

**Rachelle** is an African American student who was raised by her mother and grandparents. She attended a public high school where she was involved in a number of extracurricular and leadership activities. Considered the “smart one” in the family, Rachelle was excited about going to college. While many of her friends wanted to stay local, she was determined to go to a “good” school out of state, and eventually enrolled at Public Ivy University four hours from home.

Once she arrived, Rachelle immediately felt out of place but wasn’t sure why. She tried becoming involved in the Black Student Union but still didn’t feel connected to the campus. To make matters worse, she struggled in a biology class for non-majors and was in danger of failing the lab, but she never attended office hours and never met with an academic advisor. Instead, she would talk about her loneliness with Mr. Stanley, the janitor in her residence hall. She decided to transfer after one year.

Rachelle fared much better at Historically Black College only ten miles from home, where her grades improved dramatically, and she began to talk with professors outside of class. She applied for and was accepted into the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program and began thinking about going to graduate school. Unfortunately, at this time, her mother no longer had steady employment and had not saved any money for her daughter’s education. After two years at HBC, Rachelle was forced to leave school due to an unpaid bill.

Rachelle started working full-time and married her high school boyfriend (also first-generation). After 18 months, she transferred again to affordable Flagship University, where she was now eligible for in-state tuition. Rachelle worked in an academic department on campus where she was able to meet a number of faculty and Deans who supported her goals to pursue a Ph.D. With the help of the McNair Scholars program and two African American faculty mentors, Rachelle graduated and eventually enrolled in a doctoral program at Fancy Pants University.

**Ana** moved to the United States from Guatemala when she was 16 years old. School officials placed her in 9<sup>th</sup> grade instead of 11<sup>th</sup> because they did not accept school records from other countries. Ana was 19 years old upon high school graduation.

Although her parents made it clear that Ana had to go to college and achieve more education than they, Ana's father was displeased when he learned that his daughter wanted to attend an elite university that was an hour from home, instead of the local community college, which was cheaper. Ana deliberately chose Prestigious U. because she wanted to become a doctor and give back to her community. In fact, she only applied to this one school, which she had never visited before. Her father eventually relented and told Ana that she must come home every weekend to help her younger brother with school. Ana's mother deferred all discussions about college to her husband.

During freshman year, Ana became involved in a number of campus activities and community service projects. By sophomore year, she worked two on-campus jobs and was named president of MEChA. With so much of her time taken, Ana found it difficult to go to office hours or to attend the recommended tutoring sessions. Because she earned a "C" in chemistry, the school's pre-health advisor recommended that Ana reconsider medical school.

Ana persisted on her pre-med path but her science grades remained average. Meanwhile, she realized that she looked forward to going to history and began speaking with the professor after class. She told her father that she was considering changing her major but he countered, "What are you going to do with that?" and insisted that Ana not waste her college degree so that she could become a history teacher. Ana completed her degree in biology with a 2.8 grade point average. She's thinking about going back to school for a Master's degree in Latin American Studies.

**Luke** had not planned to go to college after high school, at least not directly after. His parents had assumed that he would get a job after graduation so that he could contribute to the family income. Instead, Luke's girlfriend encouraged him to apply to State University and, to his surprise, he was accepted. His parents made it clear that paying for college was Luke's responsibility and did not contribute any money toward tuition or other school expenses. His father did offer one piece of advice: "Be sure to major in business so that you can get a good job."

Due to his low SAT scores and underwhelming high school grades, Luke was required to attend a summer bridge program on campus, where he met a number of friends. He took two courses, including a writing class with a young, energetic professor who told Luke that he was a good writer.

Unfortunately, when the school year started, Luke rarely saw his summer pals anymore because they all lived on campus and he still lived at home. Further, the confidence that he gained over the summer quickly dissipated. Many of his classes were large lectures, the professors spoke too fast and most of the students looked like they knew what was going on. He found it difficult to concentrate at home because his older sister and her young children just moved in (temporarily), and Luke was back on the couch again. He was on academic probation by the end of sophomore year.

To help ease the family burdens, Luke dropped out of school and began working full-time, which allowed him to get his own apartment. He and his girlfriend were married and soon became new parents. Gradually, Luke started taking classes at two different community colleges in the evening. With the support of his wife, he transferred to Regional University where he took a variety of online and night classes and eventually completed his B.A. at age 31.

**Liam** attended public schools in a major urban area, and grew up in gang-prone, low-income, largely immigrant neighborhoods. He tried joining the local gang at the age of thirteen but his best friend, whose family gang involvement spans over multiple generations, wouldn't let him. Instead, Liam became more of troublemaker, often cutting classes and becoming involved in petty crimes. With his shaved hair and baggy pants, he was known simply as "Malo" (the bad one) by his family, who warned the younger cousins not to follow in his path.

After high school, Liam joined the military in order to turn his life around and to make his mother proud. While serving in the Army, he had his first true cross-cultural experience, meeting several young men from different backgrounds, unlike his racially segregated neighborhood back home. After serving for 8 years, Liam moved hours away from home and began taking classes at three different community colleges while also working part-time. There he began developing good study habits, excelling in classes that frequently challenged him in high school. A counselor encouraged him to enroll in a transfer program that would guarantee admission to the local Regional University if he maintained a 3.0 gpa. Two years later, Liam was admitted into RU where he felt at ease and comfortable because he previously had taken a few courses on the campus and was familiar with the grounds.

After receiving much encouragement from his family, instructors, and counselors Liam graduated from RU and went on to pursue a Master's degree from a private university in Counseling. Liam now assists first-generation college students, veterans, adults, and other nontraditional students in their transition to higher education and is currently thinking of pursuing a Ph.D. in Higher Education Leadership.

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*Questions for reflection:*

1. What are common themes in the challenges that each student faced?
2. What common strategies did they use to overcome these challenges? Identify specific examples of **cultural capital**.
3. What role did the institutions play in supporting the students? What role could the institution play in supporting them?