting it. If the findings of this study show that a big part of the draw to these careers is the certainty that they offer students, then a way for career centers and academic departments to encourage other options would be to borrow any transferable mechanisms. For example, are interview workshops for jobs in nonprofit work as widely available as case study prep sessions for consulting interviews? Are there resources to identify internships in popular interdisciplinary fields such as environmental justice or educational policy? For the participants in this study, they found that the buckets of available opportunities tended to lag behind their interests. Those interested in working on the climate crisis were told they could either work in the energy sector for Exxon, an organization at which TIU had connections for internships, or they could pursue public service positions, which were typically aligned with election and campaign work. Neither captured the interdisciplinary character of the career interests of many in this generation of students.

Helping students to generate ideas—a consistently stressful point in the process for them—would go a long way toward stopping the brain drain of elite campus' best and brightest away from public service, academia, education, the social sciences and could direct them toward anything other than big business. Participants report cognitive overload as they struggle to avoid the consulting, finance, and tech internship path with its polished, enticing, well-organized, all-in-one funding. It is no wonder that so many students turn away from other interests that require them to go through in exhausting application process, only to repeat these steps so that they can secure funding. In the midst of a busy academic, extracurricular, and social landscape, it is easy to understand

why avoiding a separate funding step would be appealing. Elite campuses could find ways to offer or expand existing alternative pathways that are similarly easy to choose.

The finding that participants' worries about their post-graduate future figure so prominently as a motivation in their summer planning process is also an opportunity for policy and practice. How do we as a society compensate work? Why have six-figure starting salaries for consulting positions grown even more, despite the financial pressures of the pandemic? Obviously, these questions are bigger than any single campus, but the difficulty of finding a solution does not mean that we ignore the problem. On a smaller, more local level, student affairs professionals can offer programming that truly assuages students' fears about earnings and employability. Given what this study uncovered about narrative currency and its importance for summer experiences, career centers could easily design workshops that leverage this concept so that students can tell their story in a compelling way. Would TIU students feel freer to select the summer experiences that truly most appeal to them if they felt that they could frame their summer story to employers, no matter how they spent it? Based on this study, yes, they would. From a student development perspective, this also allows for the chance to reflect on growth and past experiences and take the reins of their individual stories, developing self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2004). And even from a purely pragmatic perspective, many of the skills in the Generation, Application, and Funding Phases of the Summer Experience Process are useful, transferrable workplace skills. This shows the importance of framing. College career centers can advise students that the ability to put together a resume, write a cover letter, ace an interview, set up informational interviews, and write thank you

notes afterwards are skills that could not only help them get the summer experience of their dreams that can position them well throughout their working life.

Limitations of the Study

There are a number of adjustments that would improve this study immensely. It is a clear limitation that it had such a small number of individuals participating. However, given that I was making an initial exploration into a novel phenomenon, even the 13 participants provided plenty of data on which to base a foundational theory. Nonetheless, a broader representation of backgrounds, identities, majors, and career interests could lead to even richer, more saturated findings. A scaled-up quantitative study could look at what leads to career success and college and job satisfaction, providing another way to answer the question of whether summer prestige matters as much as students think it does. The timing of this research also meant that undergraduates and recent alumni were heavily impacted by the SARS CoV-2 pandemic. Whether it was remote schooling leading to a potential dilution of socialization forces on campus or atypical summer experiences because of the switch to remote work, it is likely that conducting interviews with participants after some stabilization with regard to public health indicators could be helpful in sussing out additional information. The biggest impact of the pandemic on this study, however, is likely the role it played in low participation rate. I was unable to recruit in person on campus because of restrictions, which meant I was reliant on email at a time when students were reporting higher levels of burnout from screen-based activities. These limitations really lead us into the recommendations for further research because so many of them are related to questions of participant number and variety.

Recommendations for Future Research

An expanded study with more undergraduates, more backgrounds represented, more majors, and more career interests would be exciting to undertake. It would provide a broader understanding of the phenomenon of high prestige summer experiences. Conducting a follow-up study on the themes that emerged in this study would also allow for a deeper exploration of the concepts that emerged in the analysis process, with an updated interview protocol that could reflect directed prompts about the Threshold of Acceptability, Narrative Currency Value, and the Summer Prestige Ranking. There would also be scope for examining sub-topics in detail, such as the social bonds that most influence summer decision-making, how they form, and how they change over the years at school. I was also curious about whether common protective factors existed among those participants who reported being most resilient to the dominant consulting and finance machinery on campus. I noted that many of them had secured prestigious things to do in their less conventionally high-status paths, but this seems a topic that would be interesting to dig into as a separate study. For better or for worse, the findings do show that the types of experiences reported by participants are entrenched in elite university culture so the opportunity to continue studying and writing about this phenomenon clearly exists.

Grounds for Optimism

There were moments in this research study in which it was easy to feel pessimistic about the future. Many participants were also aware of that hopelessness linked to recognition of an oppressive system that seems unbearably hard to change. They expressed it during their interviews, with some explicitly criticizing the valorization of

careers that can do active harm in the world. Sarah felt this distance and dread when considering her own stress and struggle relative to non-TIU peers: “We all grew up in the same place. We’re all similar people, and I’m like, what am I even doing? What is the point of all this? Why am I stressing about this? These people are going to turn out okay, too.” The striving for status was, in most participants’ views, getting them nowhere except to a future where they were expected to offer up their passions and creativity to fuel the engines of business. This was far from the messages they received upon matriculation about what it meant to be a graduate of TIU. What was the point of going to one of the best universities in the world if they were not going to use that education to make it a better place?

However, there were grounds for optimism. There were the obvious benefits of completing this research and learning more about undergraduate summers generally and how they form part of the developmental stages for students. But also, beyond those aims, it was heartening to see in the findings what the leaders of tomorrow deem important. The prestige ranking, for example, shows us that some of the things that these students value include being well-traveled, demonstrating independence, self-actualization, clarity, and sense of direction. Yes, there is the expected valorization of competing and winning, money and productivity. Nonetheless, there were also signs that even one or two years out of the TIU bubble helped participants to put their earlier pursuit of prestige into perspective: “Prestige was really important to me in college. This is something that definitely changed in the real world, but I think getting the research grant or getting into the certain summer program was something that I really cared about at the time” (Charlotte). Participants were even able to be positive about the pandemic, a

once-in-a-lifetime wrench thrown into their college years. Mo expressed what many students felt: “There was a big worry that the pandemic would make summers essentially meaningless because you spend all this time teeing up the perfect thing and then it’s remote and it’s like, ‘Ahh, it’s not going to be worth it!’ But it was very much worth it. I still very much learned a lot. I still emerged with a wonderful network, wonderful people I know, so much learning, so much personal growth.”

Likewise, when considering how participants described or responded to the phenomenon of high prestige summer experiences there was a remarkable spectrum of consciousness and awareness. These participants could see behind the veil that typically obscured the reality of fancy internships behind high pay and desirable perks. They saw beyond the seemingly objective structures presented to them and could name the forces such as privilege and generational wealth that were in actuality shaping opportunities at TIU. Students did not show the “rhetorical cover” that other researchers (Khan & Jerolmack, 2013) have identified among elite students, but were instead aware that meritocracy is something to be questioned. They used their moral compass to guide summer and career choices and were cautious about the erasures of identity that can happen at an elite institution.

Participants’ advantaged location within the system did not blind them to the drawbacks of the structures that benefitted them. Instead, they frequently called out the privilege that was extended to them unasked as a reward for their admission to one of the world’s most elite institutions: “So many people deserve the same things, and their colleges don’t provide them, and they don’t have those opportunities. So, I do think it’s very messed up that you do need to do those things to stand out in this job market and yet

getting to do them is a privilege" (Sarah). This study's biggest takeaway is perhaps recognizing that the students in elite institutions are not always sheep being led blindly by the dominant campus narratives. Instead, they can be partners for the change that is needed to bring balanced and equitable opportunities to campuses, dismantle the prevailing belief in meritocracy, and generate solutions that valorize the kind of work and summer opportunities that facilitate the development of mature, fulfilled, and compassionate adults.

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Appendix A: Study Recruitment Email

Current undergraduates and recent alumni received the same core recruitment email, with the slight differences being the subject line and that it was preceded by a short, personalized introduction for recent alumni as explained in Chapter 3.

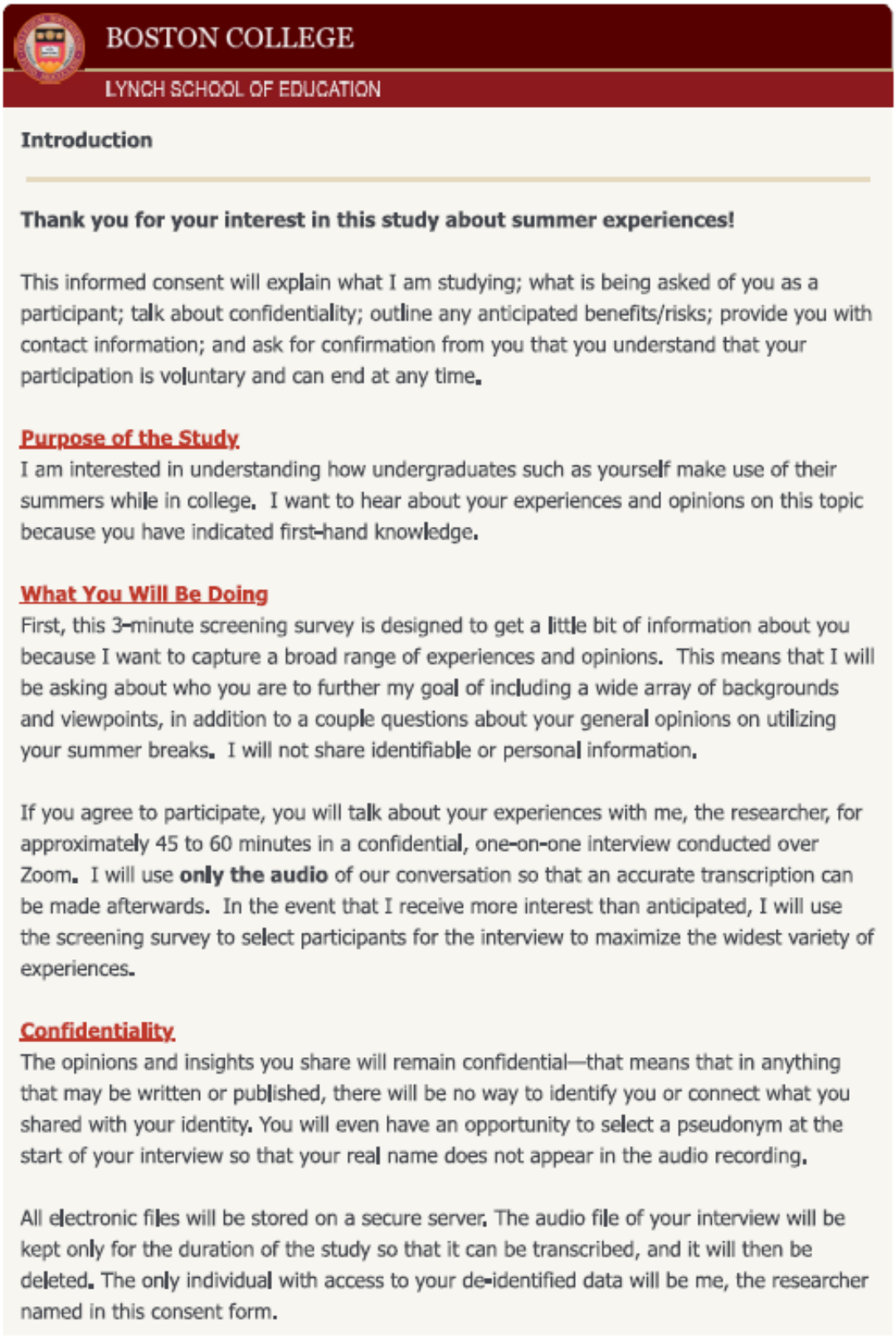
> Subject line: Interested in sharing about your summers? All experiences (good or bad!) are welcome!
>
> Dear students,
>
> Some of you already know me, but for those who don't, my name is Erica, and I was a Resident Tutor in TIU Residential Community for 8 years (!) and am now a Non-Res, working on my dissertation in higher education at Boston College. While in the House, I helped run intramurals, was a CARE and Wellness Tutor, and ran various language tables over the years (Spanish, German and Russian). I was in the Slavic Department (BA '07) and mostly advised students in other area studies departments and those looking into living abroad and education.
>
> **Today I'm writing to invite you to take part in a study about summer experiences.** This is something I spent many hours chatting about with sophomore advisees and students in our entryway, and now I am trying to study it systematically. I'm interested in hearing from everyone regardless of where you fall on the summer spectrum, from study abroad to highly structured programs to regular hourly jobs back home to summer as a break from work and academics. Maybe it has been easy for you financially; maybe it has been difficult to justify using those months for anything other than supporting your family members with income-generating activities. Whatever your story, I am interested in hearing it. My goal is to understand how students from many backgrounds, perspectives and identities feel they can/cannot and should/should not make use of their summer breaks. All opinions and all insights are valued!
> I plan to conduct all interviews over Zoom. Virtual interviews mean that I am able to work around your availability and location easily. Those of you familiar with human subject research will already know this, but I want to assure you that all information shared with me will be reported in a way that protects your privacy. If there are elements to your experience that you worry could be identifying, then you'd simply let me know and those identifying details would be altered.
>
> **If you are interested in speaking with me, please fill out this 3-minute screening survey** [*note: "this 3-minute screening survey" was a live Qualtrics link to the screening survey*] and I will reach out to you to schedule an interview. Feel free to reach out with any questions, and thank you in advance for your willingness to help with my research!
>
> Best,
> Erica Brown Soto

A sample introduction included before the recruitment email to recent alumni appears below. This was customized to reflect how I knew the participant and what their current activities and location were at the time of study recruitment.

> Subject line: Greetings and an interview request from one of your former tutors :)
>
> Hi [insert name],
>
> I know it has been a little while since we've seen one another around TIU Residential Community, and I hope that post-graduation life is treating you well!
>
> I'm reaching out because I'm in the final stages of my dissertation in higher education at Boston College and looking for a few more recent students to interview about what summer experiences in college are like for TIU undergrads. I was hoping that you might be interested, based on what I remember from our conversations around the House. I included below the email that I sent over the open list which has some more details.
>
> Do you think that this is something you would be willing/able to do? If it is, could you fill out this quick 3-minute survey [*Note: "this 3-minute survey" will be a live link to a Qualtrics survey with the informed consent and screening questions*] and I'll be in touch about a time to hear more?
>
> Thank you in advance for considering this!
>
> Best,
> Erica

Appendix B: Informed Consent and Screening Survey

Interested prospective participants completed this combined informed consent and screening survey through Qualtrics by following the link in the recruitment email.



BOSTON COLLEGE

LYNCH SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Introduction

Thank you for your interest in this study about summer experiences!

This informed consent will explain what I am studying; what is being asked of you as a participant; talk about confidentiality; outline any anticipated benefits/risks; provide you with contact information; and ask for confirmation from you that you understand that your participation is voluntary and can end at any time.

Purpose of the Study

I am interested in understanding how undergraduates such as yourself make use of their summers while in college. I want to hear about your experiences and opinions on this topic because you have indicated first-hand knowledge.

What You Will Be Doing

First, this 3-minute screening survey is designed to get a little bit of information about you because I want to capture a broad range of experiences and opinions. This means that I will be asking about who you are to further my goal of including a wide array of backgrounds and viewpoints, in addition to a couple questions about your general opinions on utilizing your summer breaks. I will not share identifiable or personal information.

If you agree to participate, you will talk about your experiences with me, the researcher, for approximately 45 to 60 minutes in a confidential, one-on-one interview conducted over Zoom. I will use **only the audio** of our conversation so that an accurate transcription can be made afterwards. In the event that I receive more interest than anticipated, I will use the screening survey to select participants for the interview to maximize the widest variety of experiences.

Confidentiality

The opinions and insights you share will remain confidential—that means that in anything that may be written or published, there will be no way to identify you or connect what you shared with your identity. You will even have an opportunity to select a pseudonym at the start of your interview so that your real name does not appear in the audio recording.

All electronic files will be stored on a secure server. The audio file of your interview will be kept only for the duration of the study so that it can be transcribed, and it will then be deleted. The only individual with access to your de-identified data will be me, the researcher named in this consent form.

I will not release to others any information that identifies you unless you give your permission, or unless I am legally required to do so. For example, the Institutional Review Board at Boston College and internal Boston College auditors could review research records, or state/federal laws or court orders could require that information from your research study records be released.

Benefits and Risks

There are no anticipated benefits to participating in this study, though you might enjoy reflecting on your experiences. Likewise, there are no anticipated risks from involvement in this study.

Contact Information

If you have questions about this research, you may contact me, Erica Brown Soto, at sotoer@bc.edu or (954) 873-8340. If you wish to obtain information, ask questions about your rights as a research participant, talk about confidentiality, or discuss this study with someone other than me, then you may contact the Boston College Office for Research Protections at irb@bc.edu or (617) 552-4778.

Your Consent

Before agreeing to be part of this study, please be sure that you understand what the study is about and ask me to answer any questions that you may have. You can request a PDF copy of this consent form for your records via email. The Boston College IRB approved this protocol on September 17, 2021.

By clicking below, you agree to be in this study and you acknowledge that:

- Your participation in the study is voluntary.
- You are at least 18 years of age.
- You are aware that you have the right to withdraw at any point, for any reason, and without any penalty.

○ I consent, take me to the first question

○ I do not consent, I do not wish to participate

Main Block

Can you very briefly describe what you have done during your summer breaks while at school? No need to get too detailed – a brief sketch is fine!

Below are 6 sentences stating various opinions somebody might hold about experiences with summer breaks at college. Please move the slider to show how much you agree or disagree with these statements (0=completely disagree and 10=completely agree).

School Basics

What class year are/were you in school?

- ○ 2021
- ○ 2022
- ○ 2023
- ○ 2024
- ○ Other

It sounds like you are a super senior or might have graduated this past May (congratulations!). Do you already have a job, fellowship, or graduate school lined up? Can you briefly describe what it is?

What is your concentration? If you have a joint concentration, please list both.

Do you have a secondary field or language citation?

- ○ No
- ○ Yes! And it is...

Demographics

Which racial or ethnic identities do you identify with? You may select multiple responses.

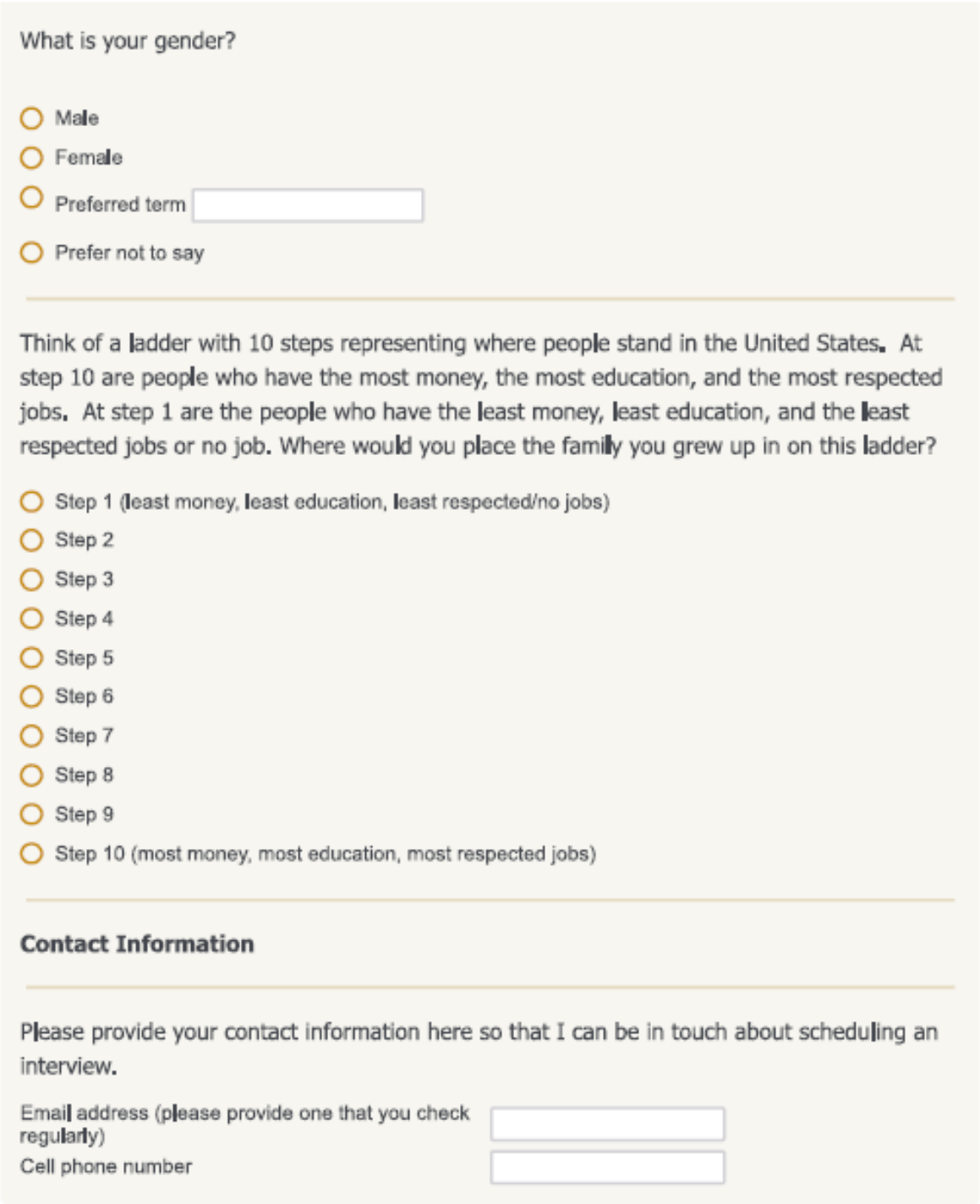
- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ White
- ☐ Other (please fill in here)

Do you consider yourself Hispanic, or Latino/a/x, or none of these?

- ○ No, none of these
- ○ Yes (please enter your preferred term)

Are you an international student?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No



What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Preferred term
- Prefer not to say

Think of a ladder with 10 steps representing where people stand in the United States. At step 10 are people who have the most money, the most education, and the most respected jobs. At step 1 are the people who have the least money, least education, and the least respected jobs or no job. Where would you place the family you grew up in on this ladder?

- Step 1 (least money, least education, least respected/no jobs)
- Step 2
- Step 3
- Step 4
- Step 5
- Step 6
- Step 7
- Step 8
- Step 9
- Step 10 (most money, most education, most respected jobs)

Contact Information

Please provide your contact information here so that I can be in touch about scheduling an interview.

Email address (please provide one that you check regularly)

Cell phone number

Powered by Qualtrics

End of Survey Message Displayed by Qualtrics

Thank you for telling me more about yourself and providing your contact information! I look forward to learning more about your summer experiences while in college and will be in touch soon. Thank you again!

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

This interview protocol guided conversations with current undergraduates and recent alumni. Brackets are used to indicate the limited number of placed where verb tense or an additional phrase appeared in the question or instruction given to participants.

Key:
Underlined terms are question blocks grouped by topic/theme.
Indented text is spoken instructions that I will give to participants.
Bulleted items are questions and prompts. Not all will be used, nor necessarily in the order listed.
Italics are actions taken by the interviewer (myself) or reminders during the interview.

Section 1: Introduction and General Overview Questions

<u>Introduction</u>

Thank you for meeting with me to talk about your summer experiences!

Before we get started, I wanted to check whether you had any questions about the informed consent that you completed.

Address questions or proceed directly if none.

As I mentioned in my email, I'm interested in how undergrads use their summers, not only the actual things they do but what goes on behind the scenes, the tensions, the pressures, how they reconcile competing priorities. [*And for alumni:* I am interested in hearing what recent alumni have to say about this because you experienced it all firsthand but also have a little more perspective on this now that you're out of college.]

I want to reiterate that anything that you share with me remains confidential. To that end, I'd like to give you the opportunity now to select a pseudonym before we start recording, if you'd like me to use that during our talk. It would also be what I use to refer to you in my dissertation when discussing your insights, rather than your real name.

Record real name and pseudonym in single, hand-written list, and proceed. If participant declines to create one, then I will generate one after the interview.

And again, there are no right or wrong answers, and no matter what your story, I'm interested in hearing it. Okay, I'm going to go ahead and start recording now so I can make an audio transcript.

Start interview recording. [do not press button early] Tell participant:

- You should be receiving a pop-up on your end now.

General Overview Questions

- Let's start with something really basic, like, tell me about what [you did with/you've done so far during] your summer breaks.
- Back when you were in high school, is that what you thought you'd be doing with your summers?
- How much time did you put into thinking about or planning your summers?

Section 2: Virtual Card Sort Activity and Debrief

Virtual Card Sort Activity Introduction

Okay, now I'd like to do the virtual card sort activity with you. It's the link that I sent along via email, if you can go ahead and open that up. If we were meeting in person, I'd be asking you to physically sort some cards for me, so this is my effort to create an activity that we can do over Zoom. You'll see that it has three slides with a question at the top of each, and all the items are editable. You can either walk me through your thinking as you sort or wait and explain your responses at the end, whichever feels more natural to you.

Do the three slides with the participants. Download as a PDF the completed cards with the participant's pseudonym at the end.

To be completed after each of the three questions as relevant. Some of the open-ended prompts to elicit information include:

- Let's start with the bucket on the left. Talk me through this. Why were these important?
- I see you put only XX into that bucket. Tell me more.
- You left a few items unmoved. Those don't apply to you?
- It seemed [easy/hard] for you to sort the items in this question. Can you tell me more about that?

Virtual Card Sort Debrief

To be completed at the end of this activity. These topics/factors appear in the activity, but if that has not generated a discussion, then I will ask about them explicitly.

- We haven't talked about family yet. Did family members factor into your decisions?
    - *Prompt further:* Maybe in terms of setting your expectations, pushing you in one direction or another, or even a need to support the family financially?
- We haven't talked about money yet. Did that factor into your decisions, in terms of earning money or making choices based on funding you have secured?
- I'd like to return to the topic of motivations for a minute. Can you tell me a little more about why you used your summers the way you did?
- Did pressure, worry, or uncertainty about the future play a role in your decision-making?

Section 3: Discussion of System Level

Now I want to zoom out from your individual experiences to ask a few questions about system and societal level factors.

Summer Norming

- [Did/Do] you feel like you [were/are] a typical TIU student in the ways you [have] used your summers? How would you compare yourself to the typical TIU student in this area?
- Was your approach to using summers influenced by the messages or examples at TIU?
- What about on-campus recruiting for summer internships? It sounds like you [were/weren't] part of that pipeline. Can you tell me a little about that?
  - *For those who did not participate:* Was it ever a temptation?
- What about the costs of pursuing and doing summer experiences? What, if anything, do you think students give up for this? Are there trade-offs?

Pandemic (for Current Undergrads and Alumni from 2020 and 2021)

- How do you think the pandemic has affected the way students can make use of their summers?
- Did the pandemic affect your ability to pursue a summer experience? In what ways?
- Did maximizing your summer feel even more important because of the pandemic? Can you tell me about that?

Final No Constraints

- Okay, one final question and we're all finished! I'd like you to imagine that [you/you're back in college and] have no constraints - (*if applicable add:* none of the concerns about money, prestige, or security that we've talked about). What would you do with your summers without these constraints?

Wrap-up Question

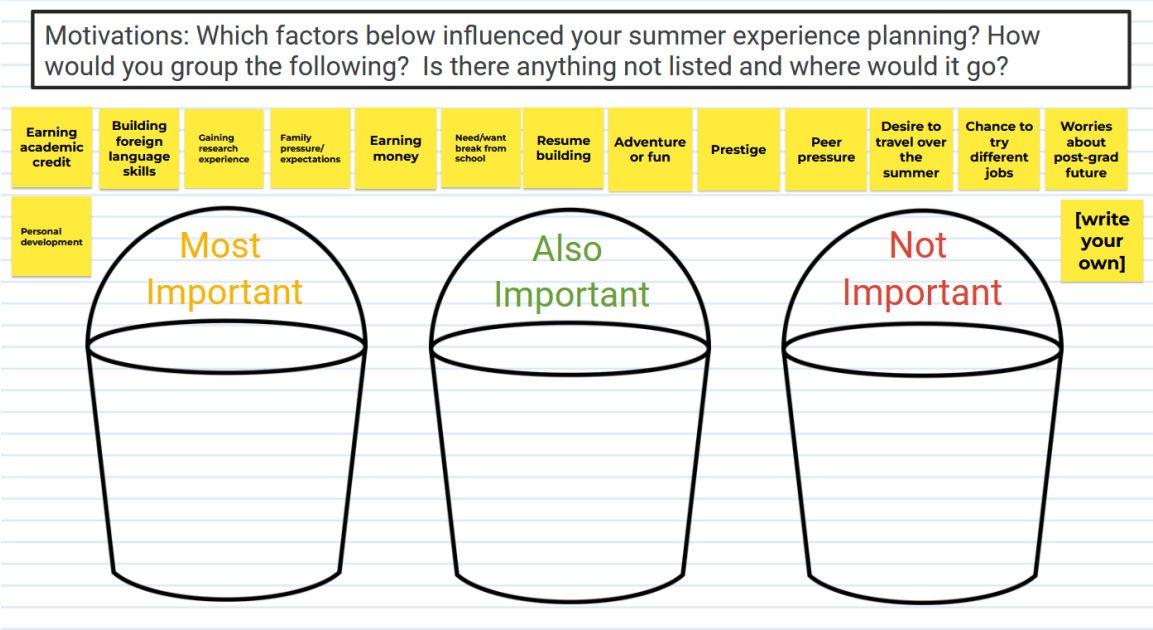
- Before we sign off, is there anything we haven't touched on that you'd like to share? Or anything you'd like to revisit and discuss in more depth? Or maybe when you heard what I was studying, you thought to yourself, I have this really burning idea or opinion about summers that I want to share, and I haven't asked you about that yet.

Again, thank you so much for meeting with me today to talk about this! I found your thoughts so interesting and really enjoyed speaking with you! Good luck with [the rest of the semester/work/etc.]!

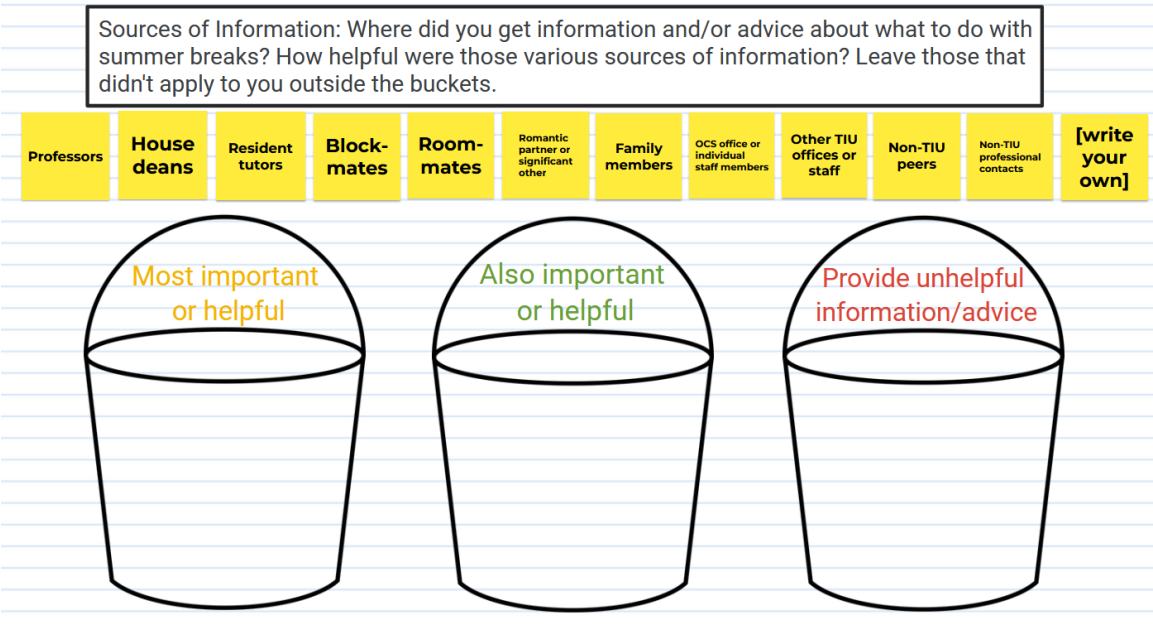
Appendix D: Virtual Card Sort Activity

Participants completed this activity during the interview using Google Jamboard. As with the other study instruments, there were slight variations with verb tenses to reflect the different temporal relationship to the topic for current students and alumni.

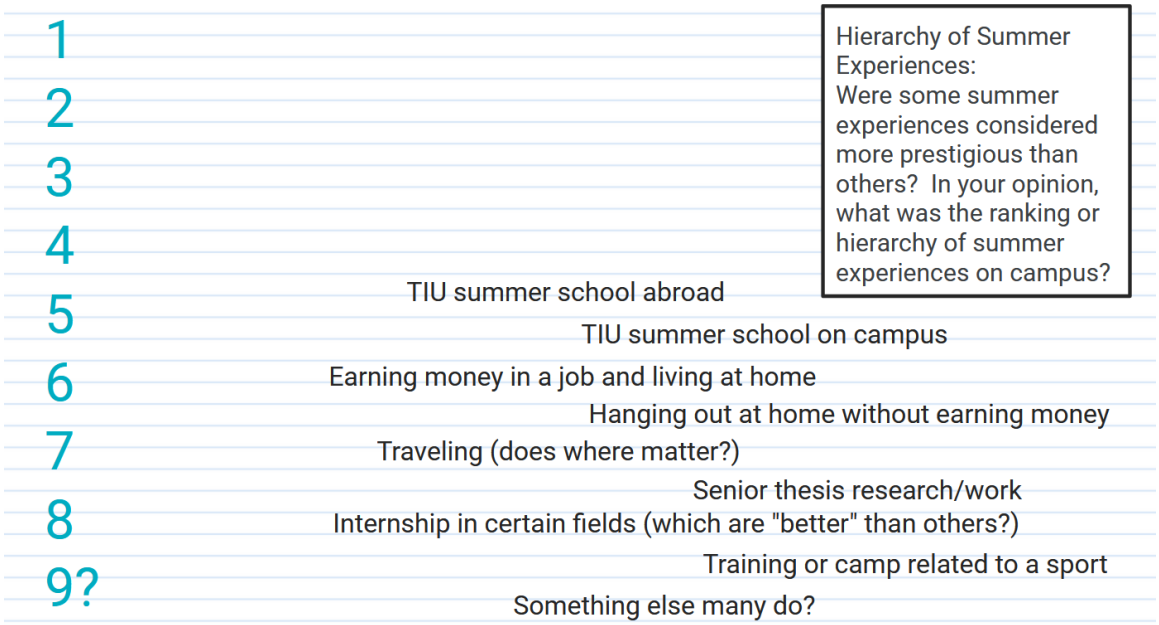
Frame 1



Frame 2

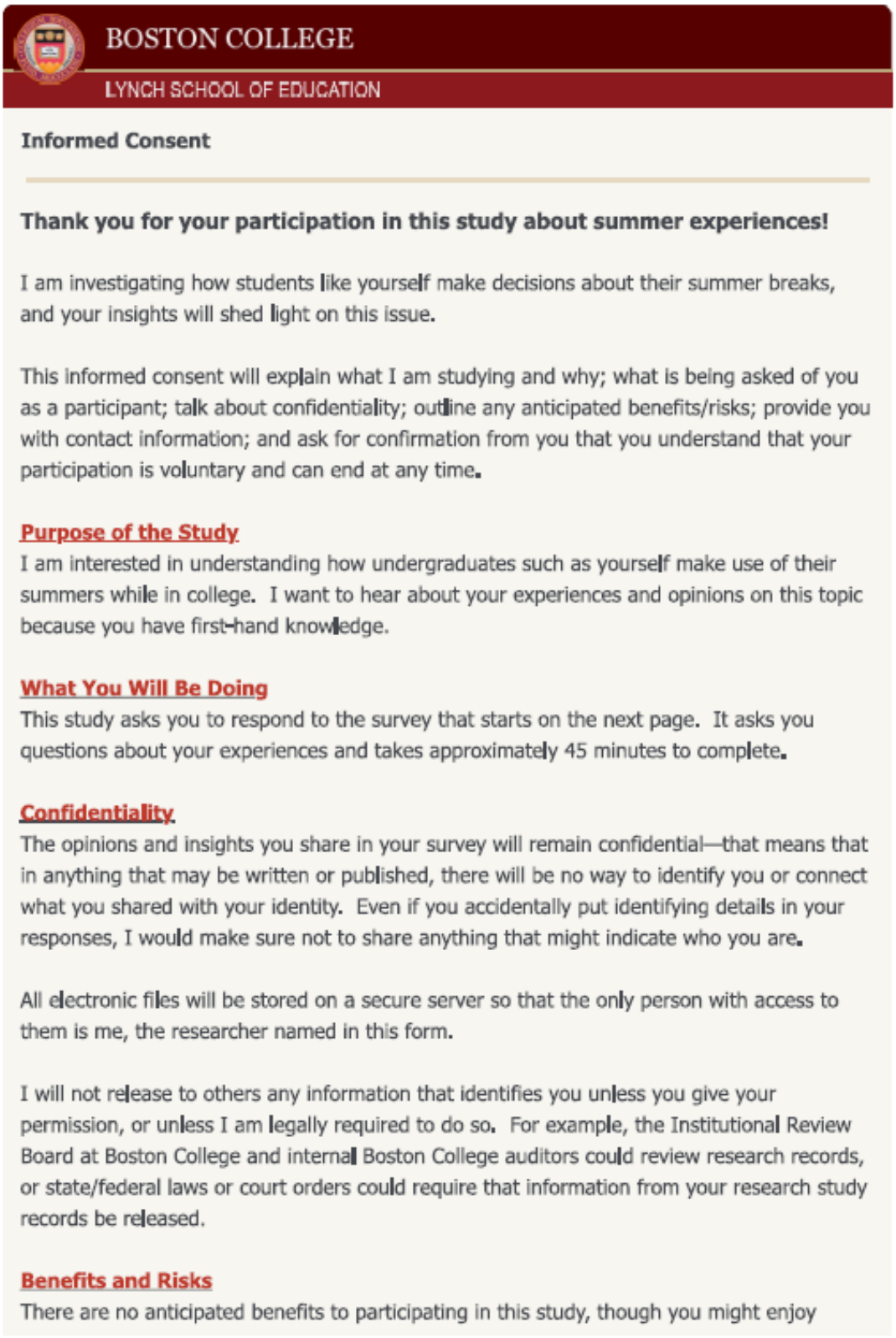


Frame 3


Hierarchy of Summer Experiences:
Were some summer experiences considered more prestigious than others? In your opinion, what was the ranking or hierarchy of summer experiences on campus?
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9?
TIU summer school abroad
TIU summer school on campus
Earning money in a job and living at home
Hanging out at home without earning money
Traveling (does where matter?)
Senior thesis research/work
Internship in certain fields (which are "better" than others?)
Training or camp related to a sport
Something else many do?

Appendix E: Comparison Group Qualtrics Survey

The disparate study instruments in Appendices B, C, and D were combined into a single Qualtrics survey for the comparison group to complete.



BOSTON COLLEGE

LYNCH SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Informed Consent

Thank you for your participation in this study about summer experiences!

I am investigating how students like yourself make decisions about their summer breaks, and your insights will shed light on this issue.

This informed consent will explain what I am studying and why; what is being asked of you as a participant; talk about confidentiality; outline any anticipated benefits/risks; provide you with contact information; and ask for confirmation from you that you understand that your participation is voluntary and can end at any time.

Purpose of the Study

I am interested in understanding how undergraduates such as yourself make use of their summers while in college. I want to hear about your experiences and opinions on this topic because you have first-hand knowledge.

What You Will Be Doing

This study asks you to respond to the survey that starts on the next page. It asks you questions about your experiences and takes approximately 45 minutes to complete.

Confidentiality

The opinions and insights you share in your survey will remain confidential—that means that in anything that may be written or published, there will be no way to identify you or connect what you shared with your identity. Even if you accidentally put identifying details in your responses, I would make sure not to share anything that might indicate who you are.

All electronic files will be stored on a secure server so that the only person with access to them is me, the researcher named in this form.

I will not release to others any information that identifies you unless you give your permission, or unless I am legally required to do so. For example, the Institutional Review Board at Boston College and internal Boston College auditors could review research records, or state/federal laws or court orders could require that information from your research study records be released.

Benefits and Risks

There are no anticipated benefits to participating in this study, though you might enjoy

reflecting on your experiences. Likewise, there are no anticipated risks from involvement in this study.

Contact Information

If you have questions about this research, you may contact me, Erica Brown Soto, at sotoer@bc.edu or (954) 873-8340. If you wish to obtain information, ask questions about your rights as a research participant, talk about confidentiality, or discuss this study with someone other than me, then you may contact the Boston College Office for Research Protections at irb@bc.edu or (617) 552-4778.

Your Consent

Before agreeing to be part of this study, please be sure that you understand what the study is about and ask me to answer any questions that you may have. You will receive a PDF copy of this consent form for your records as well. The Boston College IRB approved this protocol on September 17, 2021.

By clicking on the button below, you indicate that you agree to be in this study; you understand that your participation in the study is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any point; and you are at least 18 years of age.

- ○ I consent, begin the study
- ○ I do not consent

Section 1: Introduction and General Overview Questions

Thank you for sharing about your summer experiences! I'm interested in how students like you use their summers, not only the actual things you do but what goes on behind the scenes: the process, thoughts, feelings, and motivations — in fact, mostly those behind-the-scenes thoughts and decisions. There are no right or wrong answers, and no matter what your story, I am interested in hearing it.

Tell me about what you've done so far during your summer breaks.

What do you think summers are supposed to be for?

Did you always think summers were for this? For example, back in high school, did you have ideas about what you would be doing during the summer once you were in college?

Below are 6 sentences stating various opinions somebody might hold about experiences with summer breaks at college. Please move the slider to show how much you agree or disagree with these statements (0=completely disagree and 10=completely agree).


Completely disagree
Completely agree
0 1 2 3 4 6 7 8 9 10
I'm happy with the ways I've chosen to use my summers.
Virtual Card Sort Activity and Debrief
These 4 questions ask you to think about your motivations, sources of information, messages about what is normal, and how to rank what you should do in the summer. I'd like you to go through and sort the items into the categories that you see on the screen. Please move all the items to a category.
Motivations: Which of the things below influence your decisions when you plan how to spend your summer? How important are they?
Items
Earning money
Wanting to travel
Family pressure or expectations
Adventure or fun
Prestige
Pressure, worry or uncertainty about the future
Resume building
Building foreign language skills
Peer pressure
Needing or wanting a break from school
Gaining research experience
Earning academic credit
Training for a sport
Most important when I plan my summer
Still somewhat important when I plan my summer
Not important when I plan my summer

Sources of Information: Where do you get information and/or advice about what to do with summer breaks? How helpful are those various sources of information?

Items	Most important or helpful sources	Also somewhat important or helpful sources	Provide unhelpful information or advice	These ones do not apply to me
Student services staff or other staff				
Friends at BC who are not roommates				
People in your professional network who are not part of BC				
Roommates				
Romantic partner or significant other				
Professors				
Friends who don't go to BC				
Family members				
Teammates				

Summer Norming: What do hear about how you should use your summers from "official" school sources? What do hear about how you should use your summers from "peer" sources? What about from "family" sources?

	Official school sources		Peer sources		Family sources	
	Yes, they say I should do this	No, I do not hear this from them	Yes, they say I should do this	No, I do not hear this from them	Yes, they say I should do this	No, I do not hear this from them
Spend time with family	○	○	○	○	○	○
Build your resume	○	○	○	○	○	○
Take a vacation	○	○	○	○	○	○
Earn money	○	○	○	○	○	○
Expand your professional network	○	○	○	○	○	○
Build foreign language skills	○	○	○	○	○	○
Work on a senior thesis	○	○	○	○	○	○
Travel	○	○	○	○	○	○
Earn academic credit	○	○	○	○	○	○
Train for a sport	○	○	○	○	○	○

Hierarchy of Summer Experiences: Are some summer experiences considered more prestigious than others? In your opinion, what is the ranking of most prestigious things that you could do with your summer? 1=most prestigious, 8=least prestigious

Training or camp related to a sport

Earn money in a job while living at home

Hang out at home without earning money

Travel somewhere for fun

Go to summer school

Participate in an internship

Senior thesis research or other research

Study abroad

Section 3: Discussion of System Level Factors

Now I want to just ask you a few more questions about summer experiences, zooming out from your individual experiences to talk a bit about system and societal level factors, such as campus culture and the pandemic.

Do you feel like you're a typical BC student in the ways you've used summers? How would you compare yourself to the typical BC student in this area?

Do you talk to your friends about what to do with your summer break? Or younger students? Do you think you've influenced anybody's summer decisions? Do you try to influence anybody's summer decisions?

Have the messages or examples you've received about how to use your summer changed your views at all about what's important in life? Can you tell me about that?

How do you think the pandemic has affected the way students can make use of their summers? Has the pandemic affected your ability to pursue a summer experience? Has the pandemic affected your thoughts about careers or jobs?

I'd like you to imagine that you had no constraints — no limits or concerns relating to family expectations, money, prestige, or security about the future. What would you do with your summers without these constraints?

Have your summer breaks helped you to develop as a leader? Can you explain how that has happened? If not, how might you use your remaining summer breaks to build leadership skills?

Demographics Block

You are almost finished with the survey! This is just a short section asking about demographics and identities that research shows can sometimes impact students' experiences. Remember, anything you share is completely anonymous.

What is your major? If you have more than one, list them both.

Do you have a minor?

- ○ No
- ○ Yes! And it is...

What class year are you in school?

- ○ 2022
- ○ 2023
- ○ 2024
- ○ 2025
- ○ Other

Which racial or ethnic identities do you identify with? You may select multiple responses.

- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ White
- ☐ Other (please fill in here)

Do you consider yourself Hispanic, or Latino/a/x, or none of these?

- ○ No, none of these
- ○ Yes (please enter your preferred term)

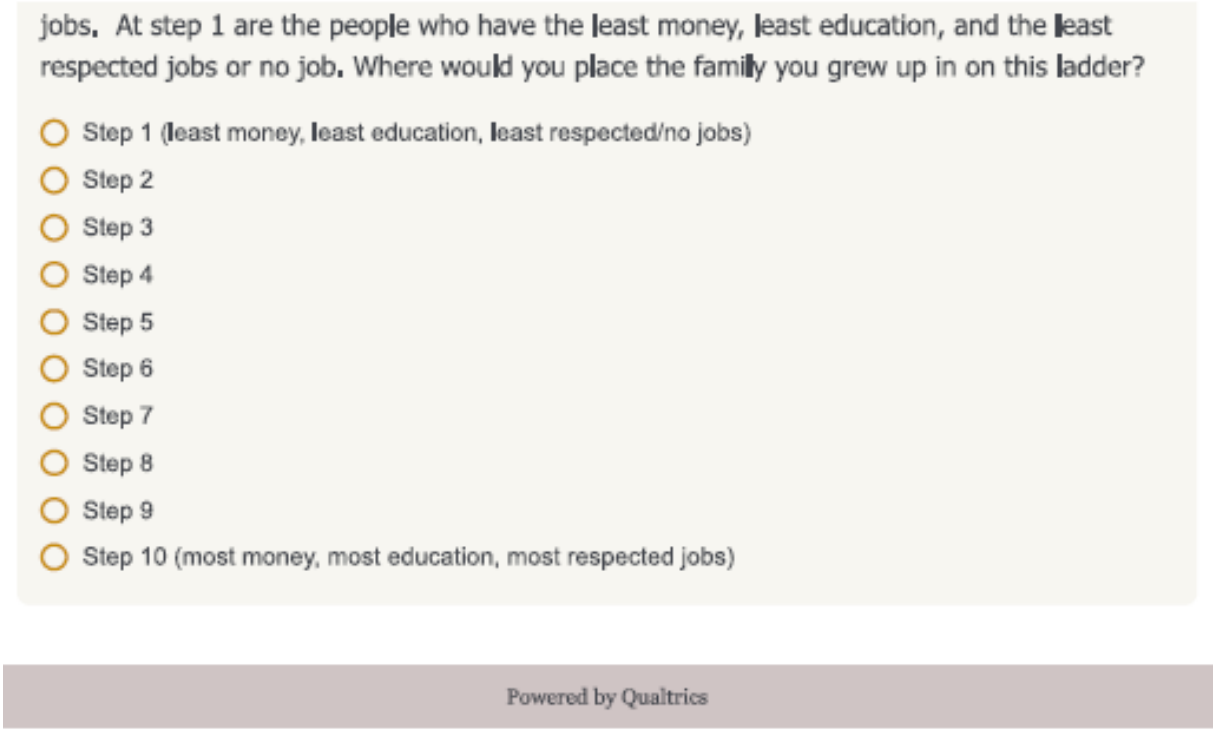
Are you an international student?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

What is your gender?

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Preferred term
- ○ Prefer not to say

Think of a ladder with 10 steps representing where people stand in the United States. At step 10 are people who have the most money, the most education, and the most respected



End of Survey Message Displayed by Qualtrics

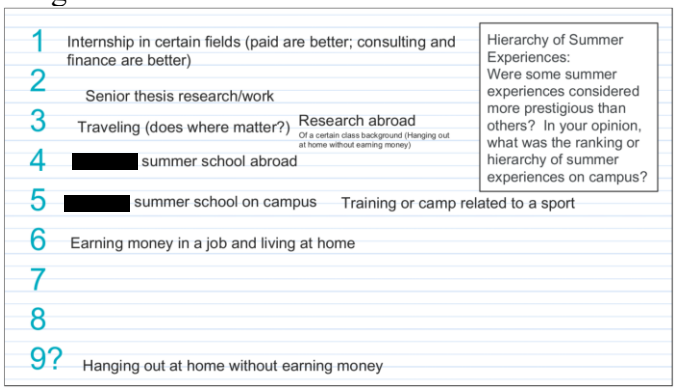
Thank you so much for your responses! I look forward to reading them carefully.

Please go to this link [*hyperlink to a separate Google form*] **now and enter your name so that you can receive credit for completing this assignment.** Using a separate link in this way guarantees that the responses you just provided will remain completely anonymous.

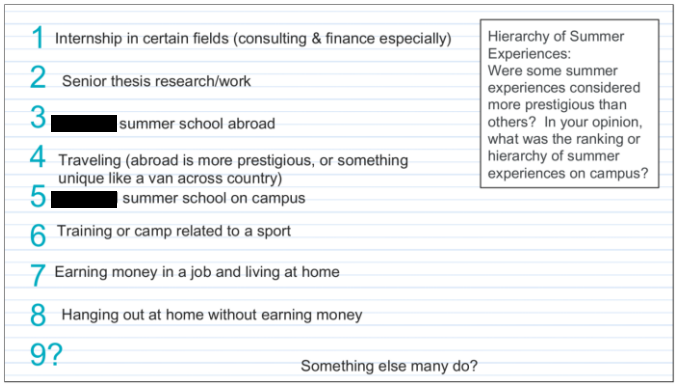
Appendix F: Participants' Prestige Hierarchies

Some items on the card sort frames below have portions of their text obscured because the virtual card sort activities contained the actual name of their campus instead of the anonymized reference to TIU that appears throughout the rest of the dissertation.

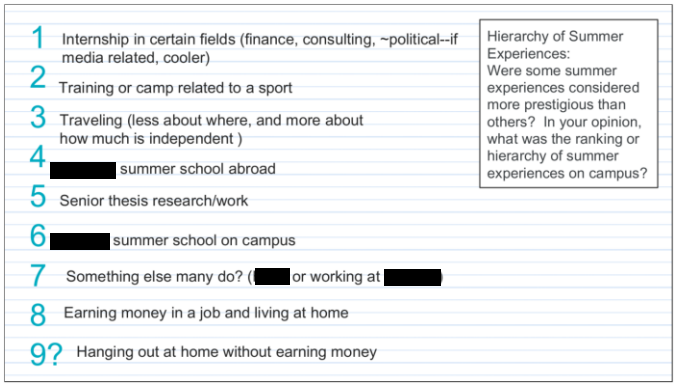
Abigail



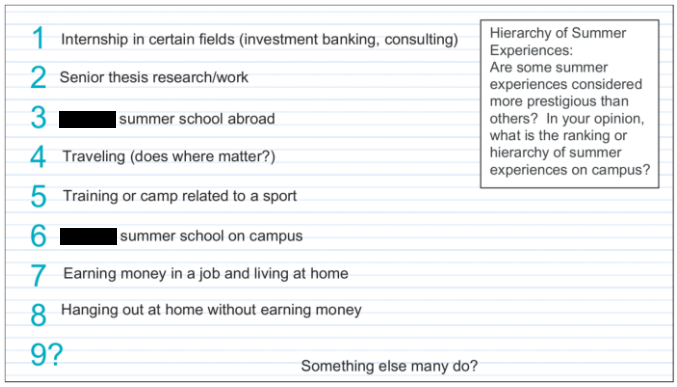
Erin



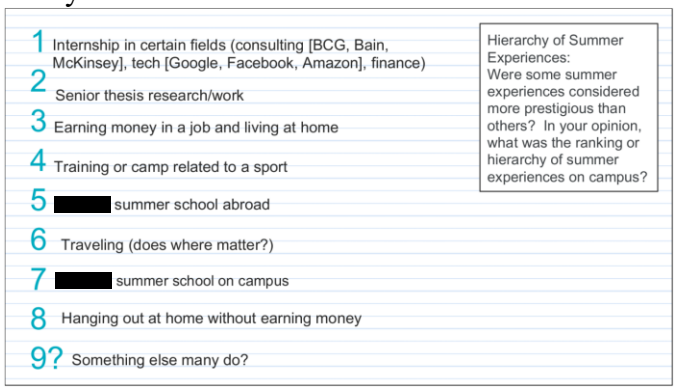
Charlotte



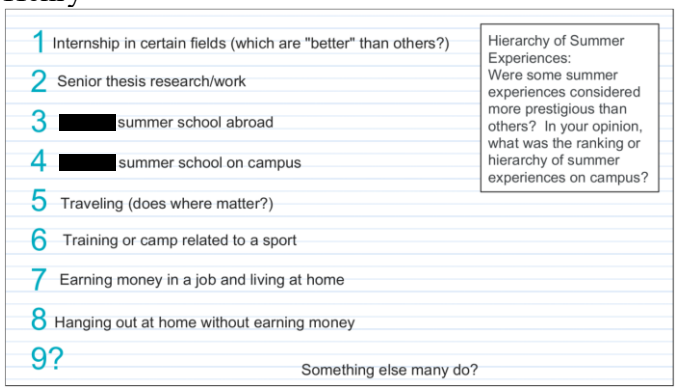
Gretchen



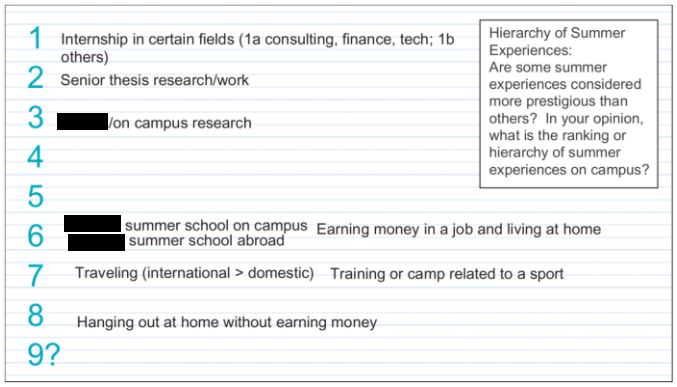
Emily



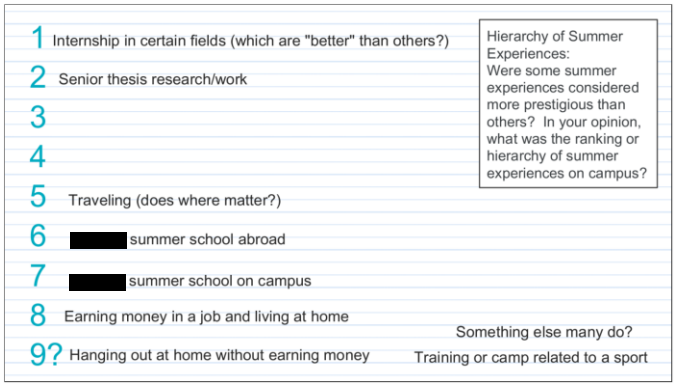
Henry



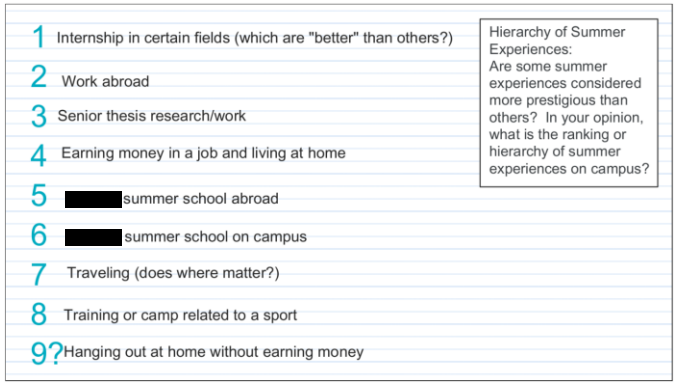
Kristen



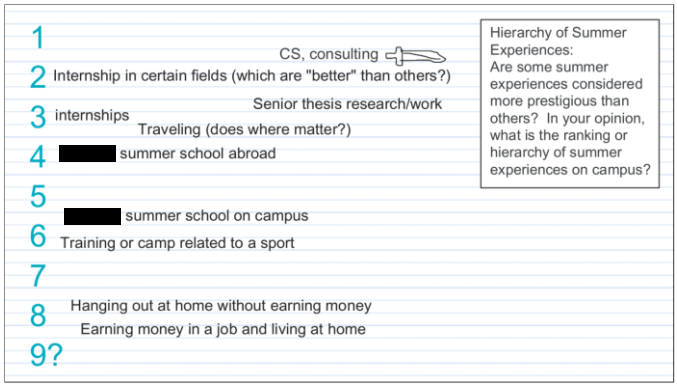
Steve



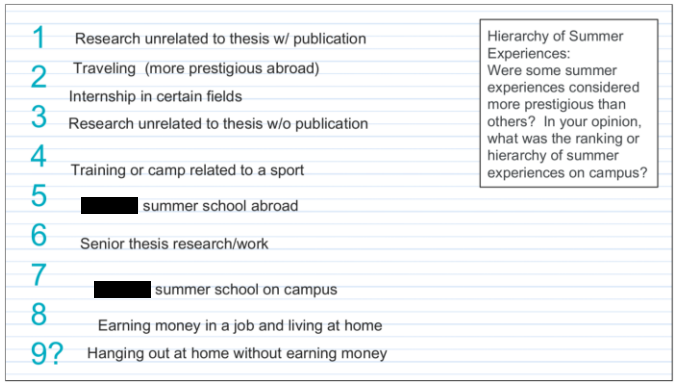
Mo



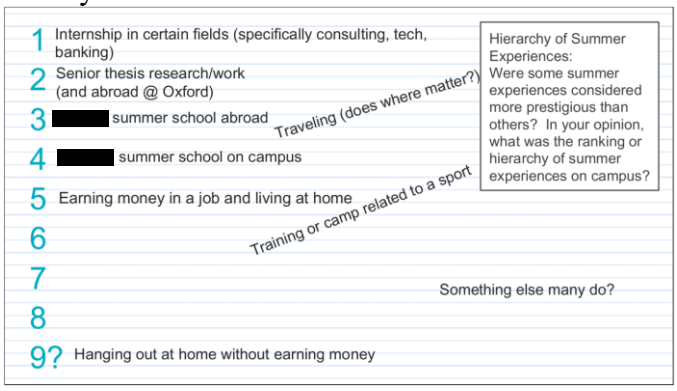
Victoria



Sam



Wendy



Sarah