

Macalester College

DigitalCommons@Macalester College

Sociology Honors Projects

Sociology Department

Spring 5-1-2022

Looking Up and Playing Down: The Paradoxes of Performing Wealth at a Liberal Arts College

Greer Lichtenberg

Macalester College, greerlichtenberg@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/soci_honors



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lichtenberg, Greer, "Looking Up and Playing Down: The Paradoxes of Performing Wealth at a Liberal Arts College" (2022). *Sociology Honors Projects*. 69.

https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/soci_honors/69

This Honors Project is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

Looking Up and Playing Down:
The Paradoxes of Performing Wealth at a Liberal Arts College

By
Greer Lichtenberg

Honors Capstone
Department of Sociology
Macalester College

Spring 2022

Abstract

Colleges and universities bring together people with varied economic backgrounds, but sociologists have demonstrated that social class and family resources stratify students' experience of higher education. In this paper, I examine how consumerist and activist cultures influence the meaning of money, which influences those who perform wealth. Using interview data from twenty-four students at a small liberal arts college in the midwest, I find dynamics of both displaying and playing down wealth which associate with guilt about money and family wealth, and attempts to distance oneself from the "oppressive" economic class. Together, these collective emotions create an overt culture of wealth hiding; however, these efforts fail to reduce the visibility of wealth inequality due to continued displays of wealth through engagement with the consumerist culture.

Introduction

Socioeconomic status plays a significant role in how students experience higher education as it influences everything from access to resources to participation in classes and activities. There has been a great deal of prior research on socioeconomic differences in higher education (e.g., Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Jack 2019; Takacs 2020), but it has not focused on how college students perceive their wealth, given the context of recent social movements calling for wealth redistribution (Lyke 2020; Igra et al. 2021).

To determine how the prevalence of both activism for economic justice and consumerism influence the culture surrounding money, specifically the ways that all students perceive wealth and how wealthy students perform their socioeconomic status, I interviewed twenty-four current students of various backgrounds at the pseudonymous Sinclair College. Sinclair College is a selective private liberal arts college with approximately 2000 students located in the Midwest in an urban area that has seen significant discussion about racial and economic justice in the past few years. Using prior research along with theoretical materials discussing performance theory (Butler 1990; Goffman 1956), I argue that the consumerist culture and prevalence of social movements for income inequality shape how students perform their wealth.

In this paper, I explore the paradox of the consumerist and activist cultures at Sinclair, the guilt of having access to wealth and thus being part of the “oppressive” class, and the ways in which students play down their wealth and display their class privilege. The activism for economic justice at Sinclair is a present part of campus life and draws more student awareness while the consumerist culture’s role is more subtle. These two sets of cultural influences still operate interdependently and this relationship can be seen when observing trends within the student body. Although the combination of the activist and consumerist cultures has created

pressure for students to hide their wealth through inauthentic performances of socioeconomic status in an attempt to avoid being seen as “oppressive” by their peers, many still perform their socioeconomic status through displays of class privilege. This narrative provides insight into how wealthy students approach acknowledging their privilege without sacrificing the benefits of that privilege.

I explore theories surrounding the cultural impacts of both consumption and efforts for economic equality, performance theory and specifically the performance of socioeconomic status, and prior research on misidentifying one’s socioeconomic status in order to better frame my research question: how does the prevalence of activism and consumerism at Sinclair College impact the culture surrounding money, specifically how wealthy students feel about and perform their socioeconomic status? Two paradoxes of wealth in the liberal arts college setting emerged from my research. The first emerges when examining how students view money both as means for consumption and a site of morality, despite the ways that these conflict. This contradiction contributes to a sense of guilt around not wanting to appear oppressive and a culture of wealth hiding among wealthy students. At the same time, however, these students continue to perform their wealth through displays of class privilege, thus exhibiting the second paradox of wealth: how one plays down their wealth while simultaneously engaging in displays of wealth.

Literature Review

Consumption and Activism

To understand Sinclair College as the setting for my research, one must first look at the intersecting cultures of consumerism and activism, specifically activism for economic justice, both on college campuses and in modern society in general. There has been a sharp rise in

consumerism in the United States over the past several decades, and in general, people now are spending more and saving less than in previous generations (Schor 1999). When specifically looking at college students, it is clear that they are spending more on convenience and entertainment (Levesque Ware 2002). Consumerism among current college students can, in part, be attributed to the culture in which they grew up; advertisers of children's products promoted the message that products are necessary for one's social survival (Schor 2005). Furthermore, consumerism has long been linked to pressure to "keep up" with one's peers in terms of what goods one has, and many college students make consumption decisions in order to establish acceptance among peers (Schor 1999; Levesque Ware 2002).

At the same time, however, there is a great deal of activism occurring on college campuses as well, as colleges often serve as a site to address larger societal issues (Reger 2018; Marine and Lewis 2019). This has become increasingly true with the use of social media as a medium for activism as it provides both a forum to learn about issues and a low-risk way to engage in activism (Reynolds and Mayweather 2017; Smith, Williamson, and Bigman 2020). It is also important to note that less affluent students tend to participate in activism at higher rates than their more affluent peers (Ozomy 2012). Similarly, those with experiences relating to systemic racism are more likely to notice and engage in activism surrounding instances of racism at their colleges (Smith et al. 2020). One form of activism that is increasing in popularity, especially among those with leftist and liberal political ideologies, is calls for wealth redistribution and reparations (Lyke 2020). This frequently occurs through crowdfunding websites like GoFundMe which have seen an unprecedented increase in use since March 2020, especially with requests for help with medical bills, lost wages, and food assistance (Igra et al. 2021). When specifically looking at the prevalence of wealth redistribution among young people,

one can turn to student-run mutual aid funds or organizations like Resource Generation, both of which encourage young people with access to generational wealth to examine their privilege and redistribute some of their wealth (Resource Generation).

Given the prevalence of both consumption and activism on college campuses, there has been a recent rise in attempts to be an “ethical” or “green” consumer. While there is still pressure to spend to fit in (Schor 1999; Levesque Ware 2002), it has now shifted to fitting in through giving the appearance of “morally good” consumption choices as there is an increased awareness of the impact of consumption decisions on society (Giesler and Veresiu 2014). People now frequently make consumption decisions with objectives regarding social, environmental, and political change (Connolly and Prothero 2008; Sassatelli 2006; Warde 2015). However, it is important to note that while these choices are often made as a way to assert individual power over broader issues like climate change, they are not actual solutions to the problem at hand (Connolly and Prothero 2008). Thus, it can be argued that these consumption decisions are made with the objective of how one is perceived by others for making that choice, indicating that these decisions are performative.

Perceptions and Performances of Wealth

In order to better understand how the performances of socioeconomic status will be discussed in this paper, one must first look at how both Butler (1990) and Goffman (1956) consider performance. Butler argues that all social categories are performances that occur through the repetition of stylized acts and that this performance is for the “mundane social audience” as well as for the actors themselves (1990). This means that one is performing their socioeconomic status at all times, regardless of whether or not they consider their actions to be a

performance. At the same time, Goffman argues that performances occur when someone's "frontstage" actions which are visible to an audience do not align with their "backstage" actions which occur when no audience is present (1956). Using this theory, I hypothesize that students will consciously attempt to perform a socioeconomic status different from their own in an attempt to conform to the "normal" student identity. Halvorsen (2019) notes that middle-class aspirations to the tastes of upper-classes can lead to a difference in performance between the frontstage and backstage. Thus, two levels of performance can occur simultaneously as one can perform their socioeconomic status both consciously and unconsciously.

The idea of socioeconomic status being a performance one embodies draws on the idea that cultural capital is, in part, embodied, meaning it is expressed through language, mannerisms, and preferences (Bourdieu 1984; Khan 2011). The other aspects of cultural capital—that it is objective through cultural goods or institutionalized through qualifications and credentials—are important as well (Bourdieu 1984). However, they are less significant when looking at the idea of performing one's socioeconomic status as the qualifications that make one an elite have shifted significantly (Khan 2011; Peterson and Kern 1996). In a college setting specifically, cultural capital often manifests through cultural taste and institutional knowledge, also known as the hidden curriculum (Calarco 2018; Jack 2019; Takacs 2020). Other prior research has documented that pressures surrounding money in college, including pressure to act a certain way, have led to negative outcomes for lower-income students, including feelings of isolation and self-sorting by socioeconomic status (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013).

Finally, it is important to understand how people tend to misidentify their socioeconomic statuses either externally to other peers or internally in terms of how they perceive themselves. One may misidentify in an attempt to be seen as ordinary rather than pretentious, to represent

more humble beginnings, or because their extended family history shapes their identity (Friedman, O'Brien, McDonald 2021). Furthermore, many distance themselves from their wealth by being upwardly oriented and comparing themselves to those with more money or by differentiating themselves as “good” rich people rather than “bad” rich people (Sherman 2017). In both of these cases, wealthy individuals create a separate category away from wealth and the stigma associated with it. Cultural capital often manifests through cultural taste and institutional knowledge, also known as the hidden curriculum (Calarco 2018; Jack 2019; Takacs 2020). Other prior research has documented that pressures surrounding money in college, including pressure to act a certain way, have led to negative outcomes for lower-income students, including feelings of isolation and self-sorting by socioeconomic status (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013).

Data and Methods

This project draws from an existing set of interview data that I collected during the summer of 2021 consisting of twenty-four interviews with current students at a small liberal arts college. Interviews proved to be the most effective method of data collection as they allowed students to fully explore concepts around identity and money in a way that survey data could not. Through my interviews, I was able to hear stories and reflections that demonstrated morality and emotional valence in ways that would not have been possible through participant observation. There were several drawbacks to this method of data collection, including partiality and performance for an external audience, yet it still proved to be an effective method nonetheless. The following paragraphs will explore how the data was collected, who is included in the sample, how the sample compares to the overall population of the school, how the interviews were conducted, and what topics were covered.

Participants were sampled to ensure confidentiality while also ensuring a broad representation of diverse student backgrounds. To make it impossible for any individual involved with this project to know the identity, socioeconomic background, and decision to participate or not, my research advisors and I utilized a three-step process to select participants. First, the Admissions and Financial Aid Office created a list of potential participants several times the desired sample size. The list included two hundred students, proportionally stratified on the basis of both their current year in school and their level of financial need. Each of these students was then assigned a case number. The next step was to send a list of code numbers (but not names) and background categories to the research faculty advisor, who then used a random number process to select code numbers while maintaining sample stratification. Throughout the research process, he selected three evenly balanced samples of forty. He then sent the list of code numbers to me, the primary researcher, who had a list of code numbers and names but no demographic information. I then used that information to contact people and invite them to participate. Throughout the process, we ensured that the Admissions and Financial Aid Office would not know which code numbers had participated and that the faculty advisor would not know the names of any students that participated to ensure confidentiality across the board. While I asked students about their financial background in my interviews, including how they self-identify regarding socioeconomic status, I did not receive data about individual student backgrounds.

Figure 1, in Appendix A, demonstrates how the interviewed twenty-four participants compare to the rest of the sample and the school overall in terms of financial need. The highest level of need reflects the lowest socioeconomic status. The sample frame was identical to the student body overall, and the respondents were nearly representative of the college overall in terms of levels of financial need. The only area where the respondent category differs

significantly from the sample is students with low financial need—and higher socioeconomic statuses. This underrepresentation is likely due, in part, to the research topic and that some of the communication was through the Assistant Vice President of Admissions Financial Aid, with whom students not receiving financial aid may be less familiar. Figure 2, in Appendix A, demonstrates the cohort year of the respondents compared to the sample frame and the college overall. All students were either rising sophomores, juniors, or seniors, meaning they were about to begin their 2nd, 3rd, or 4th/5th+ year in college. Much like Figure 1, Figure 2 demonstrates no difference between the Sample Frame and the student body overall.

The interviews were conducted over Zoom to ensure that students could participate regardless of their geographic location. Most interviews took between forty and eighty minutes. The interviews covered the following topics: the transition to college, academics, utilization of campus resources, social interactions with peers, the balance between school and other aspects of college life, socioeconomic status both in general and in relation to peers, money as a barrier to access, conversations around money on campus, performativity when it comes to money, and potential solutions to the issues discussed in the interview. A complete list of interview topics can be found in Appendix B below.

To judge how experiences differ based on income, I asked each research participant how they self-identified in terms of their socioeconomic status. I also obtained broader information about levels of financial need of the participants overall. While self-identification alone can pose a challenge as some interviewees may misidentify themselves, the combination of these two data sources provides a better understanding of the interviewees' incomes. Furthermore, self-identification provides insight into how each participant sees themselves and their place in the

college community. Figure 3, in Appendix A, displays how each interviewee self-identified in terms of their socioeconomic status.

Although it's not possible to draw a one-to-one comparison of income and levels of financial need between Figure 1 and Figure 3, it appears that fewer respondents self-identified at the lowest income levels compared to what may be expected based on the proportion who were in the highest financial need levels, indicating that several interviewees may have identified as middle-class when that is not necessarily the case. This remains consistent with what Sherman (2017) describes regarding the ghost category of the middle-class where many feel strong ties to that identity. In this case, some interviewees may identify with the middle-class as a way to escape the stigma associated with their own socioeconomic status.

Given the limitations of these two data sources on family income, I used self-identified income levels as a guide to understanding student experiences rather than as a firm marker of differing experiences. In general, I grouped my results into three categories: upper or upper-middle-class, middle-class, and low-income or lower-middle-class, acknowledging that the experiences of self-identified middle-class students may be more heterogeneous.

Findings

This section uses data from my interviews to examine the culture around wealth at Sinclair College. I explore how spending is seen as part of the “normal” college experience and the barriers that that poses for lower-income students as well as the culture of activism for economic equality and the social pressures associated with it. These two factors create a culture where students feel pressure to make morally good consumption decisions to avoid confronting their role in systems of oppression. I also explore how this specific facet of the campus activist

culture contributes to a sense of guilt felt by wealthy students which contributes to their separating themselves from familial wealth and signaling to peers that they are spending their money in a way that aligns with the values they want to associate with. Wealthy students inauthentically perform their socioeconomic status by playing down the amount of money they have through their consumption decisions, performative anxiety about money, comparing themselves to those with even more money, and connecting to lower-income peers through highlighting shared experiences. At the same time, however, wealthy students still display their wealth through the brands they own and the experiences they have, as well as simply not having to worry about money at school.

Sinclair College and the “Normal” College Student

Money plays a significant role in defining student experiences; however, this role goes beyond simply using money to purchase things. In addition to seeing money as a means for acquiring goods, services, and experiences, students see money as a site of morality, related to activism for wider causes. Sinclair students tend to frequently spend money on food, clothes, and experiences, all of which are major parts of the “normal” college experience. This “normal” college experience is a space where consumption is seen as unproblematic and exempt from many of the ethical considerations associated with money. At the same time, the college’s strong activist culture plays a major role in how students see themselves and their relationships with money. Many students attempt to strike a balance between consumption and mortality through their decisions surrounding money and engagement in the activist culture, and, as a result, many students seek out the identity of a “normal” college student in order to avoid the stigma of money.

Normalized Consumption. Consumption plays a key role in the “normal” experience at Sinclair College, despite the fact that some students face barriers to it. When reflecting on when she and her friends tend to spend money on campus, an interviewee who identified as upper-middle-class noted a broader trend surrounding spending. She notes that,

I think with money, there’s a lot of spending; some is in the sense of how going on Target runs like “Oh, I’m going on a Target run does anyone want anything” or “I’m going to CVS.” It’s very normalized for people to go there weekly and buy snacks or necessities and that kind of stuff... even with the dining hall food being dining hall food, it’s very normalized to just be like “Yeah screw this I’m gonna go buy food off-campus. And so it’s very normalized to consume.

Here, it is clear that there is some expectation that all students are consuming in the form of regular trips to Target or CVS or meals off-campus. While she does not explicitly assign a moral value to this consumption, her use of the word “want” indicates that she sees this consumption as frivolous to some degree. At the same time, however, her specification of “snacks or necessities” and the implication that the dining hall food is at times insufficient for her needs indicate that she believes that this type of consumption is justified. This was a perspective echoed by many other interviewees. One lower-middle-class interviewee, in particular, reflected on the necessity of spending money to socialize, explaining how she views costs associated with meals off-campus and Uber rides as the cost of admission into the social scene and sharing, “I’m not mad about it... It’s what you do when you socialize.” Even if she’d prefer not to spend this money, it appears that she understands that this is a key part of socializing in college. However, she did go on to note that she and her close friends tend to pick less expensive options like McDonald’s when they go out to eat, indicating that within the spending that is considered part of being a

“normal” college student, there is some variation in the amount of money students are willing to spend to achieve this sense of normality.

Although students of all income levels noted that some level of spending and consumption was necessary, those identifying as low-income, lower-middle-class, and middle-class were far more likely to discuss barriers to that normalized spending. One interviewee who identified as middle-class shared how she navigated social situations where spending money was expected by spending less compared to her friends while still spending some. She noted examples of only buying some groceries at Whole Foods or one or two items of clothing from a store rather than more. This example indicates that consuming to some degree is expected and necessary, but again, there is some room for variation in the amount. While she could fully participate in these elements of a “normal” college experience, her experience still differed from her peers. An interviewee who identified as lower-middle-class reflected on a similar expectation of spending but a different result. She shared that,

I feel like a lot of people in Sinclair have a lot of money. And that can be really overwhelming sometimes, like, in certain situations, when they just have the funds to do things that I just can't. Just like, I guess I'm thinking about off-campus, like we were talking about earlier, a lot of my friends with more money will be going places off campus, doing things off-campus, like going out for meals and things like that. But that's not really something I can afford on a day-to-day basis.

In this case, money poses a significant barrier to the normalized consumption that many students engage in. There is a sense that the type of spending discussed here is seen by most wealthier students as normal rather than frivolous or extravagant. However, her experiences reflect a larger trend of financial barriers to the normalized consumption that many Sinclair students engage

with. While spending is seen as “normal,” and is in some ways essential to engage in the social culture at Sinclair, there are still financial barriers to this experience.

Activist Culture. Sinclair College is known for its activist culture, even citing “service to society” in the school’s mission statement. In recent years, there have been numerous protests and events held to raise awareness of issues relating to racial and economic justice as well as widespread, student-run mutual aid efforts. Students frequently express left-leaning and anti-capitalist viewpoints in both academic and non-academic settings. As this culture of activism, specifically for issues relating to economic justice, is fundamental to the broader culture of the school, students face increased pressure to align themselves with those values. When reflecting on this dynamic, one interviewee explained, “I think because Sinclair has such a reputation of being liberal and politically active. Sometimes there's more of a pressure to perform that way, even if people don't actually hold those commitments.” She draws attention to the connection between the activist culture and the need to appear socially aware. This pressure to conform to Sinclair’s activism culture manifests itself in the ways students discuss money and present their own financial statuses. The normalization of appearing socially aware has led to a culture of hiding wealth, as one upper-class interviewee explained:

And a lot of people tend to keep, like, keep stuff like that a secret. I don't know why, but they just do. And then when they notice that other people are doing it, too, it just perpetuates. I don't think there are freshmen coming into Sinclair feeling like, “Oh, I better not tell anybody that my family owns [a major company].” I don't really think that they're doing that. I think that they see how people feel about capitalism here and then like, are like, okay, so I can't be oppressive. It's like, avoid seeming oppressive, even though you can't control, you know, what family you're born into, or what city you're born in.

In this quote, it is clear that the campus activist culture, specifically many students' opinions on capitalism, is directly connected to the tendency to hide one's wealth. As a result, many wealthier students develop a mindset of avoiding "seeming oppressive" by performing as a different socioeconomic status. As stated here, one way to achieve this is through not sharing that your family owns a major company. This interviewee notes that in her experience, at least, this culture of wealth hiding only begins once students have spent some time on campus and observed the political viewpoints of their peers. It should also be noted that in her critique of the campus culture of wealth hiding, this interviewee, who identifies as upper-class, makes an effort to justify her and her peers' wealth by claiming that one cannot control their family's financial situation. Nonetheless, Sinclair's activist culture has directly contributed to a culture of wealth-hiding on campus.

The Paradox of Consumption and Activism. Sinclair College is an example of an elite institution that breeds anti-elitism. Often, a great deal of privilege is required to be admitted to and thrive at a rigorous college, but the school simultaneously brands itself as an equalizer where everyone has a chance to succeed. This attitude echoed in the contradiction between the consumerist and activist cultures. While many students continue to engage in consumerist behaviors that require a level of wealth, there is also a widespread culture condemning that wealth in the first place. This paradox is exemplified through the ways that students attempt to continue to consume while making morally superior consumption decisions due to the pressure to engage in ethical consumption. One lower-middle-class interviewee explains this dynamic, stating,

Yeah, something I think is really interesting is thrifting culture at Sinclair in regards to this, in that it's sort of a flex [a way of showing off] to have thrifted all your clothes or, you know, gotten them for free or swapped them with other people. And so half of

someone's outfit is thrifted and vintage, and half of it is designer or it's from really upscale thrift stores where, you know, it's carefully curated and everything is like \$80.

Many students view thrifting or swapping clothes, a more environmentally sustainable and affordable practice, as the ideal. At the same time, however, owning designer or vintage clothing is still seen as desirable. Although wardrobes are carefully curated, students only discuss the items that they acquired through these more "ethical" or "morally good" ways of consuming. By thrifting, students can still engage with the normalized consumption while still appearing socially aware. Yet, the ability to combine swapped and luxury items or even to frequently go thrift shopping in the first place requires some level of wealth that all students may not have access to. The idea of "morally good" consumption also appears in the earlier quote where an upper-middle-class interviewee described the way she spent money at Target on necessities rather than more luxurious items but still shopped at Target or CVS fairly regularly.

This paradox also emerges through the ways that students attempt to universalize a financial experience by focusing on the ways that everyone spends their money. When reflecting on the conversations he and his peers have about money, an interviewee who identifies as upper-class explains, "We've got that kind of, 'Oh, we're all broke college kids' vibe... So like, you know, we all kind of just make jokes like, we all had to take out a little bit of student loans. Oh, we all have to pay our apartment rent, like it seems very similar in that way." Here, the interviewee describes a shared understanding of everyone's status as a "broke college student," as well as a culture that encourages discussions around that lack of money, juxtaposing the idea that college is the great equalizer with the fact that it is also involved in reproducing systems that maintain privilege. This identity of the "broke college student" is used by many as a form of distancing themselves from wealth.

The prominence of consumerism and activism as cultural ideas on Sinclair's campus determines a great deal of how students act and identify. Yet, these ideas can sometimes be in opposition to each other. For example, although consuming is seen as normal, hiding one's wealth and taking on the label of "broke college student" is also a prevalent experience. Students aim to spend money the "right" way or spend the "right" amount of money to engage with the consumerist culture in a way where they are able to appear to remain in alignment with the values of social justice and anti-capitalism. It is important to keep this paradox in mind to explore the culture surrounding money at Sinclair as it contributes to a sense of guilt for having money that many wealthy students face.

Guilt Surrounding Money

One key result of this paradox is the guilt that many wealthy students face which can be directly connected to the desire to avoid seeming "oppressive" discussed earlier. In some cases, this stemmed directly from the economic justice activism culture on campus while in other cases, there seemed to be a fear of lower-income students' resentment that played a role as well. One interviewee who identified as upper-class explained that,

I mean, I don't think anyone should be looked down on for how much money they have. But I also understand that you know, maybe for someone who is lower-income, there can easily be resentment towards someone who kind of does have things handed to them like I have. It's not something that I really shouldn't be taking it personally because it's just kind of the way things are. Sometimes it's gonna be hard to look at someone and see how easily they got the same thing you have to work really hard for.

Here, she begins by specifying that she does not think "anyone should be looked down on for how much money they have" although neither of us had mentioned anything to the contrary in

the conversation so far. Her use of the phrases “looked down on” and “resentment” rather than “envied” or something similar is especially interesting; it indicates a belief that students from higher-income families receive negative attention for their socioeconomic status. She goes on to explain that she feels that a sense of resentment can exist but then quickly makes an effort to distance herself from this sense of guilt surrounding money by clarifying that she doesn’t take it personally. While she does not mention the activist culture directly here, it can be assumed that it plays a role in her assumption that there is a sense of resentment towards wealthy students at Sinclair.

Another interviewee who identified as upper-class mentions the activist culture, specifically the calls to redistribute wealth, stating,

Sometimes it does make me uncomfortable how... recently, there's been a lot of posting on social media about different charities people can donate to and kind of seeing it as an obligation like, well, you have money, so you should be donating. Like, it's not my money. It's my parents' money. That's something I think that Sinclair students don't always separate, that there is a difference between if someone's family has money and they have money. I'm, like, I've seen some posts that are like, you should be donating your money. And I definitely do donate to different things. But I don't think I donate as much as people expect. Because like I said, it's not my money. It's my parents' money, right?

She initially notes that these calls for wealth redistribution, especially the fact that donating to charity if you have money is an “obligation” makes her uncomfortable. She goes on to draw a distinction between *her* money and *her parents'* money, claiming that Sinclair students often do not recognize this. She does not mention the inherent privilege that comes along with one’s parents having money or having access to that generational wealth and the benefits associated with it. Interestingly, she does hastily add that she does “donate to different things,” indicating

that she wants to avoid being seen as part of the oppressive group, even in the context of the interview. Her comment also indicates that donating is, to some degree, publicly known and that she cannot simply claim that she donated to escape the sense of guilt. As donating is seen as a morally “good” way to spend one’s money, this perspective highlights the conflict relating to “ethical” ways to spend money discussed earlier.

Another example of these efforts to avoid being seen as oppressive can be found in the following story that an upper-class interviewee shared about their other wealthy peers who have started GoFundMe campaigns for their own needs and unexpected expenses:

And they are claiming that, knowing their privilege, they're claiming that they're going to give a small percentage of it to a Black Lives Matter fund. And to me, like, like, that kind of epitomizes it, where, like, there's this sense that, like, they know that what they're doing is a little bit wrong and profitable. So they're gonna do like a virtue-signaling like, Yeah, well, I'm giving part of it to charity, but then they're, like, still doing the whole thing.

This interviewee explains how wealthy students walk the line between addressing their own needs and avoiding the sense of guilt that comes along with having money or the social stigma of seeming oppressive. By donating a portion of the money they make to a nonprofit that aligns with the values of the campus activist culture, these students attempt to acknowledge their privilege without making any sacrifices for their own needs. This “virtue-signaling” indicates how performative this aspect of money at Sinclair can be as it seems to cater only to the reputation and needs of the wealthy students who have started the GoFundMe campaigns. By including the fact that they’ll donate some of the money, they are demonstrating that while they may be wealthy, they are one of the “good ones” and thus not part of the “oppressive” group.

In all these cases, an attitude parallel to the idea that racism is the fault of a few bad racists rather than a system where all are complicit emerges. By noting how they “shouldn’t take it [critiques of the privilege associated with generational wealth] personally” or claiming that they do donate to various causes, all of these students are attempting to distance themselves from the idea of being an “oppressive” wealthy student. Many wealthy students feel pressure to align themselves ideologically with the left-leaning political positions perpetuated by the activist culture, but feel a sense of guilt as the anti-capitalist viewpoints indicate that they are in the “oppressive” group. As a result, many attempt to distance themselves from their wealth by altering their frontstage performance to be that of a financial status other than their own.

Inauthentic Performances of Financial Status

Throughout my interviews, I noticed many ways in which wealthy students inauthentically perform their socioeconomic status, meaning that they act as if they have less money than they do or play down their wealth in various ways, specifically in choices related to consumption, performative anxiety about money, comparisons to those with more, and connecting to the experiences of their lower-income peers. In these cases, the frontstage performance reflects a lower socioeconomic status than the student truly has or would perform without an audience present. The following section explores both how students of various income levels observed this playing down of wealth and how wealthy students described their own inauthentic performances.

Students inauthentically perform their socioeconomic status through how they portray their and their families’ choices about consumption. Many interviewees who identified as upper or upper-middle-class told me how their parents chose to spend money on necessities rather than

luxuries in an attempt to justify and play down their wealth. One upper-class interviewee explained, “I went to boarding school, but a lot of people say that they don't realize that I have money just because I don't talk about it, I guess, or my family doesn't go on like a ton of trips, and we don't live in like a huge house or anything just because, like I said, they put all their money into my and my brother's education.” Here, she draws a distinction between two types of spending and how her parents primarily spend money on education in the form of private college and boarding school rather than on a “ton of trips” or a “huge house.” By justifying her parents’ spending choices as necessary and claiming that her family consumes fewer luxuries than they could, she effectively plays down her wealth by showing that her family uses it in “good” ways, thus indicating that she is not part of the group of “oppressive” rich people. Other interviewees were able to achieve a similar outcome through their own choices related to consumption. When describing the spending habits of Sinclair students overall, one middle-class interviewee explained, “If they ever need money, they have it, but money isn't something that is spoken about a lot. But yeah, they're not stingy but more frugal,” indicating that while most students have money, they are unlikely to spend it. Another interviewee echoed this point, citing the example of wealthy students who purposefully don't wear shoes to class. Khan (2011) notes many similar instances of students clearly having money but making choices that indicate that they don't; he describes one student who wore shoes held together by duct tape and another who falsely claimed he buys his shirts at the Salvation Army. Many of the inauthentic performances of class displayed by Sinclair students echo these examples. Another key way this manifests is through thrifting clothing and how it is often seen as the ideal way to acquire clothes. In all of these cases, along with Khan (2011), the choices that students make or claim to make regarding consumption aid them in their inauthentic performance of socioeconomic status. By

demonstrating that they either do not have money to spend or spend money only on necessary or morally “good” purchases, these students effectively alter their frontstage performance to be one of a lower socioeconomic status.

The other key way that wealthy students tend to play down their socioeconomic status is through performative anxiety surrounding money. By examining this from the perspective of individuals and peers, one can gain a better understanding of why this performative anxiety occurs. An interviewee who identifies as upper-class described her anxiety about money as a “privileged money stress,” explaining,

Sometimes I get very stressed out, and I wouldn't do stuff because I wouldn't want to spend money, but that's not really like... I mean, you know, we're all broke college students who don't have that much money, but it's more of irrational stress. It's never like the genuine stress that a lot of people deal with. So yeah, it's like money stress, but it's like privileged money stress.

She shared how she would sometimes choose to miss out on social events due to her anxiety surrounding money and commented on how she believes everyone is a “broke college student” with limited financial resources as described earlier. She went on to differentiate between her own “irrational stress” and what she describes as the “genuine stress” that those with fewer resources may have. While it may not be desirable for her to spend money, it is still feasible, a key difference between her experience and that of some of her peers. Still, she legitimizes her own anxiety while acknowledging her privilege. The attitude of “we're all broke college students” indicates performative anxiety about money as well. An upper-middle-class interviewee notes similar performative anxiety around money demonstrated by her peers, explaining,

When I've talked to friends and acquaintances about how we need to go shopping for clothes for the new season or whatever, a lot of people will talk about how they can only afford thrift stores, fast-fashion brands, or anything that's really cheap. And how that makes it kind of hard to shop the way they want. And I think that's a common experience among a lot of people. But I know, with regard to their use of money, and saying, "Oh, I can only go to these places, because I don't have that much money to spend," that sometimes that can be inaccurate... I feel like some people will exaggerate their situation, where maybe they don't have the flexibility that they want, but it's not necessarily as bad of a situation as they make it out to be.

This story provides another example of the performative anxiety surrounding money as her peers frequently comment about how limiting their financial situations are but don't always act as if that is the case. She notes that some of her friends will exaggerate the extent of their financial situation, likely to conform to the idea of being a "broke college student," as described earlier. Other interviewees described similar instances of performative anxiety surrounding money including while shopping, when sharing food with friends, or when discussing housing costs. Interviewees who were what Sherman (2017) described as "upward-oriented" often noted their own wealth before quickly bringing up someone with more money, either a famous rich family or a friend's parent with a high paying job. One interviewee described her income level by saying,

Um, I guess I'd be technically maybe, either upper-middle or technically upper-class... But during high school, I went to school with like, really, really rich people like one of the kids I went to school with, like, lived a couple of houses down from like the Walgreens family as in like Walgreens pharmacy, or like, they were like old oil money. So I don't really think of myself as having money.

As the interview went on, she shared that her family has a successful company and that she pays full tuition at Sinclair, both of which indicate that she is more likely upper-class than upper-

middle-class. Still, when comparing herself to her friends who live near the Walgreens family or who have large amounts of generational wealth, she feels she may be closer to upper-middle-class. Since her circle of peers in high school skewed so far towards extreme wealth, her perception of what constitutes upper-class versus upper-middle-class has been distorted and she no longer thinks of herself or her family as “having money.” Even at Sinclair College where there appears to be more socioeconomic diversity than her high school, this perspective on her own wealth remains consistent. An interviewee who identified as upper-middle-class explained his family’s wealth compared to his peers, stating, “I think I’m probably towards the more money side, but there are a lot of people that are a lot more well off, like one of my friends, his parents are like Washington DC lawyers. His family is definitely a lot more wealthy.” Although he first acknowledged his privileged position compared to some peers, he quickly cited an example of someone with even more money. Several other wealthy interviewees used this same strategy, sharing that their friends’ parents were doctors, lawyers, and Hollywood directors. In all of these cases, students were able to distance themselves from the position of having extreme wealth and therefore the guilt associated with it. One key example of this came up in a conversation about negative perceptions of wealthy families with an upper-class interviewee. She explained that “It’s not really something that I’m offended about, because I think that if I was going to be kind of offended about that, like, generational wealth thing... It’s really not about us. So when I get offended, usually I’m like, it’s really not about me, it’s more about like, you know, with like Trump, where his father gave him like, a small loan of a million dollars right.” Here, she differentiates between her family and Donald Trump’s “small loan of a million dollars” when it comes to generational wealth. By shifting the negative perceptions of wealth from herself to Trump, she plays into the narrative of a few “bad” rich people and disregards the privilege

associated with her generational wealth. This example clearly demonstrates what many upper and upper-middle-class interviewees seemed to believe: one cannot be viewed as “oppressive” if they themselves are not part of the oppressive group. By shifting the responsibility associated with wealth to someone with even more money, these students were able to remove some of the guilt as well.

Another way that wealthy students can justify their family wealth is by connecting aspects of their identity to lower-income peers. One interviewee shared a story of a roommate, explaining that she was “very unclear about her origins. She's a child of divorce, and her father is poor, but her mother is immensely wealthy. So she kind of drew a lot on identity politics. She sort of likes the identity of having a poor father who lives in a poor part of a poor city or something. But then she very actively ignores the part of her history and identity that is very wealthy and privileged.” This student was likely attempting to justify her mother’s background by drawing attention to her father’s background instead. Regardless of how effective this strategy was, it reflects a trend of downplaying wealth by playing up other aspects of one’s identity. Another interviewee shared a similar conflict between her and some wealthier friends, explaining,

So, it’s hard sometimes because I feel like they kind of take my experience with things and, not absorb it, but kind of take away from my experience just because they kind of sometimes put me and them in kind of the same group or category about some things... It’s kind of taking away from my experiences. Like my one friend who went to a really nice public high school in a really nice area being like, “Oh, yeah, I went to public school too.” And, but it's not the same level of public school that I went to, but she’s that kind of like making us parallel.

She notes how her wealthier friends often connect with her on shared aspects of their backgrounds, such as attending public school, and how she feels that that detracts from her

experiences there. It appears that these friends, much like the student described in the previous quote, are attempting to create a new category, away from wealth, by playing up their experiences that are parallel with their lower-income peers. By connecting with those who have lower socioeconomic statuses, these students attempt to separate themselves from their wealth and from being members of the oppressive group.

Wealthy students tend to inauthentically perform their financial situation through choices surrounding consumption and performative anxiety about money. This phenomenon of playing down one's wealth can be directly connected to the activist culture and the desire to not seem oppressive while still performing the consumerist culture as discussed in previous sections. Wealthy students are wary about displaying their wealth as it may lead to negative social consequences and thus hide it through performative measures. This playing down of wealth is not the only way that wealthy students perform their socioeconomic statuses as they also do so through intentional and unintentional displays of class privilege.

Performing Wealth: Displays of Class Privilege

Wealthy students and their peers noted numerous displays of class privilege, categorized here as either bold or subtle displays. Bold displays include any outward displays of wealth through things like brands, experiences, or freedom to spend large amounts of money while subtle displays focus more on the privileges that wealthy students have in terms of access to money. Both types of displays complicate the narrative of wealth hiding presented thus far.

Bold displays of class privilege primarily fell into three categories: displays through brands, experiences, and freedom to spend. One lower-middle-class interviewee explained that they primarily recognized wealthier students through, "the items they have, what clothes they

have, what kind of technology, how updated it is.” Some of the brands and items that several students mentioned associating with wealthy students on campus included Canada Goose Jackets, Patagonia, Macbooks, and Airpods. As these products are all extremely distinctive and the general price point is fairly well known, having any of these products immediately demonstrates some degree of wealth and sets those students apart. When it comes to displays of wealth through experiences, many low-income, lower-middle-class, and middle-class interviewees shared that they frequently felt alienated from their peers when they discussed vacations, gap years, or other expensive experiences. One interviewee who identified as lower-middle-class shared,

That made me very uncomfortable, especially first-year trying to balance that as these peers and the people I was meeting and hoping to be friends with, all share such phenomenal experiences of like, the gap year they spent in Argentina, or how they always travel with their parent who's a college professor to their conferences all over the world, and like, they've been to eight countries.

These students discussed their unique experiences freely, likely not recognizing how a story about an expensive family vacation was also a display of their class privilege. This was also the case for students who freely spent large amounts of money without much worry. Another lower-middle-class interviewee explained that,

It's just really, it was really interesting to see how people were so willing to just spend money. They had financial freedom, right? They want to spend \$50 to order food, and they do it. To me, I'm like, \$50? Hell no! But for some of these people, it's really easy for them to spend money. I just noticed that, to me, every purchase is like, hey, think twice about it, but I think the culture on campus is like, hey, if you need to spend money, spend it, which is not an option that everyone has.

Here, she notes how so many of her peers have “financial freedom” and cites the example of spending \$50 to order food which is not an option she feels she has. She goes on to cite a disconnect in campus culture where spending money is seen as the norm but is not always possible for everyone. When comparing this perspective to that of the upper-class student who recognized her “privileged money stress,” one can see the difference between the desire to spend money and the feasibility of spending money. This tendency to spend money freely connects back to the culture of consumerism discussed earlier but exposes how this is only available to wealthy students. Wealthy students display their class privilege in bold ways through their possessions, experiences, and financial freedom. It is important to note that nearly all of the interviews where bold displays of class privilege were discussed were with low-income, lower-middle-class, or middle-class interviewees when discussing the broader campus culture surrounding money. This indicates that upper-middle and upper-class interviewees may view these displays of wealth as normal or not spend much time thinking about these displays of class privilege.

Interviewees who self-identified as upper or upper-middle class tended to identify more subtle displays of their class privilege such as not having to worry about paying for school and rent or not having to work as much as their peers. One upper-middle-class interviewee notes that he is in a privileged position compared to some of his peers and that that has a positive impact on his academic performance, explaining,

When I think about the fact that neither I nor my housemates are paying our rent, our parents are, I think about how there are definitely students here where that's not the case, like their families can't afford to pay their rents for their apartments. I think that's definitely something that affects my ability to focus on academics and not have to worry about money.

Another upper-middle-class interviewee echoed this perspective, stating, “But I’m lucky that my parents helped pay for my college and they have enough money to help me pay for my textbooks because some semesters it’s way worse than others.” We went on to discuss the importance of having textbooks for academic success. In both of these cases, the students acknowledged that they felt privileged to not have to worry about money for necessities like rent and textbooks.

Another interviewee, identifying as upper-class, reflected a similar privilege in the discussion of her part-time job. She explained, “I do have a job, but really I don’t work that often, and it’s like eight hours a week so I have money to do stuff for social stuff and my parents are able to, you know, pay for an apartment for me and stuff like that.” Here, she specifically notes that the purpose of her job is to have money for social events rather than necessities. In all three of these cases, the interviewees did not have to worry about money which in itself is a display of class privilege. It is also important to note that all of these subtle displays were brought up by upper and upper-middle-class interviewees while all of the bold displays discussed in the prior paragraph were brought up by low-income, lower-middle-class, and middle-class interviewees. This may reflect a larger trend in how students perceive their own and their peers’ wealth.

Both the more apparent and more subtle displays of class privilege complicate the narrative of wealth hiding discussed in previous sections. As many low-income, lower-middle-class, and middle-class interviewees were able to identify these displays of wealth performed by their peers, it can be argued that wealthy students’ attempts to hide their wealth are somewhat ineffective and that perhaps this performance only occurs when it is convenient. A second paradox surrounding wealth emerges when examining the ways that students both play down their wealth and perform it through class privilege displays. While students frequently strive to conform to the values of the activist culture by playing down their wealth, that performance has a

limit. Many are unwilling to commit to the anti-capitalist values to a degree to which they may sacrifice the privileges associated with generational wealth or their participation in the culture surrounding consumption. Thus, their participation in the activist culture is, in itself, performative as it is focused more on not being perceived a certain way rather than using one's privilege to make lasting change.

Conclusion

Through my interviews with twenty-four current students at Sinclair College, I explored several topics relating to the performance and justification of wealth and the general culture surrounding money in a college environment. I found that there are both significant consumerist and activist cultures and that a paradox arises when the two intersect. Spending money is seen as the norm and is often vital to campus social life; simultaneously, there are numerous social movements and widespread anti-capitalist discussions occurring on campus. The combination of these two has created a broader culture of performative activism and wealth hiding. Many students distance themselves from their wealth and the guilt associated with it by creating a separate category away from those who are seen as "oppressive." As a result, many wealthy students tended to play down their wealth in decisions about consumption, through performative anxiety about money, and by comparing themselves to those with more. At the same time, however, many continued to perform their wealth through various displays of class privilege, creating a second paradox of wealth. This is significant because it demonstrates the impact of changing cultural attitudes on elite institutions.

My findings can be summarized into one key takeaway: due to a variety of factors, wealthy students are uncomfortable confronting their wealth and will make considerable efforts

to avoid doing so. While many students at Sinclair College benefit from generational wealth and the cultural capital associated with it, they are not immune to the emerging leftist attitudes that are prevalent on college campuses. Now, college students are confronting systemic inequality in higher education and those who benefit from it must adapt their behavior. However, rather than critically consider their own privilege, it seems that many simply modify their behavior and their frontstage performance in order to distance themselves from the “oppressive” group. This phenomenon is by no means new; it can be seen in numerous movements for racial, economic, and gender equality in the past. Still, it is critical for understanding the shifting cultural atmosphere at liberal arts colleges. While wealthy students may appear to care about the activist culture, that care is, in itself, self-protective and performative. It is more about how one is perceived rather than actually making change.

While this paper provides insight into the paradoxes of wealth at a liberal arts college, further research is still needed. As efforts surrounding mutual aid and wealth redistribution become more prevalent across college campuses, more research into these shifting dynamics surrounding wealth would prove beneficial. A longitudinal study on attitudes surrounding money over several classes of students could better capture these shifting dynamics. Nonetheless, Sinclair college provides an example of the two paradoxes of academic wealth—that of consumerism vs. activism and that of simultaneously playing down and displaying one's wealth—as well as the ways in which the values of students at elite institutions fall short in practice.

Bibliography

- Armstrong, Elizabeth A., and Laura T. Hamilton,. 2013. *Paying for the Party*. First Harvard University Press paperback edition. Cambridge, Mass. [u.a.]: Harvard Univ. Pr.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction*. Cambridge, Mass. [u.a.]: Harvard Univ. Pr.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble*. 1. publ. in Routledge classics. New York [u.a.]: Routledge.
- Calarco, Jessica McCrory. 2018. *Negotiating opportunities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Connolly, John, and Andrea Prothero. 2008. "Green Consumption: Life-Politics, Risk and Contradictions." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8(1):117–45.
- Friedman, Sam, Dave O'Brien, and Ian McDonald. 2021. "Deflecting Privilege: Class Identity and the Intergenerational Self." *Sociology* 55(4):716–33.
- Giesler, Markus, and Ela Veresiu. 2014. "Creating the Responsible Consumer: Moralistic Governance Regimes and Consumer Subjectivity." *Journal of Consumer Research* 41(3):840–57.
- Goffman, Irving. 1956. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York [u.a.]: Anchor Books.
- Halvorsen, Pål. 2020. "A Sense of Unease: Elite High School Students Negotiating Historical Privilege." *Journal of Youth Studies* 1–16.
- Igra, Mark, Nora Kenworthy, Cadence Luchsinger, and Jin-Kyu Jung. 2021. "Crowdfunding as a Response to COVID-19: Increasing Inequities at a Time of Crisis." *Social Science & Medicine* 282:114105.
- Khan, Shamus Rahman. 2011. *Privilege*. Princeton University Press.
- Jack, Anthony Abraham. n.d. *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*. Cambridge, Mass. [u.a.]: Harvard Univ. Pr.
- Levesque Ware, Claudette. 2002. "Consumerism, credit cards, and college students." *Doctoral Dissertations*.

- Lyke, Austin. 2020. "College Students' Support for Wealth Redistribution: Evidence From a National Survey." *Journal of College and Character* 21(3):171–85.
- Marine, Susan, and Ruth Lewis. 2019. "Mutuality without Alliance: The Roles of Community in Becoming a College Student Feminist." *Gender and Education* 31(7):886–902.
- Ozmy, Joshua. 2012. "The Poverty of Participation: Self-Interest, Student Loans, and Student Activism." *Political Behavior* 34(1):103–16.
- Peterson, Richard A., and Roger M. Kern. 1996. "Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore." *American Sociological Review* 61(5):900–907.
- Reger, Jo. 2018. "Academic Opportunity Structures and the Creation of Campus Activism." *Social Movement Studies* 17(5):558–73.
- Rema Reynolds and Darquillius Mayweather. 2017. "Recounting Racism, Resistance, and Repression: Examining the Experiences and #Hashtag Activism of College Students with Critical Race Theory and Counternarratives." *The Journal of Negro Education* 86(3):283–304.
- Resource Generation, 20 Sept. 2021, <https://resourcegeneration.org/>.
- Sassatelli R. 2006. Virtue, responsibility and consumer choice: framing critical consumerism. In *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories and Multicultural Conflicts*, ed. J Brewer, F Trentmann, pp. 219–50. Oxford, UK: Berg
- Schor, Juliet. 1999. *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Schor, Juliet. 2005. *Born to Buy: the Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*. New York: Scribner.
- Sherman, Rachel. 2017. "Conflicted Cultivation: Parenting, Privilege, and Moral Worth in Wealthy New York Families." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 5(1):1–33.
- Sherman, Rachel. 2017. *Uneasy Street: The Anxieties of Affluence*. Princeton University Press.

Smith, Marisa A., Lillie D. Williamson, and Cabral A. Bigman. 2020. "Can Social Media News Encourage Activism? The Impact of Discrimination News Frames on College Students' Activism Intentions." *Social Media and Society* 6(2).

Takacs, Christopher George. 2020. "Becoming Interesting: Narrative Capital Development at Elite Colleges." *Qualitative Sociology* 43(2):255–70.

Warde, Alan. 2015. "The Sociology of Consumption: Its Recent Development." *Annual Review of Sociology* 41(1):117–34.

Appendix A: Tables

Figure 1. Levels of Need

Financial Aid Need Level	Respondents	Sample Frame	Student Body
High	50%	45%	45%
Medium-High	17%	14%	14%
Medium	17%	18%	18%
Medium-Low	8%	7%	7%
Low	8%	16%	16%

Figure 2. Cohort Year

Cohort	Respondents	Sample Frame	Student Body
2nd Year	46%	35%	35%
3rd Year	25%	30%	30%
4th or 5th+ Year	29%	36%	36%

Figure 3. Self-Identification of Socioeconomic Status

Income Level	Respondents
Low-Income or Working-Class	17%
Lower-Middle-Class	21%
Middle-Class	29%
Upper-Middle-Class	17%
Upper-Class	17%

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

Opening question: What did you expect from Sinclair, and what were you excited about when you were getting ready to attend? This could be in terms of social life, academics, or any other aspect of the school.

When you compare these expectations to your own experience, what aspects are similar and what aspects are different?

Are there any key factors or barriers that contribute to these differences? How so?

The hidden curriculum: How does Sinclair differ from your high school, and how did that impact your transition to Sinclair?

Did you face any challenges during this transition? If so, what was that experience like?

Is there anything in college, academically, socially, or otherwise, that you feel you could have been better prepared for?

Are there any tools or resources you wish had been available to you? How would that have impacted your transition?

Social: Can you tell me a bit about your social experiences on campus? This could include the things you and your friends do for fun, how you balance social life with other aspects of college, or anything else relating to peer-to-peer relationships.

How do you balance academics, extracurriculars, and social life? What challenges do you face in doing so?

Have you ever not been able to participate in either a campus event or something with your peers? What was that experience like, and what limited your ability to participate?

How would you describe the broader social culture at Sinclair?

Money: How do you self-identify regarding socioeconomic status? What about in relation to your peers? Do you feel that money is ever a factor in your ability to access any aspect of Sinclair, whether it's academically, socially, or otherwise? How does it limit your ability to participate fully?

Has your financial situation ever impacted your mental or physical wellbeing? How so?

How comfortable do you feel talking about money with friends while at Sinclair? What about other peers? Professors? Administrators?

If you do talk about money, what do those conversations look like?

What would you say the general culture surrounding money is like at Sinclair?

Have you ever noticed any aspect of performance or performativity when it comes to money or financial status?

Solutions: Are there any potential solutions to the issues surrounding accessing the full Sinclair experience that you believe could be implemented at either a faculty/staff level or an administrative level?

Are there any potential solutions to the issues surrounding money at Sinclair that you believe the administration could implement?

Are there any major cultural shifts that need to occur at a student level?

Other: Is there anything else we haven't covered here today that you'd like to talk about?