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Race and Class on Campus

Four Students' Stories

“I kind of feel like I’ve been dropped on Mars. . . . I mean, it’s so different.” These few words reflected Emily’s experience of her first weeks at Amherst College in the fall of 2005. Had you passed Emily walking across the campus of her elite New England liberal arts school, she would not have stood out from other young white women in casual clothes on their way to class. Given the school’s past reputation, you might have assumed she came from relative wealth and privilege. But a closer look would have revealed she was not in designer jeans and did not sport the markers of wealth that some students chose. In fact, Emily came from a small farming community of six hundred in South Dakota. Her father, a farmer and truck driver, had quit school after eighth grade; her mother had never made it through college and was now at home, unable to work at her hospital job since becoming ill. Emily was one of nineteen students in her high school graduating class in a K–12 school of three hundred students, and in four years of high school, she had written one research paper. Her school had no library—Emily did her research online, and her main source was Wikipedia. Her community was white, and most referred to black people as “niggers,” but there were few black people in town to take offense. The use of the term was “prominent” and went unchallenged.

The Bigger Picture

Lower-income white students like Emily, whose parents were not college educated, would have been difficult to find at Amherst or other elite

colleges and universities forty years ago. The Amherst College that Emily entered in the fall of 2005 bore little resemblance to the college back then. Over the succeeding four decades, Amherst had undergone a sea change, from an all-male, largely affluent, prep-schooled, legacy-rich student body to one that was half women and more than a third nonwhite, with more than half its students receiving financial aid. Today, elite colleges and universities like Amherst recruit both underrepresented minority students and white students with high need for financial assistance and/or limited family education. This recruitment is both purposeful and expensive. A quarter of the college's operating budget each year goes to financial aid.

What has prompted this move to diversity at Amherst and schools like it? Changes in admission policy began with the emergence of the civil rights movement and growing civil unrest in the 1960s. The idea of “affirmative action” arose to help remedy past discrimination, creating more opportunities for African Americans in many areas, including college admissions. The changes in admissions policy were both a response to black discontent and a reflection of a new concern on the part of universities and colleges like Amherst to open up the educational opportunities they offer to a wider range of students in an effort to promote equity and social mobility. Over time, however, as affirmative action came under attack, arguments shifted away from compensating for past discrimination to the need for “diversity” for reasons other than social justice.¹ Leading educators made the case that potential educational benefits existed in having students of different races and classes interacting with one another. To be prepared to become citizens in this fast-evolving, increasingly diverse society, to thrive in it, and to compete in a rapidly expanding global economy, students need to understand and be able to work with those different from themselves. They need to have previous assumptions and prejudices challenged, and ideally, they should acquire the motivation to work for equality. According to Census Bureau projections, by 2042 non-Hispanic white people will no longer be in the majority in the United States.² As Neil Rudenstine, former Harvard University president argues:

In our world today, it is not enough for us and our students to acknowledge, in an abstract sense, that other kinds of people, with other modes of thought and feeling and action, exist somewhere—unseen, unheard, unvisited, and unknown. We must interact directly with a substantial portion of that larger universe. There must be opportunities to hear different views directly—face to face—from people who embody them. No formal academic study can replace continued association with others who are different from ourselves, and who challenge our preconceptions, prejudices, and assumptions, even as we challenge theirs.³

While Amherst College, along with many other colleges and universities, has done much to create a diverse student community, two important

questions need to be answered: To what extent does learning from diversity actually take place? And what distinct challenges arise for students—affluent, lower-income, black, white—living in this diverse community? The answers to these two questions are the focus of this book.

In Search of Answers

To help us attain those answers, 58 students out of the 431 entering students in the class of 2009 at Amherst College agreed to participate in a longitudinal study of race and class at the college. The fifty-eight students came from four distinct groups: (1) affluent white, (2) affluent black, (3) lower-income white, and (4) lower-income black. Through online questionnaires and face-to-face interviews at the beginning and the end of their freshman year and again at the end of four years, the fifty-eight students (roughly fifteen from each group and balanced by gender) laid out their thoughts about how race and class had shaped their college experience.⁴

How were the groups defined? The students in the two “affluent” groups had no need for financial assistance from the college. In contrast, the “lower-income” students had significant need for financial assistance. The average financial aid award for lower-income students in the study was \$34,203 to cover the \$43,360 fee for full tuition and room and board. Half of these students were first generation—their parents had not attended college.⁵

In this study, race was limited to students who, on their admission applications, self-identified as either “white or Caucasian” or “African American, black.” Race is obviously more complicated than “black” and “white,” and a number of other races were represented on the Amherst campus. Optimally, other racial minorities would have been included in the study—in particular, Hispanics, who are one of the two racial groups that have faced the greatest challenges in attaining college degrees (African Americans are the other racial group).⁶ While forty-one students in the class of 2009 self-identified as “African American, black,” only twenty-seven students self-identified as “Hispanic.” The number of Hispanics was too small to produce a meaningful sample for this study. Forty-five entering students self-identified as “Asian/Asian American,” but these students made up an extremely diverse group in terms of families’ national origins and cultural heritage. A much larger sample of students would be needed to meaningfully study this group.

Race and Class Matters at an Elite College, an earlier book by the first author, describes the challenges students faced and the lessons they learned about race and class during their first year at the college.⁷ That book contains details on the participants’ backgrounds and the research methods. This book expands on the earlier work in two ways. It presents students’ views on what they experienced and learned at Amherst over *four* years at the college, rather than a single year. Those reflections are enriched because, of the fifty-five students who took part in the final wave of data

collection, all but six agreed to give up confidentiality and allowed identifying information to be used.⁸ This book thus gives greater depth to individual students, the issues they encountered, and what they learned.

To give a sense of what students in each of the four groups experienced and learned at Amherst, we present the stories of Emily, Matthew, Andrea, and Marc. Each of these students comes from a different group in the study. Each of them speaks to some of the common issues that other students of his or her race and class experienced, and each one's story illustrates the potential for learning from diversity. But these four students are not fully representative of their groups, as considerable variability in students' experiences and learning existed within each of the groups. Their profiles are portraits of individuals.

Emily

Early one afternoon in her first weeks on campus as a freshman, Emily took a seat for lunch at a table in Valentine, Amherst's college-wide dining room, and was soon joined by three black male students. These students were friendly and affable, but Emily sat in silence. "I didn't know what to say, how to begin a conversation." She was worried about what words might come out of her mouth, possibly something "politically incorrect." Having grown up with TV as her only exposure to black people, Emily had developed powerful stereotypes. "I have those in my head," she noted at the time, "and yet I don't really want them." She continued, "To combat that is really difficult."

For Emily, the wealth of some of Amherst's students was an eye-opener but not a cause for envy. On seeing students in coordinated outfits with well-chosen accessories or visiting another girl's room, she observed, "The piles of shoes and clothes—and everything I own in a trash bag—it's funny to me, because when I see someone who is all decked out, I think, 'Why would you want to appear that way? Why would you want to show off the fact that you're rich?'"

Yet Emily had chosen to come to Amherst, aware that she was taking herself out of her community and into a wider world, however stressful the transition might be. As she put it that first week, "I want to be very open. I want to meet people who are of different races. I mean, that's why I'm here. I want to see diversity in action. I want to be a part of that. I want to go out of my way to make friends who are different than me." She achieved that goal. By the end of her freshman year, Emily was part of a close circle of seven female friends, and she was the only white person in the group. The others were Chinese, Indonesian, black, and biracial. The racial diversity that Emily experienced in her first year remained an integral part of her Amherst world all the way through her senior year.

Whereas the races of the friends she chose to live with were diverse, none of the students in her group of close friends came from wealthy

backgrounds. When asked at the end of her senior year about the importance of having friends of the same social class, Emily responded that when she had first arrived, she had not thought it would be important. “But looking back, it has been extremely important for me to have that. I think just having that day-to-day help, and not to feel alone, just to navigate it with someone. I mean, there’s a lot going on here and just to have someone to go through it with you.”

That said, Emily did form close friendships with two wealthy white students over her four years. It was not as though she was trying to. As she explained, “I’ve made friends with people, not social classes.” But Emily felt that it had taken more work to form those friendships. She mused, “Maybe not on their part—on mine—letting go of the stereotype that they’re not going to understand.” There were things they could not understand, like why Emily worked so many hours a week off campus. “But they appreciate it,” she said. Talking about the wide gap she felt between herself and wealthy students at the college, Emily noted, “People still ask me, ‘How many hours a week do you work? Why do you work so much?’ . . . If I saw somebody working a lot, I would think, ‘Oh, they need the money.’ I don’t get any deep joy out of doing dishes at Val [Valentine dining hall].” Emily worked over twenty hours a week and sent money home to help support her teenage sister, who has two children. In response to questions from affluent students about her working, Emily reflected, “We’ve had two totally different lives. And in the same way that I’m looking at them through a cage of ‘How did you get this way?’ they’re also looking at me.” The disparity in social position between Emily and Josh, one of her two wealthy friends, was highlighted when he told her he did not know how to cash a check. She thought about how long she had been working and how getting her paycheck every week made her feel “so excited.” She remarked, “I would never have thought that someone twenty-two years old would not know that.”

In discussing her relationship with Josh, Emily noted, “I think the reason we are close is that he’s very comfortable talking about his class.” Josh did not shy away from acknowledging his wealth. Emily also noted that, unlike Josh, many students tended to “close off about themselves” when they discovered she had limited resources. She was not sure if “it’s because ‘I don’t want to be friends with you’ or if it’s because ‘I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.’” She tended to give them the benefit of the doubt and assumed that students were trying to avoid creating discomfort for everyone.

For Emily, what she could tell friends from her class differed from what she could tell her wealthy friends about the day-to-day issues that involve class. With friends of the same class Emily could discuss “not having the money to do this or that” or what she referred to as “the implications of class,” confident that the concerns she voiced would fall on sympathetic ears. In contrast, with Josh, she said, “I would feel more like I was whining. . . . He really doesn’t know, and I don’t expect him to know, what I mean.”

One incident that occurred in her freshman year stuck with her painfully. Emily was at a party with her other wealthy white friend, Abby, and at some point, Abby's boyfriend called Emily "white trash." The comment not only made her think poorly of him but also raised concerns about how *other* people viewed her. "If I say, 'Oh, I'm low income,' do they automatically assume something else?" Although Emily held on to the idea that this was not "the general attitude," she said, "I definitely think there are people here who just do look down on people who [are low income]."

Emily's journey to Amherst put more than physical distance between her and the family and community she had left back home. She arrived on campus "proud of the people at home, just the way that they got by and could make things work and didn't have a lot of outside help." Over the course of her freshman year, she began to see people at home as being more closed-minded, judgmental, and "very behind the times." Yet she did not assign blame to her home community. "I can sympathize and say, 'You grew up in a totally different way; you grew up in an older generation. You have no experiences outside of that bubble to make you different.'" But she faced a seemingly insurmountable disconnect between home and college. "I can move in between, but there's no bringing them together."

By the end of her last year at Amherst, she oscillated between positive and negative views of her community. When asked then about whether her feelings had changed, she responded, "That's something that's changed a lot over the four years." She still saw a benefit in the way she grew up, but now she also looked at her home community as "so isolated and so not what I want." She explained, "I would love it if the whole world were like Amherst in that it had a whole mix of people interacting." That was not the case, and Emily said with certainty, "I would never want to bring my gay friend home or my black friend." She would not want her friends to experience her community's closed-minded reaction. There *was* no bringing her two worlds together.

Matthew

Had Matthew, an affluent white prep-school grad, passed Emily on a walk across the Amherst campus that freshman year and sized up her position on the social-class ladder, he might well have turned his gaze away. "College is so much about making connections," he asserted in his fall interview, "and your relationships with people. I mean, it is about learning, but the most important thing is *networking* at college. Period. The networking will help you get jobs or know people, or whatever. And the people who are more likely to help you get the jobs you're looking for are of a certain class. That's not to say that kids of another class won't extend this, but the probability that a relationship is going to help you later down the line is going to be much higher if it's a person from a higher class than another."

Matthew had attended Deerfield Academy. His father raised money for Historic Deerfield Village, and his mother was a career counselor at Smith College. They were wealthy enough to send Matthew to Amherst with no financial aid, and he was not the first in his family to go to Amherst. He followed in the wake of his father, his uncle, his sister, and a cousin. “We have pictures of my sister and me wrapped in Amherst blankets when we were two.” Upon arrival, Matthew envisioned himself gravitating toward students from the upper class, from the Upper East Side of New York or Greenwich, Connecticut—students like those he had been surrounded by in boarding school—a far cry from a young woman from rural South Dakota.

If Emily had noticed Matthew as she walked across campus at some point in their freshman year, she might well have assumed he was one of the wealthy preppies at the college. He was always in neatly creased khakis and polo shirts, ever ready with a polite smile and a hello to all he passed, a legacy of his years of socialization at Deerfield. According to his description, “The way I dressed was very preppy. But also the way I acted was just sort of, not ‘snobby’ but sort of as if I had the ability, money-wise, to do anything I wanted, which could not be further from the truth.”

Matthew’s desire to become friends with very wealthy students lessened over the course of his freshman year. Many of the students he got to know during that year were unlike those he had anticipated meeting and befriending. “I remember my cousin’s Amherst, and my dad’s Amherst, and my uncle’s Amherst, and my sister’s Amherst, and being the fifth in my family to go here, I had all those stories floating around of what Amherst is like. It just could not have been more different than what I thought.”

In freshman year, the college assigned Matthew to a double room with Ruben, a lower-income Mexican American. Matthew learned that Ruben had moved out of his home as a junior in high school, had gotten his own lodging, and had supported himself by working two jobs while getting through his last two years of high school. Matthew got close to Ruben that year, but Ruben was not the only person from a dissimilar background who became an integral part of Matthew’s friendship group. That group consisted of a number of people whom he might well never have imagined would be important to him when he first arrived. By the end of that year, when he spoke of social relationships, he stated, “Your close friends you’re friends with because you like them as people and not because you think they will be successful.”

In his senior year Matthew lived off campus with Ruben and two other male students. Matthew described one of them, a black student, as being “in the lowest 1 percent” financially at Amherst, like Ruben—not exactly an obvious choice if you are looking for relationships that are “going to help you later down the line.” That friend had been in and out of college because he had no father at home, and “he needed to be the man of the house, [to] work and support the family, and he couldn’t be off getting an education.” After helping the family with its financial and social problems,

Matthew's roommate returned to the college. When asked about how they had become roommates, Matthew responded, "I chose to live with him because I would have never gotten to know him unless I was sort of thrust against him and made to know him. And he's an awesome guy." Asked how this roommate factored into what he learned about race and class at Amherst, Matthew acknowledged his importance, adding, "It's not just him; it's many different situations."

What explains the long journey that Matthew made at Amherst from newly arrived network-focused freshman bent on finding people in positions to advance his career plans to departing senior with a social world of friends, many of whom were from much less affluent circumstances than his own? Part of the answer, it would seem, is serendipity, the pairing that brought Matthew together with his freshman roommate and gave him a window into a world he had never been exposed to. Part of the answer lies in Matthew himself. Once introduced to students whose lives had been so different from his, he did not turn away. He embraced the exposure, the learning, and the people he met and liked, all the while increasing his awareness of his relative privilege. And part of the explanation lies in those fellow classmates. Matthew admired and learned from these friends and the rougher roads they had traveled.

Interestingly enough, given the relationships and experiences Matthew had with black students over his four years at Amherst, he acknowledged, "[On some deep level,] I think I still have pretty significant stereotypes about blacks that need to be broken down, despite the fact that I'm very close friends with a lot of black people. . . . When I get to know somebody who is black I stop thinking of them as that race. I sort of take them out of the pool of black people—and there's still all the other black people." And an awkwardness persisted for him in certain social situations, a self-consciousness about his being a white person and not knowing how to act around black people. Perhaps the following anecdote captures literally and metaphorically the discomfort Matthew struggled with. He vividly remembered a time when all his black friends were hanging out and "putting on really heavy rap music, getting up and dancing." He continued, "I was like, 'What am I doing? I have no idea what's going on,' but they were very accepting; they were like, 'Come on in'—making fun of me because I didn't know how to dance like they did, [but] they were good-natured about it. It wasn't like they were mean about it, but I felt so awkward." For Matthew, experiences like those, of being a distinct minority in a social situation, gave him "an appreciation for how [black students] must feel all the time."

Matthew graduated with a degree in economics and a career in investment banking awaiting him in New York. He was thinking he might room with one of his close Amherst friends who would be working for a non-profit. They would not split the rent evenly. But Matthew's social world was not exclusively composed of those less well-off than he. His friends stood on many different rungs of the social ladder. In his senior interview

Matthew echoed his spring, freshman-year sentiments when he noted, “When I look for friends, I don’t really look or care about their social class at all.” But he reiterated his even longer-standing belief that “connections are absolutely the most important thing.” “And,” he added, reflecting on the connections he had made and the resulting investment banking position he had awaiting him on Wall Street, “I think I did a good job, too.”

Andrea

Like Matthew, Andrea needed no financial assistance from Amherst. But Andrea is black, and her race and class and the intersection of the two presented issues that were not a part of Matthew’s experience. Andrea’s mother was a creative director at an ad agency. Her father, whom she described as “an out-of-practice pediatrician,” served as “Mr. Mom” to the children when they were young and later as the caretaker for his aging parents. Andrea had a brother who had graduated from Dartmouth and another who had graduated from Haverford College. She began her own college journey with uncertainties and concerns about race and class—where she fit in, how she saw herself, how others saw her, and how she wished to be seen by others in regard to those two important social identities. She would leave with increased understanding, self-acceptance, and confidence.

“I’m going home for the weekend.” A simple statement of fact, yet in pronouncing it, Andrea, whose home was New York City, recognized a new perspective she had gained over her four years at Amherst: an awareness of her relative wealth. She had acquired that perspective, in part, from her close friendship with a classmate, Brenda, who could not afford to travel home for a weekend. As Andrea reflected in her senior year, “I have more appreciation for where I’ve come from and how easy things are for me in relation to her.” But Amherst afforded another, seemingly paradoxical, change in Andrea’s perspective. The wide economic variability at the college enabled Andrea to see herself as not all that wealthy. As she put it in the fall of her freshman year, “A lot of people here have more money than me.” She was aware of students who went out to eat almost every night and students who had BMWs sitting in the student parking lot—things that caused her to feel “some jealousy.” She was struck by remarks of classmates such as “Money, that doesn’t matter. . . . I lost this; I’ll replace it.” Or “Oh, I crashed my car. My parents are just going to buy me another one.”

Andrea found much to admire in Brenda, her lower-income friend. Andrea noted that if Brenda “goes out and buys something, she’ll appreciate it more.” Andrea watched as Brenda went through the whole financial aid process, impressed at how she “rolls with the punches better in terms of money. . . . She’s like, ‘[If] I’m not getting this money, I’ll find a way to make up for it.’” Brenda was trying to pay off her loans early by working in the college dining hall. Andrea realized, “She’s more aware of future problems or issues than I am. I don’t think about that right now. I don’t

know if I ever will have to. . . . She's shown me that coming from a different social class makes you think differently about how to deal with these things now and in the future." Andrea's experience with Brenda and others at the college caused her to conclude that students who are "middle [class] or anything below upper are more grounded in reality."

Andrea's feelings about class ranged from "tension" and a bit of "jealousy" toward more affluent students to discomfort about her own relative wealth when she was around lower-income students. That discomfort led her to wish to hide her class background in certain situations during her freshman year. In her spring interview back then, Andrea explained, "I'm not on financial aid. I don't say that generally around most of my friends because they're on financial aid." But if asked directly if she is on financial aid, Andrea said she answers, "Not now." She continued, "I'll try to say it in a way that's not like 'No. I don't need financial aid.' . . . I definitely play down the fact that I'm not on financial aid."

Andrea was also reluctant to tell classmates where she lived, as assumptions were made about her on the basis of that information—assumptions she felt uncomfortable with and took steps to avoid.

My neighborhood is Jamaica Estates [Queens]. It's the nice part of Jamaica, and every time I say it, everyone's like, "Ooh, ooh," like "Big shot." So I find myself just saying I live in Jamaica more than I do the specific neighborhood. And I have a country house out in Southampton, on Long Island, and as soon as the word "Southampton" comes out of my mouth, it's "Oh, she has a pool and a mansion, and she lives next to some movie stars," which is definitely not true. People have definitely made assumptions just by normal facts about me. I live in a nice neighborhood [and before] you know—boom! [I'm] automatically superwealthy. It kind of bothered me a little bit last semester whenever I said it, so I avoided saying it pretty much. But now I've kind of grown into it, [and I] shrug it off.

In addition to assumptions around class, Andrea dealt with assumptions, as well as expectations and pressures, based on her race. Many of these assumptions ran counter to those based on class. At times students assumed she was "superwealthy" and living in a "mansion," but she also faced stereotypic beliefs that black people are poor, that she did not "come from a fancy neighborhood" and that she lived in "an apartment building, someplace run-down." In her freshman year, she said, other black students "actually assumed that I was from a lower class [and that I] was on financial aid."

Over Andrea's years at Amherst, classmates voiced expectations about how she "should speak": "I should not be speaking proper English; it should be Ebonics. I shouldn't be able to pronounce things correctly or

a certain way.” Some classmates assumed she listened to rap music. She noted, “I don’t listen to rap that much; I’m more alternative and rock and stuff like that. People walk by my room, and they’ll hear the music that I’m listening to, and they do a double take. I can definitely see that someone’s like, ‘What are you listening to?’ [As if] I should be listening to rap and R&B.” She recalled talking about Amherst’s step dance club and being told, “You should be in it.” Andrea continued, “And I was like, ‘I don’t do step.’ ‘But you’re *black*.’” And being black brought expectations from some classmates that she should dress “like a hipster,” in “skinny jeans” with “alternative T-shirts” sporting “black clothing name brands.” She fit none of these stereotypes. If Andrea mentioned where she shopped, “other students [were] like, ‘Oh, you shop there? That’s a really *white* store.’” And Andrea’s response was “What the hell does that mean?”

According to Andrea, among classmates, “if I said I was dating someone, they would assume that I was dating a black person if they didn’t know me . . . or know who he was.” Andrea’s serious relationships with white men at Amherst violated more than the *assumptions* of some black students—they violated their *expectations*. “I’m supposed to be dating black men mostly. But I generally only date white men. I’ve never heard anyone say anything to my face, but I get vibes from black male friends of mine that they don’t approve of me dating outside of my race. And no one would ever say it because, you know, it’s 2009. What are you going to tell someone, ‘You can’t date outside of your race’? But I definitely feel the tension there.” Talking about the reaction she got to a specific white boyfriend who was “upper class, really wealthy,” Andrea noted, “I definitely felt negativity from black men.”

When asked at the end of her freshman year what difference, if any, her race had had on her experience at Amherst socially, Andrea reflected, “A lot of people assume that black people are always just going to hang out with black people” and that they date others of their race and party with them. “And that’s not [me]. I don’t cut myself off to any other people just because they’re not black.” Andrea sensed a general feeling among some black classmates: “You should want to be with people of your race.” She got invited to be in groups with other black students—invitations that came with the message “We’re the black students in ’09, and we have to stick together” or “We all have to band together and stay strong.” But, as Andrea observed, that was not her. “I have black friends, and I have white friends. I have Asian friends.” She felt open to everyone while acknowledging that race “definitely affects you socially—how you think about who you’re friends with, how people see you because of who you’re hanging out with or who you’re dating and stuff like that. So it definitely affects the social atmosphere.”

Andrea experienced an element of surprise and disappointment that “people group together,” that “they don’t want to branch out,” that they do not want to “see what else is out there, see what it’s like to be friends

with someone from a different culture,” that they do not “embrace it.” In high school she was aware that some students desired to hang out in same-race groups, but she had expected students to reach across race lines in college “because you’re living with these people, you’re with them 24-7, you party with them, you work with them . . . you share personal space with them.” It made her realize some students “really like being in this bubble.”

Andrea was not one of them. In her senior year Andrea lived in a suite with four white students. She noted, “I find it easier to make friends with people that are not my own race. . . . I think it’s because I grew up in a very white neighborhood. I went to a high school where I [could] count the black people on my hand.” As a senior looking back, Andrea spoke of having had “a lot of racial issues” when she was younger about “not being black enough and being called ‘white’ all the time” because of what she liked. She continued, “And then I just started working with those issues, and [now I] don’t care about that anymore. . . . Race has taken a back burner in how I socialize with other people.” When asked how she explained this profound change, she said simply, “I think I’ve become more confident in myself.”

Over her years at Amherst, race may have been relegated to the back burner for Andrea, but even in her suite at times she came up against the assumption that she represented “black people” and thus could shed light on the behavior of other black students that was puzzling to her suitemates. One of them might note a particular behavior she had observed and wonder why “black people act like that.” All eyes would turn to Andrea. “And I’m like, ‘Well, I don’t know. I don’t [know] what to tell [you].’” And there were times when Andrea would turn to her suitemates to gain an understanding of their perceptions of members of her race. If they were watching a movie with “a very stereotypical” portrayal of black people, she would ask them, “Does it have an effect on you as a white person? If I start acting like this, are you going to think, ‘She’s just being black . . . as opposed to just being who she is?’” She added, “We’ve had several conversations about it.”

For Andrea, representing her race to white students was not confined to her suite. She found herself in that position in classes, too. She recalled times in black studies courses when a student would pose a question and the professor would turn to Andrea and suggest, “Well, Andrea, why don’t you talk about it?” In her “Introduction to Black Studies” course, she reported, “There were about five to seven black people in a class of twenty, and we’re constantly asked to speak for [black people]. ‘Why are black people so hostile and angry about race? Why do they always bring up slavery?’ And it’s like, ‘I don’t know. I don’t bring up slavery in my daily conversations.’ A lot of times we’re expected to know everything about our race and talk about that.” Reflecting on her experience in her “African Education” class, she noted, “I’m African *American*. I don’t have any family ties in Africa, but because I was black, people kind of just assumed that

I knew more than they did when it came to Africa.” When asked if she felt these unwarranted expectations from her classmates were an opportunity to inform, she responded, “I felt it was more of a burden.”

Marc

As a black student at Amherst, Marc had experiences in the classroom that closely paralleled Andrea’s regarding expectations that he could speak for his race. “There have been times, especially in literature classes where we’re reading slave narratives; we’ll read Frederick Douglass . . . and I’m supposed to be the authority. Teachers will literally say, ‘Well, Marc, how did this book make you feel?’”

But while Marc felt many of the same pressures and expectations concerning race as Andrea, there were differences—large class differences. He was a lower-income black student from inner-city Hartford whose parents had emigrated from Jamaica in the early 1980s. Marc’s dad, who had not attended college, made helicopter blades. Marc’s mother, who had started college in Jamaica but had never finished, worked as an insurance agent. She had always had hopes that her children would have a better life than she and her husband had been able to achieve and provide for their family. When Marc finished sixth grade and his parochial school abruptly discontinued its seventh and eighth grades, thus threatening to thwart her educational goals for Marc, his mother mobilized. One day that summer, with Marc in hand, she arrived on the campus of Kingswood-Oxford, a prep school she passed as she commuted to and from work each day. One thing led to another, and in the fall Marc entered the school on scholarship. A decade later, as Marc began his senior year at Amherst, his younger sister started her freshman year at Trinity College.

Given his family’s circumstances, unlike Andrea, Marc never had to worry about hiding his wealth. In fact, he arrived on campus with a strong interest in making wealth. Money and earning a living out in the world loomed much larger in his thinking than in Andrea’s. But there were other pulls within Marc. In the fall of freshman year he had mused, “I wonder what it’s like to experience life through someone else’s eyes or someone else’s skin and understand what experiences they go through, or what’s different for them just because of their skin color.” At an earlier point in that interview, he stated his view that for him, “a lot of college is exposure to different people and new ideas.” Over the next four years, Marc allowed himself that exposure, and a tension developed within him between doing well and doing good, fueled largely by the diverse friendship group he chose to become a part of. In so choosing, he embarked on a remarkable journey across class and race lines that eventually changed him and his life goals.

When he arrived on campus as a freshman, Marc joined a varsity team, having been lightly recruited after his high school career. The team provided a ready-made friendship group with similar interests to eat dinner

with every night. Marc summed up the way he saw it as an entering student: “I want friends. I need a group of friends at Amherst, and this is the most accessible group, so it’s really going to be easy to make friends with them and stay in this comfort zone.” In the spring of his freshman year, some friends not on the team invited Marc into a room draw group for sophomore housing, and Marc’s decision to join that group led to a new friendship group that stayed intact for the rest of college. “I’ve distanced myself from the team as I’ve gotten more comfortable with a different group,” he explained. Marc realized that he was socializing with teammates out of necessity and not necessarily because he really wanted to. And it was the new group of friends that had such a strong impact on him and set in motion many of the changes he went through. “Our group’s really diverse. There’s three white friends, two black friends, [and] two Latinos, and they’re all male—and of varying social classes.” Other friends were not part of the core group of eight and lived in different locations on campus, he said, “but we still keep in touch and go to meals and things.”

When asked how he learned about the social class of his various friends, Marc reported, “Conversations over time, especially because Amherst does a really good job of making these sorts of conversations happen a lot.” Marc spoke of attending talks at the college with his friends where “really tough questions about social class and interactions between varying social classes” at Amherst and beyond were raised. “I think that what my group of friends does really well is take those conversations back to the dorm rooms. . . . There have been countless nights when we’ll stay up and actually talk about what it means to have this really diverse group.”

The entire group of friends Marc lived with sophomore year joined the Hispanic affinity group *La Causa*, and that experience had an enormous impact on his awareness of class and of race. He talked about the influence of *La Causa* and other cultural groups on campus: “I think those groups do an amazing job of making social class and race a conversation piece. A lot of what they’ll do in those groups, as far as throwing events on campus, is to base them around social class and different aspects of race. I think that having been in that group and having the majority of my friends in [*La Causa*] has definitely led us to be more social-class conscious.”

One of Marc’s close friends, a wealthy white student he lived with, became the chair of *La Causa* and, as such, “got to decide what topics will be discussed. . . . Often a lot of the meetings that he led were about social class.” Marc had never thought “the wealthy cared about lower social classes.” His friend’s strong interest in understanding the experiences and concerns of those from less-affluent circumstances opened Marc’s eyes on that score. On a more personal level, he shared, “This person showed me that I can have a completely normal, completely healthy, and great relationship with someone who’s incredibly . . . out of my social class.”

When he arrived at Amherst, Marc planned to become a lawyer. He had gained direct exposure to the law at a Hartford law firm for which he

worked over summers and winter breaks through college, initially doing office chores and then paralegal work. He explained, “I remember having conversations with my mom, and a lot of her impetus for my doing law was just make money and ‘do better than we did . . . and be able to raise a family comfortably.’” Those ideas were a part of Marc’s thinking, too. But something happened. As he described it, “A lot of people who I originally thought were going to take lucrative jobs, like even myself . . . went through a change.” His desire to pursue law was overtaken by a desire “to touch the lives of the next generation to come.” And he knew how he would go about it: “I really want to teach at any cost, whatever it takes.” Marc emerged from his four years pointed in a new direction, propelled by changes in perspective and values.

To attribute Marc’s changes in attitude and direction solely to Amherst would be unfair to Marc. He placed himself in positions that gave him exposure to new people and ideas and, like Matthew in *his* way, allowed those experiences to have great effect. And not all of Marc’s Amherst experiences were so welcomed.

When, at the end of his senior year, Marc was asked how salient his race was on a day-to-day basis at Amherst, he responded, “On a daily basis maybe once per day something will remind me.” When might that occur? Maybe at lunch in Valentine, “thinking about who is sitting with who and noticing a group of black students will more often than not sit together.” Marc reflected, “It’s not necessarily that the black students want to sit by themselves but just that they’re sitting with their friends and their friends happen to be black, not the other way around.” For Marc, over his four years at the college, the vast majority of his reminders were observations without emotional charge. A few, however, stood out and were remembered for the self-consciousness or pain they caused. One example might have been the remark by his coach when pairing Marc up with a black recruit visiting Amherst: “You guys should understand each other.” Or a teammate’s biting put-down: “If you were a white with your [level of athletic skill], you wouldn’t have gotten in here.” Perhaps an example was a question, not typical but memorable, in a literature class about a work by Frederick Douglass: “Well, Marc, how did this book make you feel?” Or maybe another example was a racist remark on the Amherst Confessional, a website that allowed students to post anonymous comments about one another. One comment Marc remembers was “how minorities are easing their way through Amherst and don’t deserve to be here because affirmative action got them here.” It went on to say, “They’re bringing down the level of prestige at Amherst.” Thinking back on some of the things he had seen written in the Confessional about people of his race, Marc offered these reflections:

To be honest, it’s disillusioning . . . because you’ve got to think you’re going to school with some of the most intelligent people in

the nation, and for these ugly things to be said about other people, you just wonder where it comes from. You walk around, and it could be any of the people that you're walking around with, having lunch with, having dinner with in the cafeteria. And everyone seems perfectly well-adjusted, and no one says anything like that when it's face-to-face conversation. You introduce this form of anonymity, being able to say whatever you want, and all of a sudden people are incredibly nasty to each other. . . . It always makes me sad to think there are people who I very well could be friends with or acquaintances with who are harboring these thoughts.

Looking ahead to his life after graduation, Marc contemplated going back to Hartford to teach. Yet going back would not be a seamless transition. He had changed over his four years at Amherst. He no longer went to church, he had experienced interracial dating, and he was comfortable with gay people marrying. He had brought family members around to tolerating some of his positions, even if they disagreed. Some chasms were too wide to bridge. He explained, "They're very negative toward gay marriage rights and things like that. I have a friend who is very 'out' and very outspoken about the gay community. He's the head of Pride Alliance right now, and through his eyes I've seen what the gay struggle is and what some of their main issues are. I think I've become more sensitive to that, and my family just doesn't get it at all."

Marc had issues with his black friends in Hartford who voiced concerns about "staying true to your race."

They see me off gallivanting with whites in Massachusetts, and that's offensive to them. The way I talk, they feel it's very affected. I use all these big words, so now I [must] feel like I'm better than them. . . . The majority of us are going through the college experience. But I think that being at Amherst is very different from being at one of the community colleges. . . . Whenever I try to relate the experiences that I'm having, it's kind of a disconnect between me and my friends just because they don't have the same [experiences]. . . . What I'm thinking about in particular are some of the lectures on race and class issues that are not only part of the Amherst community but extend past that globally. I don't think they are getting that same exposure. So they're like, "Yeah, that's cool, but why does that matter?" or "Whatever." It becomes tough to explain constantly [why] we should be conscious of what's happening outside of our own bubble.

As his life at Amherst was drawing to a close, Marc was poised to re-enter that Hartford "bubble." He commented, "I feel like I've done a good job of taking the Hartford stuff and bringing it to Amherst." But the hard

part for Marc, as for Emily with her community, he said, would be “bringing Amherst back to Hartford because it’s a place that doesn’t change and isn’t as accepting. The only way I feel the gap would ever be bridged is to just keep rubbing those two worlds up against each other until something gives, and once you find that thing, maybe you can start to bring in more. . . . Since I’ve been away from Hartford, I miss being home a lot. I actually want to go back and make changes.”

Why This Study Matters

We can view the world of the undergraduates at Amherst College as a microcosm. In their everyday interactions, students face a great challenge that also confronts the larger society today—how to address differences and inequalities in order to build a community. Like numerous Americans, many of the students in the study had little close contact with people of another race or class before leaving home for college.⁹ Like numerous Americans, they had internalized stereotypes and prejudices based on race and class that are widespread in our society. The study participants give us an unusual and valuable perspective by revealing their personal perceptions of their experiences and their learning. Through their eyes we see, for example, difficulties they faced and how some moved beyond stereotypic views of race and class toward greater understanding and appreciation of those whose lives have been so unlike their own. We observe the learning about self and others that can come from students’ efforts to build relationships with those different from themselves and students’ discovery of more commonalities than they had believed existed. We learn too about the emotional costs of moving on and moving beyond families and communities students have left behind.

The outcomes of students’ experiences with diverse classmates on campus are important. These students will carry what they have learned about diversity into their interactions in the world beyond Amherst and will be better able to help bridge differences in that larger world as a result. As Emily explained, “The opportunities or the experiences that I’ve had outside of the classroom with friends is going to make me better in the outside world. It’s going to make me more willing to interact with people of different races, different backgrounds. And that’s something that, if I hadn’t had this step, if I had just gone from South Dakota to out in the real world, . . . would have been a lot more difficult. And Amherst has definitely provided a stronger bridge than I could have done on my own.”

What follows in this book are the study participants’ perceptions of and responses to the challenges of class and race on campus and to the learning opportunities that diversity presented. Most of what we know regarding students’ living and learning among diverse peers comes from large-scale survey studies, which are reviewed in Chapter 9. Yet what we learn from the fifty-eight students at Amherst contributes something

important. Psychologist Jim Sidanius and his colleagues conclude their longitudinal survey study of the challenges of diversity at UCLA with the comment “We were not able to connect the mountains of very useful quantitative data with the students’ own subjective understandings of their lives and the challenges facing them over the college years.”¹⁰ Throughout this book the reader hears the voices of students in the study, who provide their individual perspectives on and responses to the issues raised by having to navigate their way in unfamiliar, challenging waters. In Chapter 9, we step back from Amherst and look at other institutions of higher education across the country—how they are addressing the challenges of diversity and which programming and practices have proved successful.