ABSTRACT

BACHENHEIMER, AARON. Being Smart and Social: The Lived Experiences of High Achieving, Heavy Drinking College Students. (Under the direction of Dr. Joy Gayles.)

Studies showing the pervasiveness of college student drinking and the multitude of serious negative consequences as a result of this consumption have left researchers calling student abuse of alcohol “the single most serious public health problem confronting American colleges” (Wechsler, Dowdall, Maenner, Gledhill-Hoyt, & Lee, 1998, p. 57) and higher education professionals searching for a solution (Ham & Hope, 2003; Hingson et al., 2009; Osberg et al., 2010; Perkins, 2002a; Wechsler & Nelson, 2008; White & Hingson, 2014).

Within the wide-ranging field of research on alcohol and college students, we have learned very little about the drinking experiences of high-ability students; specifically how they drink, why they drink, and what role drinking plays in their academic experience. What we do know is that while the majority of the heaviest drinkers in college struggle academically, there is a smaller but meaningful sub-set of high achievers that are part of the heavy drinking college culture (CORE Institute, 2006; Moss, Chen, & Yi, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to describe and understand, through qualitative research methods and a phenomenological approach, the lived experience of high academic achieving and heavy drinking, traditionally aged college students, at a highly selective research university. The central research question that guided this study was what is the lived experience of college students who excel academically and engage in high-risk drinking behaviors?

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design approach. Through in-person interviews with academically successful and heavy drinking college students at a
highly-selective private university, several key findings related to academic and social identities, motivation to drink, and the process by which these students navigate their lived experience as an academically successful, heavy drinking student.

This study has contributed new insight into a little understood phenomenon and has allowed participants to contribute their voice to a field largely dominated by quantitative research. By engaging in a qualitative and phenomenological study into a subject area with far reaching health and academic implications, researchers and practitioners now have an expanded understanding of this unique sub-set of college students and the various goals, challenges, and needs that inform their experience.
Being Smart and Social: The Lived Experience of High Achieving and Heavy Drinking College Students

by
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DEDICATION

For my students, whose amazing potential to make this world a better place has inspired and challenged me. My professional purpose is to do all I can to create and influence the kinds of learning environments that will allow them to reach and exceed what they thought was possible.
BIOGRAPHY

Aaron Bachenheimer is a student affairs professional and higher education administrator with a career focus in the areas of leadership development and student organization advising.

Originally from New York, NY, Aaron was raised in Chapel Hill, NC, and lived for long stretches of his life in Boone, NC, Jackson, WY, Oxford, OH, and Farmville, VA, before returning to Chapel Hill in 2009. He earned his Bachelor of Science degree in Communications from Appalachian State University, a Master of Science in College Student Personnel from Miami University (OH), and is completing his Doctorate in Education in Higher Education Administration from North Carolina State University.

Currently, Aaron serves as Director of Fraternity & Sorority Life and Community Involvement at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Prior to joining Carolina in 2009, Aaron worked at Appalachian State University as Assistant Director of Organizational Leadership Education and at Hampden-Sydney College as Assistant Dean of Students. He has worked in several other student affairs capacities including multicultural education, student activities, and orientation. In addition, Aaron serves as a Regional Governor and risk management education facilitator for Pi Kappa Phi National Fraternity, on the Board of Advisors for Orange County (NC) Habitat for Humanity, and on the Board of Directors for UNC Student Legal Services and Carpe Diem, a non-profit alcohol education program located in Chapel Hill, NC.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**LIST OF TABLES** ........................................................................................................... viii

**CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION** .................................................................................. 1

- Purpose of the Study ................................................................................................. 11
- Research Questions ................................................................................................ 13
- Definition of Terms ................................................................................................. 14
- Significance of the Study ....................................................................................... 17
- Overview of Methodological Approach ................................................................ 18
- Chapter Summary and Organization of the Study ............................................... 21

**CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW** ...................................................................... 23

- Drinking and Academics ....................................................................................... 25
- High Achievement ................................................................................................. 35
- Cognitive Decision-Making Factors ...................................................................... 46
- Chapter Summary .................................................................................................. 80

**CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY** ............................................................................... 82

- Research Design ..................................................................................................... 84
- Researcher Statement of Subjectivity ................................................................... 100
- Ethical Issues ......................................................................................................... 104
- Chapter Summary .................................................................................................. 107

**CHAPTER 4. PARTICIPANTS** ................................................................................ 108

- Participant Summaries ......................................................................................... 110
  - Buck .................................................................................................................... 111
  - David .................................................................................................................. 114
  - Gilbert ............................................................................................................... 116
  - Hannah .............................................................................................................. 118
  - JT ....................................................................................................................... 121
  - Katie ................................................................................................................. 125
  - Stephanie ........................................................................................................... 128
  - Tommy .............................................................................................................. 130
- Chapter Summary .................................................................................................. 134

**CHAPTER 5. FINDINGS** ......................................................................................... 135

- Major Themes ........................................................................................................ 135
  - Development of Academic Identity as Smart .................................................. 138
Development of Social and Drinking Identity .......................................................... 159
This is Why I Drink ........................................................................................................ 180
Navigating the Work Hard/Play Hard Philosophy ..................................................... 206
Chapter Summary ........................................................................................................ 241

CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION ......................................................................................... 243
Discussion of Key Findings ......................................................................................... 245
Implications for Practice .............................................................................................. 279
Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 290
Limitations .................................................................................................................. 290
Directions for Future Research .................................................................................. 294
Closing Thoughts ......................................................................................................... 297

REFERENCES ............................................................................................................. 298

APPENDICIES ............................................................................................................ 322
Appendix A—Interview Guide ...................................................................................... 323
Appendix B—Informed Consent Form (2013-2014) .................................................... 325
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Participant Demographics .................................................................................. 110

Table 2. Themes .................................................................................................................. 137
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Researchers have called college student abuse of alcohol “the single most serious public health problem confronting American colleges” (Wechsler et al., 1998, p. 57). Data show that little has changed over the last 20 years in terms of heavy drinking rates and the effort to reduce negative consequences for students (Califano, 2007; Hingson et al., 2009). National survey data reveal that 44% of college students report binge drinking within the previous 2 weeks, and 84% report such behavior within the previous 90 days (White & Hingson, 2014). College binge drinkers are characterized as students who drink most frequently and in the highest quantities, and are measured as regularly consuming at least 4 drinks in a sitting for women and 5 drinking in a sitting for men. These individuals are responsible for 91% of the alcohol consumed by college students (Ham & Hope, 2003; Wechsler & Nelson, 2001). Further—31% of college men drink more than 21 drinks per week and 19% of college women drink more than 14 drinks per week. In terms of negative consequences, each year college student drinking results in 1,700 deaths, 97,000 sexual assaults, and 600,000-700,000 non-sexual assaults and injuries (Ham & Hope, 2003; Hingson et al., 2009; Osberg et al., 2010; Perkins, 2002a; Wechsler & Nelson, 2008). Statistics like these have left student affairs professionals, health and wellness educators, and college presidents perplexed, wondering how to address such a pervasive and troubling aspect of the collegiate culture.

Within the extensive body of research on college student drinking, we have learned very little about the drinking experiences of high achieving students at selective colleges and
universities; specifically how they drink, why they drink, and what role drinking plays in their academic experience. What we do know is that while the majority of the heaviest drinkers in college struggle academically, there is a smaller but meaningful sub-set of high achievers that are part of the heavy drinking college culture (CORE Institute, 2006; Moss et al., 2007). We eventually see these students after college as doctors, lawyers, and other high achieving and high functioning adult professionals, a small but significant percentage of whom enter alcohol assistance programs and suffer from long-term alcohol dependence and/or abuse disorders (Allen, 1997; Beck, Sales, & Benjamin, 1995; Benjamin, Darling, & Sales, 1990; Hughes et al., 1992; McBeth et al., 2008; McNamara & Margulies, 1994; Schuckit, Smith, & Landi, 2000; Zacharias, 2004).

Research on college drinking clearly supports that students who make D’s and F’s drink more frequently and in heavier quantities than students who make A’s; however, research estimates at least 28% of A-level college students are still engaged in heavy drinking (CORE Institute, 2006; Taylor, Johnson, Voas, & Turrisi, 2006; Williams, Powell, & Wechsler, 2003; Wolaver, 2002). Porter and Pryor (2007) have found approximately 45% of college students meeting criteria for heavy episodic drinking, yet a report published in 2011 shows 72% of students at public colleges and 85% of students at private colleges receiving A’s and B’s (Rojstaczar & Healy, 2012). Put these numbers together and we can see a college culture in which many students who excel academically also drink heavily.

Because high achieving students are not seeing the negative results from their drinking behavior on their academic performance, they may not notice or perceive the
negative consequences of alcohol use in others areas of life. Further, because of their high achieving status, their drinking behaviors are most likely overlooked by college administrators—resulting in a lack of assistance with any underlying issues they may be experiencing. Given that high achieving students figure out ways to be academically successful during high school and college, there are short and long-term implications for their drinking behaviors on physical health, lost potential, legal issues, and mental health (Peairs, Eichen, Putallaz, Costanzo, & Grimes, 2011).

While there is a large body of research filled with statistical evidence of heavy alcohol use across the academic spectrum of college students, we can learn more about the experiences of high achievers who drink. The purpose of this study was to expand our understanding of this population, from a qualitative approach, and learn more about why they drink and what meaning they ascribe to their heavy drinking behaviors within the context of high academic achievement. This research has wide-ranging implications, from informing alcohol abuse prevention for targeted populations of students to reducing long-term alcohol dependence incidents via early intervention opportunities. Although there was an intentional design to this study that held aside pre-conceived assumptions about emergent data, I presented several potential theoretical frameworks within this opening chapter, and within the literature review, which ultimately provided a useful lens for interpreting findings and drawing conclusions.

**Alcohol and college.** We have learned a great deal about alcohol use on campus from the empirical literature on college student drinking. Landmark reports like the 1993
Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study and other large national data projects such as the ongoing University of Michigan’s Monitoring the Future Study, begun in 1975, have increased our understanding about student characteristics that influence drinking behaviors. In addition, such reports have informed our understanding of environmental conditions that promote drinking behavior, and have uncovered a broad array of negative consequences associated with drinking (DeJong, 2007; Ham & Hope, 2003; Huang, DeJong, Towvim, & Schneider, 2009; Mallett et al., 2013; O’Malley & Johnston, 2002; Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeykens, & Castillo, 1994; Wechsler & Kuo, 2003; Weitzman, Nelson, & Wechsler, 2003; White & Hingson, 2014; Zeigler et al., 2005).

We know that college students are more likely than their non-college going peers to drink and drink heavily, and those who were frequent drinkers in high school are more likely to engage in frequent and heavy drinking in college (O’Malley & Johnson, 2002; Taylor, Johnson, Voas, & Turrisi, 2006; Wechsler, Dowdall, Davenport, & Castillo, 1995). We also know that heavy and frequent college drinkers are more likely than moderate and infrequent drinkers to suffer a long list of self-reported negative consequences, including undesired sexual experiences and performance, assaults, vandalism, drinking and driving, missed classes, hangovers, underperformance on tests, and memory loss (Califano, 2007; Hingson et al., 2009; Jennison, 2004; Wechsler et al., 1994; Wechsler & Nelson, 2008).

There is consistent evidence in the literature that male college students consume more, drink more frequently, and are more likely to suffer negative consequences of their drinking than women. However, women who drink are at higher risk for some serious
alcohol-related consequences, most significantly sexual assault, in comparison to men who drink (Presley, Leichliter, & Meilman, 1998; Taylor et al., 2006; Wechsler et al., 1995; Wolaver, 2007). Research shows that Caucasian and Hispanic students drink more than African-American students, and colleges located in the Northeast and North-Central regions of the U.S. tend to have higher heavy drinking rates than those in other areas of the country (Ham & Hope, 2003; Treise, Wolburg, & Otnes, 1999). Conversely, students also report several desired effects from use, including a sense of fitting in, ease of stress and tension, enhanced ability to interact socially, and enjoyment of college life (Colby, Colby, & Raymond, 2009; Crawford & Novak, 2006; Ham & Hope, 2003; Huang et al., 2009; Peele & Brodsky, 2000; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996; Wechsler et al., 1994; Wechsler et al., 1995; Wechsler et al., 1998; Weitzman et al., 2003).

**Alcohol and academics.** Given the academic mission of colleges, it is no surprise that a common emphasis of research on negative consequences of alcohol consumption among college students focuses on academics and drinking behaviors. Research on the effects of alcohol on academics has produced mixed findings, despite common sense telling us that drinking has obvious direct negative impacts on academic outcomes (Singleton, 2007). Many studies have reported a relationship between alcohol use and negative consequences related to academics, with these most commonly in reference to students’ self-reported impact of drinking resulting in missed classes, causing them to do poorly on a test, and their having trouble focusing and studying (Cook & Moore, 1993; Powell, Williams, &
Wechsler, 2004; Singleton, 2007; Taylor et al., 2006; Thombs et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2003; Wolaver, 2002; Wood, Sher, Erickson, & DeBord, 1997).

Indirect relationships between alcohol use and impaired academic performance have been clearly established through such factors as the amount of time that drinking takes away from studying, and the connection between alcohol use prevalence, specific college subcultures that are believed to promote anti-intellectual attitudes such as Greeks and athletes, and the academic outcomes of these groups (Larimer, Turner, Mallett, & Geisner, 2004; Taylor et al., 2006; Wolaver, 2002). Direct effects of alcohol on academic performance have been much harder to establish, due to several limitations in studies, including small, single campus samples and cross-sectional approaches (Ham & Hope, 2003). Most apparent is the challenge of controlling for all of the factors that influence academic performance. Many studies highlight the multitude of pre-college and during-college variables that influence a student’s individual success or failure in the classroom (Taylor et al., 2006; Thombs et al., 2009; Wolaver, 2002). In addition, ethical limitations prevent experimental studies that would assign potentially harmful conditions to groups or individuals, but might elicit establishment of causal relationships between alcohol and outcomes.

High achievers. In addition to understanding the role and influence of alcohol on college campuses, we must also understand something about the high achieving student. There is a relatively large volume of research on high achievement and giftedness at the grade school and high school level, focused on social-emotional development, perfectionism, depression, interpersonal relationships, self-actualization and psychological well-being (Jin
& Moon, 2006; Matthews & Kitchen, 2007; Mueller, 2009; Pufal-Struzik, 1999; Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010; Spiers Neumeister, Williams, & Cross, 2007). There is a particular focus on the differing experiences of stress and coping strategies of gifted youth and non-gifted youth in response to academic challenges (Peairs et al., 2011; Preuss & Dubow, 2004; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Ruban & Reis, 2006; Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010).

However, with the exception of studies looking at special groups of gifted college students such as those that enter college early, there is limited literature on high achieving college students and their experiences outside of some seminal work conducted over 50 years ago (Clark, 2008; Rinn & Plucker, 2004). According to Rinn and Plucker (2004), we have limited information regarding high achieving students on factors related to choosing a college or university, the learning process, their ability in multiple disciplines, their personality characteristics, and their success in college. Overall, there is a lack of research on special populations of talented students.

There is evidence to suggest that academically gifted students rank academic challenge and social environment highly when asked what influences their choice of college to attend (Douglas & Powers, 1985; Kerr & Colangelo, 1988; McClung & Stevenson, 1988; Rinn & Plucker, 2004). Research indicates that students who are part of college honors programs have a high need for achievement, are driven toward perfectionism, and are more introverted than their non-honors peers (Harte, 1994; Hickson & Driskill, 1970; Laycock, 1984; Mathiasen, 1985; Randall & Copeland, 1986; Yoo & Moon, 2006). While gifted students deal with many of the same developmental challenges as the average college
student, they face additional challenges including perfectionism, fear or failure, isolation, and self-perceived difficulties fitting in socially (Ford, Webb, & Sandidge, 1994; Kerr, 1991; Yoo & Moon, 2006).

Of greatest interest to this study may be Cross, Coleman, and Stewart’s (1993) findings that gifted students often engage in coping strategies to influence how others interact and perceive them to mitigate self-awareness of social stigmas. In their study of pre-college gifted students, Cross et al. (1993) found three important themes to be true for these students’ social experience: gifted and talented students want to have normal social interactions; they believe that people treat them differently when aware of their giftedness; and, they can influence how others interact with them by manipulating the information others have about them through various coping strategies. If these students reach the college environment with similar social perspectives, and perceive drinking to be a central common focus for the predominant social culture, heavy alcohol consumption could be one such coping strategy to employ (Rice & Van Arsdale, 2010; Windle & Windle, 1996).

Selective institutions. The research is clear—college environmental factors interact with a variety of other variables to affect student drinking behaviors (Mallett et al., 2013; Presley, Meilman, & Leichliter, 2002; Wechsler & Kuo, 2003; Wechsler & Nelson, 2008). Racial composition, the presence of Greek and athletics sub-cultures, percentages of students living on- and off-campus, two- and four-year degree designation, and size and geographic location all have been associated with alcohol consumption (Presley et al., 2002). Generally, historically white institutions, those with large populations of fraternity and
sorority members and athletes, those that are granting 4-year degrees, smaller schools, and schools in the Northeast and North Central region of the country have higher quantity and frequency rates of drinking (Presley et al., 2002). Therefore, it is important to understand the context in which the proposed study will take place.

Depending on the source, the 4,600 or so colleges and universities in the U.S. are divided into a variety of categories such as size, mission, degree granting ability, admissions selectivity, and student academic profile (Carnegie Classification, 2010). For example, “top tier” institutions have highly competitive admissions standards, enroll students who graduate in the top 35% of their high school class, have SAT scores above 1240, and accept less than 50% of applicants (Carnevale & Rose, 2003).

Highly selective colleges and universities have several important characteristics relative to understanding who attends these schools and the overall campus culture. According to Greene and Greene (2000), less than 1% of all college students attend the ten most selective U.S. colleges, yet these students represent over 30% of the top high school academic achievers and highest scores nationally on the SAT exam. Over 20% of America’s highest paid CEO’s are alumni of the 20 most selective U.S. colleges (Greene & Greene, 2000), an indication of both the social capital and human capital that can be acquired at a top school. While the racial, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity of most colleges in the U.S. has increased significantly over the last quarter century, selective colleges lag behind. Aside from Asian students, who tend to represent a greater share of places at highly selective institutions than their proportion in the population of rising college students, the two largest
minority populations (African-Americans and Hispanics) represent less than half of the places their population proportion would suggest, a considerable underrepresentation (Carnevale & Rose, 2003; Massey, 2003).

Even more significant is the skewed access to selective colleges by socio-economic status, with almost 75% of all students at the most selective schools representing the top quarter of the socioeconomic spectrum, and just 3% from the bottom quartile (Carnevale & Rose, 2003). Highly selective schools spend more per student, have higher graduation rates, have greater access to postgraduate studies, and their graduates tend to see a significant wage premium in the workforce (Carnevale & Rose, 2003). Greene and Greene (2000) found that students who attend the most selective institutions tend to describe the campus academic environment most often as challenging, rigorous, and intense, with high levels of academic stress.

Although very little published research exists comparing alcohol use at highly selective institutions to the national college average, Outside the Classroom, a technology-based company that provides alcohol education to colleges and universities, has compiled data comparing drinking statistics from national data sets to drinking at several COFHE institutions (Outside the Classroom, 2010). COFHE is the Consortium on Financing Higher Education, and is composed of approximately 30 private, highly selective, liberal-arts colleges and universities (http://web.mit.edu/cofhe/index.html). Data from Outside the Classroom shows COFHE schools to have slightly more light and moderate drinkers, similar percentages of high risk drinkers, and fewer non-drinkers than the national average (Outside
the Classroom, 2010). However, while students at COFHE schools are just as likely to arrive on campus as high-risk drinkers as the national average, students rate of change from non-drinker or low/moderate drinker to high-risk drinker increases at a significantly higher rate at COFHE schools than the national average (Outside the Classroom, 2010). Students at these schools also engage in a variety of high-risk drinking practices, such as pre-gaming (consuming large quantities of alcohol in a short period of time prior to attending public events or going to bars), taking shots of hard liquor, chugging alcohol, and choosing a drink because it has more alcohol, at rates higher than the national average (Outside the Classroom, 2010).

The confluence of alcohol, academics, high ability students, and the environment at highly selective institutions provides the backdrop for this study. There are many questions left unanswered in the existing literature about alcohol use and college students, and specifically the connections between heavy drinking, high achieving college students, and the lived experience of this population of students during college. This study explored, from a qualitative perspective, the meaning high achieving students ascribe to their drinking, within a large and mounting field of evidence that drinking frequently and heavily results in measurable negative outcomes.

**Purpose of the Study**

The following dissertation lays out the purpose, significance, place within existing literature, methodological approach, findings, discussion and implications for better understanding a previously unexplored phenomenon on college campuses: the lived
experience of high academic achieving and heavy drinking college students at selective institutions. This study provided a coming together of varied and in some cases limited research into alcohol use on college campuses and its role in academic performance, high achieving college students and their characteristics and experiences, and the academic and social environments at selective institutions.

Higher education professionals spend a great deal of their time and resources trying to understand and help “red flag” students. These students experience obvious and easily identifiable negative consequences due to the abuse of alcohol such as academic failure and/or objectionable and policy violating social behavior. However, high achieving students who engage in heavy drinking behaviors represent a forgotten group of students, often overlooked both in the literature and on campus. These students seem, at first glance, to have it all figured out. They are the students who excel academically, are involved in the public life of the campus, and engage socially; yet, many drink at exceptionally high levels. The field of research on alcohol and college students has focused on student characteristics that influence drinking behavior, environmental conditions that promote drinking behavior, consequences of drinking, and the efficacy of various interventions, but has generally ignored looking specifically at the sub-population of students who are high achieving and academically successful, yet engage in heavy drinking.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe and understand, through qualitative research methods and a phenomenological approach, the lived experience of high
academic achieving and high-risk drinking, traditionally aged college students, at a highly selective research university.

**Research Questions**

The central research question that guided this study was what is the lived experience of college students who excel academically and engage in high-risk drinking behaviors? Accompanying research questions included:

- What is the essence, or central theme, of the lived experience of college students who excel academically and engage in high-risk drinking behaviors?
- How do high academic achieving college students come to understand and make meaning of their high-risk drinking behaviors?

Through these questions, the goal of this study was to expand understanding of drinking experiences among an often-overlooked population of students in terms of their health and overall wellbeing using an interpretive approach to qualitative inquiry.

The literature review details a set of cognitive decision-making theories that speak to the meaning college students may ascribe to their drinking. These theoretical frameworks explore drinking through a lens of: alcohol expectancies—what students believe drinking will do to them and for them; social drinking norms—what students believe about the drinking habits and attitudes of their peers; drinking rituals and rites of passage—the role students believe alcohol plays within the college experience; and, drinking motivation—the needs and functions alcohol fulfills for students. At a most basic level, all of these theories speak to a question of, why drink?
The proposed methodological approach for this study, qualitative phenomenology, is in itself a theoretical perspective, based on an assumption that an individuals’ conscious interpretation of their experience (the phenomenon) matters more than any attempt at discovering an objective truth to what really happened (Giorgi, 1985). In the context of this study, there was no effort to observe the experience of high achieving, heavy drinking college students. The attempt was to understand their experience as they understand it. Phenomenology also requires researchers to hold aside prior assumptions and theories, in order to let the data emerge unbiased. Therefore, the collective review of these theoretical frameworks, in both the literature review and methodology sections, served two primary purposes. First, they assisted the researcher in acknowledging what was known going in and what needed to be held aside consciously in order to allow participants to share their own experiences without biases getting in the way. Second, they assist readers of this study, and assisted the researcher, by helping to frame and understand the experiences of high achieving, heavy drinking college students in the interpretive stage of research.

**Definition of Terms**

The following list of terms will assist readers of this study in understanding the language being used.

**Heavy drinking/high risk drinking.** Alcohol consumption, or ‘drinking’, encompasses two ideas important in understanding an individual's drinking behavior: frequency (how often a person drinks) and quantity (how much a person drinks). Frequency of consumption refers to the number of days or occasions that an individual has consumed
alcoholic beverages during a specified interval (e.g., week or month). Quantity of consumption refers to the amount ingested on a given drinking occasion.

Most typically, consumption is assessed using ‘standard drinks’, defined as: 5 ounces of wine, 12 ounces of beer, or 1.25 ounces of distilled spirits. Because individuals do not drink the same amount at every drinking occasion, some surveys attempt to assess the frequency with which a person drinks various amounts of alcohol (e.g., one to two drinks, three to four drinks, five to six drinks) over a specified period of time. This approach provides a fairly accurate assessment of total volume consumed and of variability in drinking patterns.

For the purposes of this study, however, identifying light or moderate consumption is not the issue, ‘heavy’ or ‘high risk’ consumption is. For that reason, it is common to assess heavy drinking on the basis of the frequency of consuming a number of drinks meeting or exceeding a certain threshold. Based on the influential work of Harvard’s Henry Wechsler and colleagues—who define ‘binge’ or ‘heavy/heavy episodic’ drinking as five or more drinks in a row for men and four or more drinks for women—this has become a key measure in estimating the extent of alcohol problems on college campuses (Bachman, Wadsworth, O’Malley, Johnston, & Schulenberg, 1997; Presley, Meilman, & Lyerla, 1996; Wechsler & Nelson, 2001). Because many college students who engage in the heaviest drinking often consume alcohol in quantities beyond binge levels, a sampling technique was used to attempt to identify the heaviest drinking students among the high achieving population.
High-ability/achieving student. For the purposes of this study a high-ability, high academic achieving student is one that has completed at least half of his or her academic credits toward graduation and has a cumulative grade point average (GPA) at or above a 3.5. The available literature also refers to students in this category as academically gifted, academically talented, and honors students, but do not establish intellectual criteria in the same way that literature on giftedness in youth (pre-college) are derived from varying IQ levels (Clark, 2008; Rinn & Plucker, 2004). Through subject sampling techniques, the highest achieving students who also met heavy drinking criteria were identified.

Selective institution. For the purposes of this study, a ‘selective/highly selective’ institution was identified as a college or university that has a highly selective admissions criteria, whose student body represent the highest academic achievers, accepts few transfer students, is largely residential, has a strong focus on research and is defined as top tier, highly selective, or elite by Carnegie Classification criteria (Carnegie Classification, 2010), Barron’s (Carnevale & Rose, 2003), or Greene (2000). The research site met the following criteria:

- Fall enrollment data showed at least 80 percent of undergraduates enrolled full-time
- Test score data for first-year students indicated that the institution is more selective in admissions (analysis of first-year students’ test scores places these institutions in roughly the top fifth of baccalaureate institutions).
- Fewer than 20 percent of entering undergraduates are transfer students.
• Fall enrollment data showed FTE enrollment of at least 10,000 degree-seeking students (both undergraduate and graduate/professional)

• At least half of degree-seeking undergraduates live on campus and at least 80 percent attend full time.

• At least 60–79 percent of bachelor’s degree majors are in the arts and sciences

• Graduate degrees are observed in at least half of the fields corresponding to undergraduate majors.

• It is a doctorate-granting university.

• Is considered a very high research activity institution

**Significance of the Study**

Studies of alcohol use and college students overwhelmingly present a quantitative approach, using methods such as cross-sectional snapshots and small, single campus samples, which limit generalizability and present varying degrees of response bias via self-reported data. In addition, most have concerns with including or not including pre-college variables, making any causal inferences impossible. The few qualitative approaches seem to offer expanded understanding of motives and perspectives on alcohol use. Given the resulting negative consequences of alcohol abuse that impact personal safety and security, health and wellness, and academic performance, and the relative inability of colleges to positively influence change on their campuses, it is important that research into college student drinking begin to look at new and innovative approaches to the issues (Califano, 2007). This study contributes to the field of research by taking a qualitative and phenomenological approach to
gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of heavy drinking college students from their own perspectives and via their own meaning making.

In addition, this study offers insight into what many in higher education would term the ‘best and brightest’. Given the proliferation of alcohol and other drug assistance programs in professional fields that attract high achieving students, such as medicine and law, we must begin to narrow the view of research on college students at the highest levels of academic achievement to see if we can begin to understand motivations for and implications of heavy alcohol use during college. Understanding these student perspectives and experiences has important implications for academic advising strategies, academic and student-life policy development and enforcement, alcohol education programs, counseling interventions, and health and wellness and/or alcohol abuse and dependence treatment approaches.

**Overview of Methodological Approach**

Why choose qualitative inquiry to study college student drinking? The answer to this question lies at the heart of critical assumptions and beliefs of the qualitative researcher. The qualitative researcher assumes the purpose of research is description rather than prediction, that discovery of new knowledge happens inductively rather than deductively, and that results or studies may not generalize, and often do not, to other populations, but rather inform future understanding and research (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Most importantly, a qualitative researcher is concerned with subjective experiences of people, not at the expense of objective knowing, but from the belief that all knowing is subjective and
created by human interaction (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). It is for these reasons that this study offers a qualitative design.

Within qualitative research, there are several theories that guide the process. As Guba and Lincoln (1989) state, “if knowledge exists essentially in the form of human constructions, than a paradigm that recognizes and accepts that premise from the start is to be preferred to one that does not” (pp. 67-68). They go on to assert that if the research approach has in its process a requirement for “constructors to confront one another’s constructions and to deal with them, then the constructivist paradigm ought surely to be the paradigm of choice” (p. 68).

The constructivist paradigm answers three important questions: what is there that can be known (the ontological question), what is the relationship of the knower to the known (the epistemological question), and what are the ways of finding out knowledge (the methodological question) (Guba & Lincoln, 1989)? The constructivist answers these questions by asserting that knowledge is socially constructed, and that truth is best defined as the most informed construction on which there is some consensus; that the researcher and research participants literally create the findings through their interactions; and, that methodology involves an ongoing process of discovery, analysis, critique, re-discovery, and re-analysis, leading to a shared construction of new knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

With a qualitative approach and a constructivist paradigm, a style of design is necessary to give support to the underlying assumptions of the researcher.

Phenomenological research emphasizes the individual’s subjective experience (Bogdan &
Biklen, 2007). The point of view of the participant is paramount, and the researcher avoids personal assumptions about realities apart from the participant. This notion fits both philosophically and structurally within a constructivist paradigm and a rational decision making framework, in that within the framework of phenomenology, people will “act according to the meaning they attribute to things” (Krathwohl, 2009, p. 242). In other words, their meaning is socially constructed. While this study offers theoretical frameworks for better understanding the phenomenon of interest in the interpretive stage of this study, it is important to understand that phenomenology is also a theoretical perspective, which guides the assumptions and methodology of the study (Jones, Torres, & Armino, 2006).

The experiences of college students and their decisions to drink, studied via surveys and statistics, is valuable in terms of framing issues and finding influential factors. However, the qualitative approach, from a constructivist paradigm, and within a phenomenological design, allows the student participants to engage fully in their own knowledge building. It puts the students, the ones who experience the decisions and consequences, at the start, center and end of the research process. The study becomes by them, for them, and ultimately served to benefit them by allowing a meaning making process to occur, situated in their own experience. A theoretical framework, which either informs a researcher’s knowledge base prior to a study or emerges from the data later in a study, does not supersede the student meaning making, but instead is one more component of the constructed experience.
Chapter Summary and Organization of the Study

The issue of heavy college student drinking is one that has attracted a great deal of attention both at the institutional and research levels. Within the literature field, the vast majority of studies have been quantitative in nature and have either focused on aggregate populations or those sub-populations that have suffered academically as a result of their alcohol consumption. This study sought to expand the field of research into this area by providing a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of college students at a highly selective institution who excel academically and engage in heavy drinking. It provided new insights into this phenomenon and opened new opportunities for future research. It illuminated a population of students that does not receive a great deal of attention in terms of drinking behaviors, such that we can consider new and more effective means for policy implementation, educational intervention, and treatment.

This study was carried out via qualitative and phenomenological methodologies, in order to view this issue through the interpretations of the students who experienced it. By employing a rigorous research design, the aim was to reduce the collected data to the essence of the participant’s experiences.

Chapter two will provide a thorough and in-depth review of the relevant field of literature on this subject, focusing on major studies with significant implications for research design, as well as theoretical frameworks that can both shape the readers understanding of the topic and guided interpretation and conclusions after the data was collected and analyzed. Chapter three provides a detailed examination of the study design through methodology
philosophies and the specific steps taken during data collection and analysis. By the end of the chapter on methodology, readers will have a clear understanding of why this study was undertaken, where the study fits into the existing field of research, and how the study unfolded. Chapter four has a focus on the students who participated in the study, providing a composite summary profile of each. Chapter five lays out the findings of the study, sharing examples of student narratives that speak to the major themes found across their experiences of the phenomenon at hand. Finally, chapter six offers a discussion of the findings in the context of both the field of relevant research and implications for professional practice, as well as some suggestions for future research and concluding thoughts.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature for the field of research on college students and drinking is extensive. A cursory search of academic research in this area yields tens of thousands of citations. This literature is overwhelmingly quantitative in nature and can be broken into several large themes, including: how much and how often college students drink, individual and group characteristics of those that drink and abstain, peer group and environmental influences on consumption, consequences of alcohol use, and policies and interventions to help reduce harm and consumption.

The literature for the field of research on high-achieving or academically gifted and talented college students is small. There is a much larger body of work on K-12 students and giftedness. Within the college student-focused research, the primary focus is on Honors programs and counseling needs of high-achieving students. There does exist a much larger body of research on the general subject of achievement and academic motivation.

Given the expanse and variety of literature, and the specific elements of this study that focus on the lived experiences of high academic achieving students and heavy drinking, I will present three primary focus areas within this literature review. First, I will present an in-depth review of key studies related to alcohol use and academic performance in college. This is a critical area of research for the current study given the specific interest in high academic achieving students. To understand the students lived experience, it will be important to understand the prevailing research on how alcohol consumption interacts with academic success in the college environment. The direct and indirect influence of alcohol
consumption on academic performance could have a profound impact on how students who are successful in college navigate the influence of alcohol and how they think about the potential tension between their consumption and academic success. This section will also include some related research concerning the relationship between and cognitive ability and alcohol consumption.

Next, I will present a review of the research on high-achievement. This section will be structured into two sections: studies related to the attributes of high-achieving students; and, studies related to the relationship between academic achievement and motivation. This research is important given the context of this study and focus on high achievers and their ability to navigate the rigor of college while maintaining a socially active and heavy drinking lifestyle. The role and influence of motivation could have interesting implications for these students and their ability to overcome what is commonly thought to be a detrimental behavior to academic success.

Finally, I will discuss a vast amount of literature that focuses on cognitive decision making factors that influence why students drink and predictions of individual differences in consumption rates and associated problems. The purpose of this section is to highlight several potential theoretical frameworks in the literature that may help inform the outcomes of this study. Although many factors are likely to influence a student’s decision to drink heavily in college, including personal demographic characteristics, pre-college drinking experiences, parental influences, and campus environmental conditions, the reasons why high academic achieving students choose to drink from a cognitive decision-making perspective
seems most salient given their competing intellectual academic interests. The cognitive processes of deciding to drink, and deciding when, where, how much and how often to drink are mediated and moderated by several factors that this section will explore. Specifically, research into alcohol consumption expectancies, perceived peer and campus drinking norms, perceptions of college drinking as a ritual and rite of passage, and drinking motives, will help to inform the theoretical framework of this study. This research will also provide some basis for understanding the meaning making that high achievers engage in when describing their drinking experiences.

These frameworks, while held aside during data collection and analysis, provided a lens through which to understand and interpret the meanings and descriptions the student subjects provided. The purpose of this review was to place the findings and conclusions of this study within relevant fields of research that already exist. Although the researcher began the study with a comprehensive understanding of the literature and theoretical frameworks that would inform the data analysis, an intentional effort was made to hold this information aside during data collection and analysis in order to strengthen the phenomenological methodology of the study and its core principle of bracketing (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010; Moustakas, 1994).

**Drinking and Academics**

The following review of literature in the field of college drinking and academics will highlight key studies and major findings, in order to provide a clear picture of what we know and understand. First, we will focus on the shift from studies that employ a two-variable
model to those that incorporate multiple variables in the analysis of relationships between alcohol and academics. Next, we will explore findings in studies related to direct and indirect effects of alcohol on academics. We will then look at the various methodological issues across the field of research on drinking and academics that impact significant differences in findings. While the current study will not attempt to address limitations in any quantitative methodologies, these limitations are important to understand in the context of the complex relationships that exist between students, alcohol, and academic performance. Finally, this section will review a select set of studies that address the relationship between intelligence and alcohol consumption.

**Bivariate studies.** Over the last two decades, researchers have attempted to establish the relationship between collegiate alcohol use and academic performance, with varying results. Several studies conducted since the early 1990’s that address the relationship between undergraduate alcohol consumption and academic performance show consistent bivariate associations between increased alcohol use and decreased academic performance based on GPA and study hours, and student’s self-reported academic difficulties related to increased alcohol use (Cook & Moore, 1993; Presley & Meilman, 1992; Presley, Meilman, & Cashin, 1996; Wechsler et al., 1994). Using subjective measures of consumption and academic performance, this body of research shows a clear distinction between the academic grade attainment of heavy drinkers and light to moderate drinkers, with a linear trend of the lowest grades going to the heaviest drinkers and the highest grades going to those that drink the least.
This same research also indicates a strong relationship between heavy drinking and associated performance measures such as missing a class, performing poorly on a test, and having memory loss. Several studies also focus on indirect effects of alcohol consumption on academic performance through class attendance, participation in class, study hours, and getting behind in schoolwork, and hypothesize that there must be direct effects of alcohol use on brain functioning via memory recall, attention time, and cognitive ability (Williams et al., 2003; Wolaver, 2002).

**Multivariate studies.** Citing concerns that prior research ignored background and other influential variables, more recent studies began to employ multivariate models, factoring in measures of academic aptitude, high school academic performance, concurrent drug use, living arrangements, parental drinking behaviors, and participation in other aspects of the college experience (Paschall & Freisthler, 2003; Powell et al., 2004; Singleton, 2007; Thombs et al., 2009; Wood et al., 1997). Although some research still finds small but significant associations between heavy use and lower academic performance, the more background and other key indicators of academic performance that are controlled for, the more likely the data is to show negligible and non-existent correlations (Singleton, 2007). This important shift in research raises questions about the association between alcohol and academics, and whether other pre-existing variables play a more important role in college academic performance.

Wood et al. (1997), in support of many prior studies, found a moderate bivariate association between problematic alcohol consumption and academic problems in college,
such that alcohol involvement during the freshman year was predictive of academic problems over the course of a college career. However, when Wood et al. (1997) added third variables to their structural equation model, each of which previous research had identified as important in the prediction of college success, the association between alcohol use and academic performance disappeared. The employment of individual student characteristics such as academic aptitude and high school academic achievement dropped the unique variance in academic problems attributable to alcohol use from 10% to .01%. This study is important to consider in the context of how alcohol affects students of various academic achievement levels, and that individual characteristics may be more predictive of alcohol problems than use itself.

**Direct and indirect effects.** Several studies published in the early 2000’s utilize results from the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study (1993, 1997, 1999 waves), to focus on alcohol’s direct and indirect effect on specific variables associated with academic performance, such as the relationship between increased alcohol consumption, time spent studying, and GPA (Powell et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2003; Wolaver, 2002, 2007). These studies continued to find direct bivariate associations between alcohol and time spent studying, and time spent studying and GPA, but little support for causal relationships between alcohol and academic performance. An important aspect of all of these studies is the recognition that many students who see the greatest impact of alcohol on academic performance are not included in the data sets because they have already dropped out or been
asked to leave college. These studies also found discrepancies between the effects of drinking on the study habits of freshman and upper class students.

Paschall and Freisthler (2003) found small, non-significant associations between college GPA and specific measures of heavy alcohol use, alcohol-related problems, and drinking opportunities in the first year of college. The study, conducted at the highly selective University of California at Berkley, contains waves of survey data collected from 465 students prior to their freshman year compared to freshman year academic performance to determine the effects of heavy drinking, alcohol related problems, and drinking opportunities. Consistent with Wood et al. (1997), the study suggests that there are no important direct effects of alcohol on academic performance in college, essentially dismissing cross-sectional findings of direct associations as attributable to pre-existing factors. Moreover, like Wood et al. (1997), the study found academic aptitude and pre-college academic success to be the best predictors of college academic success. Paschall and Freisthler (2003) present an important context for the present study of high-ability students, given the protective nature that high academic aptitude and previous academic success could have in mitigating the effects of heavy drinking.

Singleton (2007) took an important step forward from Paschall and Freisthler (2003) by obtaining official institutional academic data on subjects, employing a host of key background variables in the analysis, and collecting a randomized sample of participants. Singleton’s (2007) findings, based on a multivariate analysis of factors, challenge notions that alcohol use has little or no direct effect on academic performance by establishing that
alcohol use does in fact influence academic performance in both the short and long term. The findings also show that the amount of alcohol consumed, rather than frequency of consumption, has the strongest negative association with academic performance.

Singleton’s (2007) most important finding is the important effect of campus environment and type of institution on whether or not alcohol consumption would have a significant impact on academic performance. The study suggests that more homogeneous student populations on campuses with monolithic drinking cultures may experience more pressure to drink and this culture may override background variables. Singleton (2007) called for a consideration of college context as a moderating influence on drinking behaviors, and research that explores the influential combination of campus culture and personal characteristics on the effect of drinking on academic performance.

**Limiting methodological factors.** Many studies show a correlation between alcohol use and academic success factors such as number of years of school completed, time spent studying, actual GPA, and choice of major (Cook & Moore, 1993; Singleton, 2007; Powell et al., 2004; Thombs et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2003; Wolaver, 2002, 2007). However, none expresses a causal relationship due to several study limitations, including: failure to use random sampling; inability to control for all predictor variables or omitted variable bias; lack of experimental conditions due to ethical constraints; and, most importantly, the fact that the drinking, as a variable, is highly mediated by so many other factors in terms of its impact on potential academic outcomes. As Wolaver (2002) pointed out, “If students choose not to study and if they receive poor grades…it may cause them to drink more” (p. 416). In this
example, drinking does not cause the undesired academic outcome, but there is a relationship.

Clearly, the main issue within existing research is the declining significance of alcohol as a predictor of lost academic productivity when individual background variables and environmental variables are considered. From large multi-institutional studies and data sets (Cook & Moore, 1993; Powell et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2003; Wolaver, 2002) to small single-campus samples (Singleton, 2007; Wood et al., 1997), negative effects of alcohol use on academics remain speculative.

Researchers still make inferences of correlations by reasoning that some students who choose alcohol consumption over studying, which are both time intensive endeavors and involve a trade-off of time allocation, will likely suffer academically as a result (Williams et al., 2003). It makes reasonable sense to hypothesize that if students are spending significant amounts of time drinking, and that drinking has negative consequences of hangovers, missed classes, and other issues that would take away from academics, that this would compromise short and long-term academic success (Powell et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2003; Wolaver, 2002).

**Intelligence and drinking.** There exists a limited and relatively recent set of studies that focused on the relationship between intelligence, predominantly measured by IQ, and substance use (Batty et al., 2008; Finn & Hall, 2004; Kanazawa & Hellberg, 2010; Latvala, Rose, Pulkkinen, Dick, & Kaprio, 2013; Peairs et al., 2011; White & Batty, 2012). These studies are a mix of qualitative and quantitative design, and several have taken a longitudinal...
approach by following cohorts of children through adolescence to adulthood. Despite evidence suggesting that lower cognitive ability in adolescence and adulthood predicts increased risk for alcohol and other drug related mortality and morbidity, the mounting current data shows that higher intelligence is linked to early experimentation, more frequent use, and more use overall in adolescence and adulthood (Latvala et al., 2013).

Batty et al. (2008) were among the early researchers to examine this phenomenon, utilizing the 1970 British Cohort of children as a sample. They found higher childhood cognitive ability linked to both alcohol problems and greater alcohol intake in adulthood. They hypothesized that this was likely due to people of higher intelligence engaging in career and social environments that would expect and require frequent consumption. They also interpreted a sampling effect, with those of higher intelligence being more likely to respond to a study about health effects of substance use.

White and Batty (2012) used the same study sample of British children to look at drug use as opposed to alcohol. Concerned that the relationship between high IQ and elevated parental social class, occupation, educational attainment and income, along with a significant relationship between psychological distress and substance use, could have influenced the results of previous studies, they controlled for these factors and still found higher IQ predictive of greater illegal substance use in adolescence and adulthood. Interestingly, and with implications for the current study, the subjects with the highest IQ’s also tested highly for stimulation seeking, novelty seeking, and openness to experiences.
This association between intelligence and novel stimuli had already been explored by Kanazawa and Hellberg (2010), who had used an anthropological approach to hypothesize that the association between higher intelligence and increased substance use was due to the adaptation of the human brain over time to stimuli. They argued that the human brain had originally been designed for and adapted to the conditions of our ancestral environment. As society developed over time, the brain may have had difficulty comprehending and dealing with situations that did not exist in the ancestral environment. Kanazawa and Hellberg (2010) believed that intelligent people may have an easier time dealing with evolutionarily novel stimuli like alcohol, the consumption of which is a recent phenomenon. Citing examples of other more recent stimuli that are associated with intelligence—liberalism, atheism, and sexual exclusivity—they posit that a willingness to seek novel stimulation is what leads people with higher intelligence towards substance use.

Peairs et al. (2011) took a more sociological approach to the relationship between high intelligence and greater likelihood of alcohol use, looking deeper into the interpersonal factors involved. They hypothesized that gifted youth may be more likely to initiate use as one way to compensate for the social cost that may come along with high academic ability. In adolescence, the desire to fit in is a powerful dynamic within a peer group, and gifted teens face a delicate balance of wanting to cultivate their talents while achieving social acceptance. Peairs et al. (2011) noted that these adolescents often engage in coping strategies to resolve a real or perceived conflict between these two interests, where they “mask their giftedness and/or develop alternative identities which are perceived as more
socially acceptable and valued within a peer culture motivated by conformity” (p. 96).

Conflicting with other research in this area, Peairs et al. (2011) found that gifted students do not continue to use alcohol as regularly through adolescence after initiation of use. They suggest that the gifted students may be more likely to recognize the social benefits of use and experimentation, but also understand that use does not have to accompany negative behaviors.

**Concluding thoughts on alcohol and academics.** There are several relevancies and implications of past research on the present study. First, it is important to recognize that a variety of factors play aggravating and mitigating roles in the influence of alcohol on academic performance. Students who engage in other deviant behavior, lack histories of academic success, do not possess measured academic aptitude, or who live in environments that are unsupportive of academic success, may see greater negative impact from drinking on academic outcomes than students who bring strong academic backgrounds and motivation and live in achievement-oriented environments.

Second, just because a student is making A’s, does not mean they are achieving their full academic potential. It is quite possible that students with intellectual gifts and academic motivation experience less impact from alcohol use, but still experience some impact. How significant is the difference between a 4.0 and a 3.75 GPA at a highly competitive school where the vast majority of students are high achieving? More research is needed to understand what role alcohol plays in the academic identities of all students, including the highest achieving students.
Third, if we understand that people with high intelligence are more likely to drink, and we know that intelligence does not necessarily equal achievement, what other factors are at play in the success of students who drink heavily and make good grades? In addition, if we know that the association between intelligence and drinking is due at least in some part to a greater propensity for novel stimulus seeking and as a way for the gifted to fit in to social environments that may not always value their intellectual talents, what does that mean for how we support high-ability students in terms of encouraging their talents and connecting them socially? We need to understand more about the intersection of intellect, alcohol and achievement from both a physiological and psychological framework.

Finally, this research gives great support to the highly individualized and contextual nature of academic success and the influence of alcohol, as well as the significant role of method in research outcomes. To draw conclusions from any single study ignores the wide-ranging differences in results and data collection processes. Additional research approaches, such as the one presented here, only add to the canvas of understanding this issue.

High Achievement

To better understand the lived experiences of high academic achieving college students who drink heavily, it is important to understand more about high achievement as an independent construct, separate from alcohol. Although the primary purpose of this study is not to expand the body of literature on achievement and what drives academic success, the nature of the participants and their experiences may inform this field and thus, a review of relevant literature is called for.
This section will focus on two main areas of achievement: first, research related to the attributes of high-ability students; and second, research related to academic motivation. Knowing more about the characteristics, needs, and special considerations that high-ability students bring with them into various academic environments informs both the analysis and implications aspects of this study. Research in this field can help us understand similarities and differences between students who are seen as high-ability versus average or low-ability in terms of both their academic success and social interests, as well as understand protective and risk factors for high-ability students for substance use. Knowing more about what drives bright students to academic achievement illuminates the phenomenon of being high-achieving and heavy drinking. Research in this field can help us understand how high-ability and high-motivation students navigate a potentially oppositional behavior like heavy drinking towards successful academic outcomes.

**Attributes of high-ability students.** It is important to note that while there is an extensive body of research on gifted, high-ability, and talented students and their attributes, much of this research is focused on children and adolescents (Cross et al., 1993; Ford et al., 1994; Holliday, Roller & Kunce, 1996; Mueller, 2009; Preuss & Dubow, 2004; Pufal-Struzik, 1999; Shaunessy & Suldo, 2009). What little research does exist on the attributes of high-ability college students focuses primarily on a specific sub-population in Honors programs and is concerned with counseling needs (Braid, 2008; Harte, 1994; Hickson & Driskill, 1970; Jin & Moon, 2006; Kerr, 1991; Laycock, 1984; Mathiasen, 1985; Peterson, 2006; Randall & Copeland, 1986; Yoo & Moon, 2006). However, these and several other
important studies focused on the high-achieving college student offer a strong foundation and good insight for the current study (Rice & Van Arsdale, 2010; Rinn & Plucker, 2004; Warren & Heist, 1960).

Related to some of the research on intellect and alcohol, Warren and Heist (1960) offered some early perspective on the strong orientation toward sensory experiences and stimuli for college students with high scholastic aptitude. They observed high-ability students’ attraction and appreciation for both intellectual activity and more creative and aesthetic pursuits. Additionally, they suggested that high-ability college students preferred complexity in their stimulus patterns and were better able to deal with that complexity and potential disorder in their environment.

Several studies over the last forty years have focused on perceived similarities and differences between high-ability and other students at all levels of education from grade school to college (Harte, 1994; Hickson & Driskill, 1970; Holliday et al., 1996; Kerr and Colangelo, 1988; Mathiasen, 1985; Mueller, 2009; Peterson, 2006; Preuss & Dubow, 2004; Pufal-Struzik, 1999; Randall & Copeland, 1986; Rice & Van Arsdale, 2010; Shaunessy & Suldo, 2009). These studies have relied largely upon self-reported survey data, and have resulted in a mixed perspective on whether high-ability students are advantaged or disadvantaged in the academic environment. Peterson (2006) provides perhaps the best summary of the research by describing giftedness as both “asset and burden” (p. 45).

Kerr and Colangelo (1988) provided insight into the difference in attributes between exceptionally talented students and moderately talented students in their research into the
college plans of high-ability students. They found that the highest ability students (99th percentile) reported more social, adjustment and emotional problems, but the moderately talented students (95th percentile) were well adjusted and had few emotional problems. They found that these students actively sought out intellectually stimulating opportunities and were looking for a high level of social involvement and engagement in all that college life had to offer, including fraternity and sorority life.

Cross et al. (1993) added a significant element to our understanding of giftedness and social life with the exploration of Coleman’s (1985) Stigma of Giftedness Paradigm among high school students. They found that gifted students: 1) want to have normal social interactions, 2) believe that people treat them differently when aware of their giftedness, and 3) can influence how others interact with them by manipulating the information others have about them through various coping strategies. The gifted students in the study wanted to maintain normal relationships with peers, and if they did not stand out, they did not need to conform. Conformity was viewed in the research as a coping mechanism for gifted students to fit in when they felt perceived as different.

Ford et al. (1994) engaged in a similar study of the social attributes of gifted students, and like Cross et al. (1993), found that gifted youth report confronting a number of social and psychological challenges including pressure to perform, fear of failure, and social isolation. Gifted students experienced great conflict, valuing their talents but recognizing that this value was not always shared by peers. Ford et al. (1994) acknowledged that there was a need for more research in this area among college students, and posited that the lack of interest in
this population could stem from a belief that gifted college students have few problems or that their problems dissipate once they leave a more formal schooling environment.

There is ample research indicating that high-ability students possess a number of desirable personal characteristics that contribute toward their academic success, including higher persistence in the face of academic challenge, strong work and study habits, a sense of seriousness for academic pursuits, and desire to reach their full academic potential (Mathiasen, 1985; Pufal-Struzik, 1999; Rinn & Plucker, 2004). More recent studies have focused on the specific learning mechanisms and resiliency constructs that high-ability students possess and employ, including an ability to self-direct their own learning, establish autonomous goals, maintain confidence and self-concept, avoid depressive states, and cope with and solve complex problems (Clark, 2008; Mueller, 2009; Preuss & Dubow, 2004; Rinn, 2008; Ruban & Reis, 2006).

This notion of coping and dealing with problems, both in and outside of the classroom, was a focus of several recent studies that found that while both non-gifted and gifted students experienced and dealt with problems in their academic environments, gifted students’ strategies for resolution were different (Preuss & Dubow; Ruban & Reis, 2006; Shaunessy & Suldo, 2009). Preuss and Dubow (2004) compared intellectually gifted and typical children in their coping response to school and peer stressors, and found that gifted children endorsed problem-solving strategies to a greater degree than typical children. Ruban and Reis (2006) studied college students and the application of self-regulated learning strategies to academic challenges. They found that gifted students addressed their stressors
by actively finding ways to reduce workload by taking easier courses, recalibrating their personal expectations for success, and working with teachers to adjust assignments and deadlines. These students also reported using complex and sophisticated academic strategies that allowed them to study more efficiently and process information at a more meaningful level. Shaunessy and Suldo (2009), focusing on a cohort of high school students in an international baccalaureate program, found that gifted students experienced their problem solving and decision-making process at a more intuitive level than typical students and addressed problems with active strategies such as focusing to get their work done and finding temporary diversions to relax and de-stress. Non-gifted students tended to deal with problems by avoidance, procrastination and dwelling on the situation.

As can be seen in this body of research, academically talented and gifted students possess attributes that can both help and hinder their academic achievement. Although some educators and researchers may believe that college provides gifted students with the intellectual stimulation they have always desired, and therefore should be able to achieve on their own, there are several examples in the literature of researchers who call for much greater attention to the unique needs of high-ability students (Jin & Moon, 2006; Peterson, 2006; Rinn & Plucker, 2004; Yoo & Moon, 2006). Rinn and Plucker (2004) argue that issues such as fear of failure, increased competition, perfectionism (high need for exceptional achievement) and multipotentiality (ability to excel in multiple domains leads to indecision, lack of commitment, and related problems) among high-ability college students, as well as
our lack of understanding about how high-ability students learn, necessitate more research and more services for these students.

While the body of research on high-ability college student is sparse, the aforementioned studies all contribute to a greater appreciation for the complexity of the academic experience for students who are intellectually talented. They are likely to possess many attributes that support and encourage academic success, but also carry social stressors and unique psychological challenges that can impact their adjustment and navigation of the more interpersonal elements of the academic environment.

**Achievement and motivation.** While intelligence is an important attribute for academic success, there is a field of research that would suggest that intelligence alone cannot account for academic success; it is motivation that precedes greater educational and learning outcomes (Clark, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Motivation has been a focus of research in many areas of psychology due to its central role in producing the energy for, steering the direction of, and overcoming the challenges to, action (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Individuals are motivated to act based on a variety of factors, but generally action is driven by the intrinsic value derived from the activity itself or the strength of an external coercion or control mechanism (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The research in this section will focus on studies that help to explain the various types of motivation and how these relate to educational outcomes.
Much of this research, as it applies to the present study, relates back to Deci and Ryan’s (1985) Self-determination Theory (SDT) and Eccles’ (1983) Expectancy Value Theory of Motivation. Through their work on SDT, Deci and Ryan (2000) asserted that an understanding of human motivation “requires a consideration of innate psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness” (p. 227). In their model, competence is concerned with knowing how to attain desired external and internal outcomes and being effective in the performance of the actions needed to accomplish those outcomes. Relatedness involves the cultivation of connections with others in one's social contexts. Autonomy is the ability to be self-initiating and self-regulating of one’s actions and behaviors (Deci et al., 1991). At its core, self-determination involves the conditions within which an individual feels they are in control and driving their decisions and actions. Eccles’ (1983) Expectancy Value Theory asserts that a person’s decisions, persistence to goals, and performance can be understood through their expectations about how well they will do on the activity and the extent to which they value the activity (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

In a similar vein of research, Pintrich and DeGroot (1990) studied the concept of motivation as related to self-regulation and classroom academic performance. They found that self-regulation (acting in one’s own self-interest and in keeping with their values), along with self-efficacy (one’s belief in their ability to successfully complete tasks), were strong predictors of classroom performance. Additionally, they saw a positive relationship between intrinsic value of the educational activity and use of cognitive strategies and self-regulation. Pintrich and DeGroot (1990) connected their findings to Eccles’ (1983) Expectancy Value
model by positing that self-regulated learning involves: (a) an expectancy component, which includes students' beliefs about their ability to perform a task and responsibility for their own performance, asking themselves, can I do this task, (b) a value component, which includes students' goals and beliefs about the importance and interest of the task, asking themselves, why am I doing this task and, (c) an affective component, which includes students' emotional reactions to the task, asking themselves, how do I feel about this task.

Deci et al. (1991) also applied these constructs to education, finding that when students are intrinsically motivated or internalize the activities and regulatory process they are participating in, the result is high-quality learning and enhanced conceptual understanding. They believed that self-determination, within education, applied to promoting a student’s interest in learning, their value of education, and their confidence in their own academic capacity and skills.

Deci et al. (1991) discussed intrinsically and extrinsically motivated behaviors and provided definitions and educational examples of what different types of motivation might look like. They described intrinsically motivated behaviors as those engaged in freely and for the enjoyment and satisfaction derived from their performance. They cited the example of the child who reads for the inherent pleasure of doing so. They suggest that intrinsic motivation is the embodiment of self-determination—emanating from the self and fully endorsed. They described extrinsically motivated behaviors are those that are performed because they are believed to be instrumental to a consequence. They cited the example of a student who completes an assignment to avoid a parental confrontation or to acquire a
teacher’s praise. Deci et al. (1991) noted that in prior research, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation were viewed as antagonistic. Their interest and research, however, sought to explore the various types of extrinsic motivation and how these types might differentially represent self-determined versus controlled responses. The hypothesis was that it was the locus of control, not necessarily the origin of motivation, which was most directly related to heightened academic outcomes.

Deci et al. (1991) offered four types of extrinsic motivation that fall along different points on the continuum from autonomy to external control: external regulation, introjected regulation, identifiable regulation, and integrated regulation. External regulation applies to those behaviors that are controlled and initiated entirely external to the person. They are not self-determined, not valued internally, and the individual feels no autonomy over their decisions. Introjected regulation applies to behaviors that are internalized but not valued or self-determined. A student might get to class early because they know they will feel bad about themselves if they do not. There is internal coercion and not free choice. Identified regulation applies when a person values the behavior and has accepted the regulatory processes necessary to achieve the desired outcome, but there is still an instrumentality to the activity. A student might study harder for an exam because they know that their future success depends on doing well in the class. The student values the activity and does it willingly. Finally, integrated regulation applies to behaviors that are fully integrated with the individual’s sense of self and are assimilated with one’s values. Deci et al. (1991) cite an example of a student who has potentially oppositional interests and regulatory processes—
being a good student and being a good athlete. This student could initially experience some internal tension while navigating these experiences, even though both activities are highly valued. Deci et al. (1991) believed the student will only be equally motivated to achieve success when both identities have become integrated and internalized in harmony with other personal values. These behaviors would then be engaged in willingly, would be fully self-determined, and would mimic intrinsically motivated behaviors due to their autonomous nature, even if there is instrumental value.

Ultimately, Deci et al. (1991) and other research studies with a focus on the role of self-determination and autonomy in education found that students who had more self-determined forms of motivation for academic work were more likely to persist in school, had better conceptual learning and memory, more enjoyment of academic work, and more satisfaction with school (Benware & Deci, 1984; Clark, 2008; Connell & Wellborn, 1990; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990). These studies all suggested that social and academic contexts which promote greater autonomy and self-determination, and by result greater choice and responsibility, lead to highly desired educational and societal outcomes.

As Ryan and Deci (2000) point out, little of what adults do in life is purely intrinsic in nature. The concepts of self-determination and integrated regulation have significant application for the current study, given the social pressures associated with drinking and the types of external motivation that can influence academic performance. If college students are able to internalize and integrate their motivation to succeed academically and desire for
social engagement through heavy drinking, these studies provide some appreciation for their ability to be successful in both areas.

**Cognitive Decision Making Factors**

Over the past 30 years, a significant portion of college alcohol and drinking research has focused on cognitive factors that influence why college students drink, how much and how often they drink, and to what degree these cognitive factors predict alcohol related problems. Although much of this research is interrelated, several distinct themes have emerged, each exploring cognitive factors through different lenses and orientations.

Research into college alcohol expectancies addresses the question, what will alcohol do for me, and looks at beliefs students hold about the effects of alcohol use (Osberg et al., 2010; Osberg, Insana, Eggert, & Billingsley, 2011). These beliefs carry over from not only what alcohol will do for the drinkers themselves, but also what these same young people believe about peer’s consumption habits and the attitudes other students have regarding alcohol.

Perceived campus and peer norms studies examine the subjective reality students have regarding the frequency (how often do fellow students drink), quantity (how much do fellow students drink), and general acceptability (how do fellow students feel about it) of alcohol consumption around them (Baer, 2002; Osberg et al., 2010; Osberg et al., 2011). Expectancies and peer norms research connect to an interrelated cognitive factor that explores alcohol consumption as a ritual and rite of passage (Gilder, Midyett, Mills-Nova, Johannessen, & Collins, 2001; Treise et al., 1999; Wolburg, 2001). Within this framework,
students perceive alcohol as fulfilling various ritualized components of the college experience (Crawford & Novak, 2006).

Finally, through what many researchers believe is the final common pathway to consumption, studies exploring drinking motives focus on the needs and functions fulfilled by alcohol consumption and the balancing of positive and negative incentives to drink (Baer, 2002; Cooper, Frone, Russell, & Mudar, 1995; Cox & Klinger, 1988; Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel, & Engels, 2005; Osberg et al., 2010; Osberg et al., 2011).

The following sub-sections of this review of literature will explore the accumulated knowledge base of the past 30 years from the extensive body of research in these thematic areas. In order, sub-sections will contain key research and findings on alcohol expectancies, perceived peer norms, drinking as ritual and rite of passage, and drinking motives.

Aside from the relatively small number of studies in the ritual/rite of passage thematic area, virtually all other studies utilize a statistical quantitative approach. Although researchers have raised methodological issues within this field, the current study is not attempting to address or rectify any quantitative shortcomings in the existing research. Therefore, this section of the literature review will only provide a brief summary of methodological issues at the end of the section. Whereas the methodological issues within the alcohol and academic field of research is important to delineate given the discrepancies in findings, no such divisions exist within the largely consistent field of cognitive decision-making factors for drinking. The primary purposes of the following sub-sections are to
provide an understanding of the various theoretical approaches within this field and establish a potential framework for the analytic phase of the current study.

**Alcohol expectancies.** Early research into the predictive factors for alcohol use and alcohol problems focused primarily on demographic and background variables (Brown, 1985). Within this early research, a person’s age, gender, race, religion, cultural background, and parents drinking habits represent relatively fixed predictive factors in the future use and associated problems from alcohol consumption. Studies that explore alcohol use expectancies (what people believe alcohol will do to and for them) seek to expand and improve the prediction of alcohol drinking patterns beyond these demographic variables (Brown, 1985; Moore & Gullone, 1996; Leigh & Stacy, 1993). Studies on expectancies adopt the scientific theory that the behavior of an organism is influenced by an expectation that certain consequences, either desirable or undesirable, will result (Moore & Gullone, 1996; Leigh & Stacy, 1993). In addition to predicting use, expectancy research also seeks to discern whether different expectancies predict different types of drinking patterns (Brown, 1985).

Brown (1985), providing perhaps the foundational study in the modern era of expectancy research, sought to answer whether expectations of alcohol use for adolescents better predict use, patterns of use in terms of quantity and frequency, and whether use results in associated problems. Brown (1985) identified six factors of alcohol expectancies in college students: global, positive change; sexual enhancement; social and physical pleasure; social assertion; tension reduction; and arousal with feelings of power.
Global, positive changes are references to feeling better and more optimistic because of drinking. Sexual enhancement describes feeling sexier and more romantic. Physical and social pleasure speaks to the positive role of alcohol in celebrations and the actual enjoyment of alcohol in terms of taste. Increased social assertiveness refers to the enhanced confidence drinkers experience when talking to others. Relaxation and tension reduction describes the anticipation of better sleep and less worry. Finally, arousal and aggression describes feelings of power and influence, as well as a physical sensation of being hot, when drinking.

The study revealed alcohol expectancies to be the single best predictor of drinking patterns and related differentially to problematic and non-problematic outcomes of drinking. Findings showed frequent, non-problematic drinkers primarily associate alcohol consumption with social and physical pleasure, while problem drinkers associate drinking with tension reduction. While Brown’s (1985) study reinforces the importance of key background variables in predicting the drinking behavior of students, she found expectancies add to the predictive power of demographics in identifying various drinking patterns of college students. Additionally, Brown (1985) identified tension reduction as the best predictor of problematic drinking among college students.

**Expectancies as predictors.** Subsequent expectancy studies continued to focus on the theme of differential expectancies predicting differential outcomes. Specifically, studies found that students who believe that drinking will enhance social experiences and will increase feelings of pleasure drink heavily, but do not tend to experience associated problems from drinking (Boys et al., 1999; Goldsmith, Tran, Smith, & Howe, 2009; Lewis & O’Neill,
These same studies showed that students, who believe drinking reduces tension resulting from stress, anxiety, and worry, end up drinking heavily and experiencing a host of related negative consequences (Goldsmith et al., 2009; Lewis & O’Neill, 2000; Reis & Riley, 2000; Werner et al., 1995; Wood et al., 1996). Goldsmith et al. (2009) referred to tension and worry reduction expectancies as the most powerful predictor of hazardous drinking in college students.

O’Hare (1990) added to the theme of problematic outcomes related to tension reduction in finding that for many college students, social anxiety predicts an expectancy of tension reduction and social assertiveness for alcohol use. Implications of this finding are that although the pharmacological effects of alcohol may contribute to a social lubrication effect in college students, alcohol may actually reduce social functioning, which leads to problematic drinking patterns as students continue to seek expected effects and continually fall short of their desired outcomes.

For the current study, the differential expectations and patterns of drinking have implications for the lived experiences of high achieving students. If students believe that drinking will enhance their social experience in college, it may not be surprising that they engage in heavy drinking but avoid problematic patterns of use. If however, they drink to reduce stress and tension from the academic or other life pressures they are under, it may well explain problems they are having, academic or otherwise.
Expectancies as positive and negative. Brown’s (1985) expectancy findings, utilized in subsequent research studies and instruments to predict patterns of drinking, were primarily positive in nature. After Brown (1985), questions began to arise in the research literature, based primarily on educational learning theories, as to why one would use only positive expectancies as variables to predict use and resulting problems (Leigh & Stacy, 1993; Lewis & O’Neill, 2000; Reis & Reily, 2000; Werner et al., 1995; Wood et al., 1996; Wood, Read, Palfai, & Stevenson, 2001). Researchers began to ask, would not both reinforcing and punishing consequences, as formed in expectations, affect future alcohol use (Leigh & Stacy, 1993)? Subsequent studies found that while negative expectancies exist, they are neither as powerful, immediate, memorable, or as universally ascribed to as positive expectancies, nor do they exist as an either/or proposition (Capron & Schmidt, 2012; Leigh & Stacy, 1993; Mallett, Bachrach, & Turrisi, 2008; Werner et al., 1995).

Leigh and Stacy (1993) found that for most college students, positive expectancies outweigh negative ones because positive expectancies arrive in their consciousness and remain encoded in their memory more readily. Further, results showed that students employ positive expectancies in their decision making to drink because the fun factor of alcohol stands out far more than thinking about a hangover, throwing up, or failing a test. Werner et al. (1995) took this finding one step further stating that heavy drinking students, heavy and problem drinking students, and non-drinkers, all have different positive and negative expectancies. In one of the few longitudinal studies within the expectancy research, Werner et al. (1995) found that students who became heavy, problem drinkers, over a three-year
period (freshman to junior year), had significantly higher positive outcome expectancies from drinking and developed far less concern for negative outcome expectancies than their heavy but non-problematic and light or non-drinking peers. High-risk drinkers had consistently high positive expectancies for their drinking. Light drinkers and abstainers had high concern for negative outcomes, and low expectancy and value for positive outcomes. This was all despite heavy drinkers having experienced far more negative outcomes as a result of their actual drinking over time.

In a more recent exploration of the positive/negative beliefs within expectancy research, Mallett et al. (2008) looked at how students perceive negative consequences. In a statistical analysis of brief feedback sessions, Mallett et al. (2008) found that college students do not always see negative consequences in a negative light. For their participants, other than academic failure, there was no consistency and very little majority agreement on whether such drinking outcomes as throwing up, regretted sex, being rude or obnoxious, blacking out, or having a hangover are actually negative outcomes from drinking.

If positive outcomes outweigh negative ones in the cognitive process of college students, and several presumed negative consequences are not even perceived as such by most college students, this would seem to increase the likelihood that a student will see more outcomes that are positive from drinking and allow them to further minimize any actual negative outcomes they perceive or experience. The question for high achieving students may not be whether they experience negative consequences from heavy drinking, but how
they perceive and make meaning of negative consequences and to what extent these outcomes translate to expectations for future consumption.

**Expectancies over time.** Early alcohol expectancy research utilized primarily cross-sectional methodology, and typically explored expectancies prior to alcohol use initiation (Brown, 1985; O’Hare, 1990; Leigh & Stacy, 1993). Studies in the 1990’s began to explore the utility of expectancies over time and after students enter college and engage in consistent patterns of use (Sher, Wood, Wood, & Raskin, 1996; Werner et al., 1995). Researchers sought to understand how expectancies might be associated with changes in use over time, the anticipated changes in expectancies given increased use that typically accompanies arriving at college, and the direction of the association between expectancies and use (Sher et al., 1996; Werner et al, 1995).

Werner et al. (1995) established a theory of alcohol expectancy, which posits that expectations of use and experiences of use combine to influence the process by which an individual evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of initiating alcohol use or changing current levels of use. For students who have never consumed alcohol prior to college or whose prior drinking is limited, expectancies might be primarily positive—based on what they have learned from peers and peer culture—and may lead to more positive initial experiences, which will reinforce expectancies for future use. Werner et al. (1995) found that students who come into college with engrained patterns of heavy alcohol use and who reduce consumption over time possess higher concern for and frequent perception of negative outcome expectancies. For students who arrive at college with a significant history of
consumption, they may have negative-outcome experiences to draw on and learn from, that eventually moderates use patterns over time (Werner et al., 1995).

Sher et al. (1996) continued along this line of research by looking at what happens to college students as they increase use, establish a stable use pattern, and then decrease use into early post-college adulthood. This research indicates that expectancies play an important and highly predictive role in initial alcohol use, which strengthens expectancies, and results in a positive feedback loop and increasing use over time. Eventually, as experiences add up to expectancies, students may enter a maintenance or moderation period depending on the combination of positive and negative expectancies and experiences gained. In short, in a reciprocal process, expectancies influence use, and use influences expectancies (Sher et al., 1996).

A more recent research study, employing the only qualitative approach to studying alcohol expectancies found in the literature, looked at the changing nature of expectancies and perceptions of use both during and after college (Colby et al., 2009). Colby et al. (2009) desired to understand various perceptions of alcohol use and how those might influence and promote heavy drinking in college and declining consumption after college. Through focus groups with current students, Colby et al. (2009) found several consistent themes emerge across their participants related to alcohol expectancies during college, including beliefs that drinking has positive social benefits, that alcohol eases inhibition and social anxiety, that alcohol relaxes and reduces tensions, and the normative prevalence of alcohol use during college. When asked why their current drinking was heavy but might change and become
less so after college, students reported that while college is a time out from reality and contains significant opportunity for freedom, post college life is the real world, filled with significant constraints on freedom. Students saw heavy drinking in college as normative, positive, and low risk, and viewed heavy drinking after college as less socially acceptable, with more negative consequences, and with higher risks. They generally viewed college as the last opportunity to enjoy life freely.

Interestingly, and with significant implications for the current study, Colby et al. (2009) also found their students talked at length about the competing demands of academics, work, and social life in and after college, and that these academic and work demands would influence when and how much they drink, and result in limiting factors on their alcohol use. If they had a lot of class work, they may limit their drinking to Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights. In addition, if they had a job, they would not go out the night before. One hundred percent of Colby et al.’s (2009) participants cited work and career as an anticipated life change that would influence a reduction in freedom and the ability to drink as much as they do in college.

The direct linear connection between expectancies—what one anticipates will happen—and motivation to act, is an important element of the cognitive decision making process with respect to alcohol consumption (Cooper et al., 1995). As Goldsmith et al. (2009) pointed out, “individuals will drink to cope only to the extent that they hold expectancies that alcohol will reduce their negative affect” (p. 506). This link between expectancies and motivational use led researchers to forward the notion that “alcohol
expectancies causally precede the motivated use of alcohol, serving as direct predictors of drinking motives” (Goldsmith et al., 2009, p. 506). While a subsequent section of this paper covers drinking motivation, we can see here that expectancies are a clear starting point in understanding why college students initiate and continue alcohol use through the college years (Cooper et al., 1995). Expectancies also play an important role in understanding what type of drinker a college student might be or become. College students have expectations of alcohol consumption, and the research shows those expectations to be largely positive in nature, contributing to enhanced social experiences and tension reduction, just to name a couple. Possessing these beliefs not only predicts heavy use during college, but differential outcomes from use.

It seems reasonable that for the purposes of this study, an understanding that social expectancies predict and may explain heavy use, but that tension, stress, and worry reduction expectancies predict significant problems from heavy use, is quite important. Some high achieving students may not experience a significant level of stress or anxiety from academic demands. However, existing research seems to indicate that in fact, many high achievers do experience stress and anxiety related to academics, and the expectancy framework helps provide context to the meaning these students ascribe to their drinking and lived experiences (Peairs et al., 2011; Preuss & Dubow, 2004; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Ruban & Reis, 2006; Shaunessy & Suldo, 2010).

**Perceived drinking norms.** While college alcohol expectancy research focuses on student perceptions about what alcohol will do for them, the closely related field of perceived
drinking norms in college is primarily concerned with what students believe about other students’ attitudes and behavior around alcohol. Social norms research, of either peers or of a boarder campus environment, asks, what do you think your friends, peers, or fellow college students think about alcohol consumption, and how much or how often do they drink?

At the heart of all research related to social drinking norms is the discrepancy between what students perceive to be reality, and what reality actually is. Study after study has found significant gaps between how liberal students believe their peers to be in terms of attitudes about alcohol use, how much alcohol their peers drink, how often their peers drink, and the actual attitudes and consumption habits of those peers (Baer & Carney, 1993; Baer, Stacy, & Larimer, 1991; Perkins, Haines, & Rice, 2005; Kypri & Langley, 2003; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986; Perkins, Meilman, Leichliter, Cashin, & Presley, 1999; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996; Prentice & Miller, 1993). While most students personally hold moderate attitudes about alcohol use, they tend to misperceive their peer community has having much more permissive views (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). While most students drink at a moderate level, they tend to misperceive their peer community as drinking far more and far more often (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). Given the widespread agreement within the existing literature of this collegiate perception/norm bias, the important themes within this area of research become why this perception problem exists, what influence it has on personal drinking habits, and whether different students or campus environments differentially experience this phenomenon.
**Why the perception gap exists.** Several theories have been put forth to try and explain why virtually all students ascribe more permissive alcohol attitudes and behaviors to their fellow students, including pluralistic ignorance, attribution error, ego protection, cognitive retention, and the influence of social media (Baer & Carney, 1993; Baer et al, 1991; Kypri & Langley, 2003; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996; Prentice & Miller, 1993). While the answer likely lies in some combination of these, each theory is compelling in its own right.

Pluralistic ignorance is a psychological state characterized by the belief that one’s private attitudes and judgments are different from others, even if everyone’s public behavior is the same (Prentice & Miller, 1993). When many people are operating from this perspective, public actions will belie private feelings in an effort to conform to a perceived norm. A person may believe that while social pressure drives their own behavior, true feelings drive everyone else’s behavior or publicly expressed attitude. The implication here is that although an individual may hold privately moderate or conservative attitudes, college students collectively perpetuate a biased public norm. In addition, a pervasive social norm of college drinking forms, such that regardless of one’s own personal reservations about drinking, a student believes that in order to fit in, she/he needs to be comfortable with drinking to take part in the social life of college (Prentice & Miller, 1993). Students perceive the drinking norm to be more liberal or permissive than their own because they think they are the only one who has moderate views.
In many ways related to pluralistic ignorance, attribution error is another psychological state in which an individual with limited information will assume that all observations are typical (Kypri & Langley, 2003). For example, if a student with limited drinking experience sees a peer consume twenty beers, the student will perceive that to be normal behavior absent contrasting observations. Additionally, one will attribute a personal behavior (like drinking too much) on a passing situational circumstance (it was a special occasion), whereas the same individual might attribute another person’s identical behavior on a consistent personal character flaw or deficiency (Baer & Carney, 1993). From this perspective, students only know what they see, and if they see heavy drinking as normative, or negative consequences as commonplace, they will assume that although they do not approve of heavy drinking or endorse negative consequences, that others do simply because of the observation.

Ego protection, sometimes known as denial, is the theory that people perceive others to be worse off than themselves in order to justify their own bad behavior (Baer et al., 1991). If a student drinks, which most college students do, ego protection theory says that they are going to assume others drink more and suffer more consequences if for no other reason than to make themselves feel better about their own consumption and problems.

Cognitive retention theory says that people remember things that stand out from the norm (Baer et al., 1991). It is hard for students to calculate normal or average behavior, especially if they have limited access to everyone within their peer environment. Therefore, if occasional observations of excessive drinking are more memorable than say, a
commonplace activity such as studying, students are more likely to perceive the exceptional
and memorable event as the norm (Baer et al., 1991; Perkins, 2002). In a similar respect,
Perkins (2002b) points out the significant effect that popular entertainment media has in
influencing perceptions, such that students perceive heavy drinking and permissive attitudes
about drinking as the norm because the media portrays it as so.

All of these possible explanations for the misperception of drinking likely influence
student biases in one way or another. The important factor is that all students, including
high achievers, view their peers to be highly accepting of drinking and to be drinking in high
quantities and with great frequency (Baer et al, 1991; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986).

**Influence of misperceptions.** Perceiving a campus environment as permissive of
alcohol is associated with heavier personal consumption even when controlling for personal
attitude (Perkins & Wechsler, 1996). While students tend to drink in ways that closely
mirror their immediate friend group, perceptions of the larger normative environment are an
exceptionally powerful influence on personal drinking habits (Baer et al., 1991; Kypri &
Langley, 2003; Mattern & Neighbors, 2004; Perkins et al., 1999; Perkins et al., 2005; Perkins
& Wechsler, 1996). There are a variety of findings in the existing literature that speak to the
impact and influence of perceived norms on personal use. As examples, Baer et al. (1991)
found that students do not question their own use, regardless of how much or how often they
drink, because they perceive others to be drinking more. Baer & Carney (1993) found that
students perceive problems as happening to others more frequently than to themselves and
are more likely to define something as a problem if it happens to others. Perkins &
Wechsler (1996) found that students who believe that their campus peers desire and expect heavy alcohol consumption may be at greater risk for alcohol abuse as they feel pressure to conform to perceived norms.

Potentially, the most compelling finding to emerge from the social norms studies is the widespread evidence that students most negatively impacted by misperceptions are those that hold the most permissive attitudes and maintain the heaviest drinking behaviors (Baer & Carney, 1993; Baer et al., 1991; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986; Perkins et al., 1999; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996). Heavy drinkers tend not to see their own problems, because even they think others drink more (Baer & Carney, 1993). Similarly, students who already hold favorable attitudes about alcohol when they come to college may be more likely to act on those attitudes because they perceive their peers to be even more accepting (Perkins & Wechsler, 1996).

The primary implication here is that students have widely inaccurate perceptions of how much their peers drink and how permissive their peers are about alcohol, and those misperceptions play a significantly influential role in establishing unhealthy personal drinking habits (Neighbors, Larimer, & Lewis, 2004). High achieving students may be just as likely to hold and be influenced by biased social norms, even if their immediate peer group may drink less than the majority.

**Differential effects on different students and environments.** While the research shows that virtually all students hold exaggerated misperceptions about campus and peer drinking norms, there are some variances in how different students perceive those norms and
act on them (Kypri & Langley, 2003; Perkins et al., 2005; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996; Prentice & Miller, 1993). Although Kypri & Langley (2003) found both men and women to overestimate incidences of heavy drinking among peers, Prentice & Miller (1993) found that women tend to maintain their private attitudes over time and alienate from the perceived norm, while men tend to change their attitude and conform to the perceived norm over time, internalizing their misperceptions. One explanation could be that while both men and women misperceive the norm, they also both base their normative perception on men (Prentice & Miller, 1993). In that way, women do not feel the same pressure to conform to same gender norm.

Unlike some gender differences, there is no difference in the misperceptions of drinking between light and heavy drinkers (Baer & Carney, 1993). All drinkers tend to overestimate quantity and frequency of consumption. The overarching finding with respect to individual background variables and peer norms is that perceptions are far more predictive of drinking, in the same way as expectancies are, than of any demographic or personal background variable or personal attitude toward drinking (Perkins et al., 2005; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996).

While there are wide variances in actual drinking norms on different college campuses, and there is some variance in perceived drinking norms among students as a whole, little of that variance is due to actual campus drinking norms (Perkins et al., 2005; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996). Regardless of whether a campus has a high rate of alcohol use among its student population or not, gross overestimations and misperceptions exist.
The value of social norms research, in conjunction with expectancies, is that we can see just how pervasive and influential the beliefs and perceptions of students are in forming personal use habits beyond any personal characteristics. It would appear that high achieving students could be just as likely to hold positive attitudes about alcohol and overestimate the role of alcohol in the college environment as other students. These beliefs play a significant role in the next theme, focused on the perception of drinking as a ritual and rite of passage in the college experience.

**Drinking as ritual and rite of passage.** An alcohol expectancy framework looks at how college students make decisions about drinking based on their beliefs about what alcohol does for them. A perceived social norms framework looks at how college students make decisions about drinking based on their beliefs about what their peers believe about alcohol and how much and how often their peers drink. A ritual influence and rite of passage framework looks at how college students make decisions about drinking based on their beliefs about the role of alcohol in the college experience (Treise et al., 1999). Research in this area has focused on the perception by students that alcohol is the primary (or perhaps sole) social focus of college campuses, necessary for parties and socializing (Gilder et al., 2001). Although looking at the perception of drinking as a necessary component of the college experience via ritual and rite of passage is largely interrelated, this sub-section will explore the framework in two main parts, beginning with an understanding of ritual in the context of college drinking and following up with a description of drinking as a rite of passage.
The ritual influence model. As this review has already discussed, there was ample research by the late 1990’s showing that college students hold largely positive perceptions of alcohol use and believe that alcohol consumption is a pervasive and normative practice on most campuses (Treise et al., 1999). Out of this large body of perception-oriented research came a smaller, largely qualitative, sub-set of studies focused on the ritualized nature of alcohol within the college environment (Crawford & Novak, 2006; Treise et al., 1999; Wolburg, 2001). Treise et al. (1999) set the foundation of this research by establishing a ritual influence model of college alcohol consumption, based primarily off of two pre-existing theories of ritual in society, Rook’s (1985) model of ritualistic consumption, and Driver’s (1991) model of the social gifts of ritual.

Rook (1985) defined ritual as an expressive, symbolic activity, constructed of multiple behaviors that tend repeat over time. Four tangible components of ritual are artifacts, script, performance roles, and audience. For the purposes of understanding how ritualistic consumption applies to college drinking, Treise et al. (1999) viewed alcohol as the artifact itself, rules about who can drink and when and where drinking can occur as the script, how to drink, how much to drink, and how to behave while drinking as the performance roles, and peers, bartenders, and campus faculty and staff as the audience. In this manner, Treise et al. (1999) framed drinking as more than simply an instrumental process to achieve a goal, but as a process imbued with deep meaning and purpose.

Driver’s (1991) social gifts of ritual model focused on three components or purposes of ritual: order, community, and transformation. Order, in the context of drinking, implies
that drinking behavior imposes order on participant’s lives. In a temporal fashion, alcohol orders time in a highly prevalent way for college students. Alcohol and decisions about drinking affect when to eat, when to sleep, when to take a shower and get dressed, and when to complete academic assignments. Alcohol also establishes regimented patterns of behavior in terms of who to go out with, when to go out, special events to attend, and which days of the week to go out. In a spatial fashion, alcohol places order upon where a student chooses to spend their time (a bar perhaps) and where they belong (does that bar allow underage drinking). Order provides security, a sense of predictability, and a reduction of uncertainty for students, knowing they can go to a particular place at a particular time and have a particular experience (Crawford & Novak, 2006; Treise et al., 1999).

Community, in the context of drinking, implies that drinking as ritual is social by nature. Drinking unites people together emotionally and intensifies relationships and the experience. Peer pressure is a form of community ritual, as students have a desire to fit in and not stand out or appear outside the pervasive perceived norm. Community helps to describe the importance of friendships and peer influence in drinking plans and behaviors. Community ultimately provides a sense of intimacy, fitting in, belonging, and connectedness for students (Crawford & Novak, 2006; Treise et al., 1999).

Transformation, in the context of drinking, is all about seeking an alternative to the mundane everyday existence of college life through drinking behavior. Escape is a central theme within transformation, as students view alcohol as a way to ease tension and relieve stress. Transformation occurs through positive drinking missions such as getting to be with
friends, meeting someone new, celebrating special events, and simply getting drunk.
Transformation occurs through a process of coming of age, as students see drinking as a pathway to adulthood. In many ways, the rite of passage is getting away with underage or reckless drinking. Transformation provides students with a sense of emotional well-being, excitement, escape, adventure, and the potential for a “non-mundane” (Treise et al., 1999, p. 26) experience (Crawford & Novak, 2006).

In an effort to develop public service messaging to college students that addresses drinking as a ritual behavior, Wolburg (2001) conducted focus group testing of Treise et al.’s (1999) model. Wolburg (2001) found that the expected benefits of the ritual functions of alcohol are too great to sacrifice by moderating consumption for college students. Each aspect of drinking, for order, community, and transformation, provide a compelling reason to take risks with drinking. Students express uncertainty in social situations when they are sober, and within the function of providing order, perceive a likelihood of fitting in when they follow the rules of drinking for when, where and how much to drink. Students express that drinking allows them to fit in and find friends, and although they weigh the costs of drinking, the community function overwhelms the potential harm. Voicing the transformative function of alcohol, students express feeling extreme stress and the need to play as hard as they work in class. By numbing the pain of stress and anxiety, alcohol allows them to escape from reality and become a different person.

For most of the students in Wolburg’s (2001) study, the cost of moderation or abstinence from alcohol is too high. They expect drinking to make for great stories and
memories of college, for college to provide the last chance for freedom to drink without regard for consequences, and for alcohol to provide an incomparable sensation and thrill and an excuse for bad behavior.

**The rite of passage.** Although they found Treise et al.’s (1999) ritual influence model of consumption to provide compelling insight into why abuse of alcohol is so prevalent among college students, Crawford & Novak (2006) sought to explore more deeply the concept of alcohol as a central focus and defining characteristic of the college experience. In so doing, they focused specifically on the concept of alcohol consumption as a rite of passage process for college students through Van Gennep’s (1960) rite of passage framework.

Van Gennep (1960) viewed a rite of passage as three stages in which individuals become separated from and re-integrated to a larger social system (Crawford & Novak, 2006). Crawford & Novak (2006) conceptualized college as a transitory status for young people, and within Van Gennep’s (1960) framework, saw college students as experiencing the liminal stage of a rite of passage, where individuals are segregated from and perceived as distinct from the broader community. In this stage, the normative constraints of society become less relevant and lose regulatory power over the individual. Because modern society lacks formalized rites of passage formerly embedded in religions and familial structures, youth have developed rituals, often involving alcohol, that mark movement from adolescence to adulthood. This liminality, according to Crawford & Novak (2006), applies to college
students, who see themselves as being in a unique and temporary state where drinking is both desirable and acceptable.

In the statistical analysis of their research (the lone quantitative approach to the topic), Crawford & Novak (2006) found that although many students do not view alcohol as integral to the college experience, those that do view it as integral tend to be heavy drinkers. They found that the interrelated beliefs about alcohol and the college experience are predictive of high-risk drinking behavior, but far more so for men than women. In much the same way that men may be more likely to conform their beliefs and habits to their perceived same-gender peer norms, men may be more likely to enact beliefs about the role of alcohol in college if they perceive that role to be more salient for their own gender.

The implications of both drinking as ritual and drinking as a rite of passage are similar to other frameworks based on perception. Students who perceive drinking in college as fulfilling important functions are more likely to drink and the stronger those perceptions the heavier the drinking (Crawford & Novak, 2006; Gilder et al., 2001; Treise et al., 1999; Wolburg, 2001). For the current study, this area of research adds to an existing body of literature that implies a weak influence of personal characteristics on drinking decisions and outcomes. A student can be highly intelligent, motivated academically, and in a peer group that is largely moderate in its aggregate consumption of alcohol, yet possess a host of beliefs and perceptions about alcohol expectancies, peer norms, and drinking as a normative function of the college experience. The existing research stresses that these beliefs tell us
much more about the likelihood of heavy drinking and experienced outcomes of drinking than any anything else.

**Drinking motives.** While alcohol expectancies, perceived peer norms, and the ritual influence on drinking all possess significant predictive power in terms of college student drinking, the final, common pathway to alcohol use is motivational (Cooper et al., 1995; Cox & Klinger, 1988; Kuntsche et al., 2005). Just as Perkins and Berkowitz (1986), Brown (1985), and Treise et al. (1999), each established foundational models to inform the aforementioned perception-orientated frameworks, Cox and Klinger (1988) provided the Motivational Model of alcohol use that guides virtually all discussion and research in this area of cognitive decision-making related to alcohol use. To achieve a thorough understanding of the motivational model and field of research that follows, this sub-section will be divided into three focus areas. The first focus area will provide an explanation of the model via the work of Cox and Klinger (1988), Cooper (1994), and Cooper et al. (1995). The next focus area will discuss the predictive value and differential outcomes of various drinking motives. The final focus area will explore the findings of key research studies that built on the Cox and Klinger’s (1988) work and found important variables, specifically gender and academics, which influence the model.

**The motivational model of alcohol use.** Combining animal lab studies with lessons learned from motivational counseling techniques, Cox and Klinger’s (1988) theory of motivated alcohol use determined that people ultimately decide to drink or not to drink based on whether positive affective consequences that they expect to derive from drinking
outweigh those that they expect to derive from not drinking. This is an incentive-based model, in that people are motivated to use alcohol based on a pursuit of incentives; positive ones to which they are attracted and negative ones from which they are repelled.

It is easy to see how expectations influence and precede motivation. People have expectations of the affective changes that come with alcohol use, and proceed to use by a combination of conscious and sub-conscious rational decisions based on expectancies and the weighted emotional value they place on those expectations (Cooper et al., 1995; Cox & Klinger, 1988). The fact that the decision to drink may not always be a conscious one does not imply it is an involuntary one. Cox and Klinger (1988) believed that after an initial choice to use progresses to more common consumption, motivation and decision-making become automated and more narrowly influenced by fewer decision-making points. In other words, less and less thought and consideration play into the motive-driven decision making process.

Ultimately, there are two fundamental premises in the motivational model of alcohol consumption: people drink in order to attain certain valued outcomes; and, drinking behavior is motivated by different needs and functions and is characterized by unique patterns of antecedents and consequences (Cooper, 1994). The Motivational Model of alcohol use considers three primary historical variables that contribute to the motivational process: a person’s biochemical reactivity to alcohol, personality characteristics, and the socio-cultural environment in which people are making decisions (Cox & Klinger, 1988).
A person’s biochemical reactivity to alcohol is the extent to which they are predisposed to different effects of alcohol. If a person is predisposed to strong, positive effects of alcohol (euphoria, relaxation), and weak negative effects (hangovers, vomiting), positive expectations about the effects of alcohol will be raised and motivation to drink will be enhanced. The opposite is also true, which is why tolerance to alcohol plays such an important role in the development of long-term alcohol dependence. Individuals with low tolerance for alcohol tend to feel the inhibitory effects of alcohol sooner and are far less likely to engage in heavy drinking, whereas individuals with a high tolerance for alcohol tend to drink far more in order to acquire desired effects.

Personality characteristics do not imply that there is an addictive personality per se, but rather that certain characteristics modulate the impact of other variables on the decision to drink and outcomes from drinking. Two people may have the same biochemical reactivity to alcohol, but because of personality differences, may have different choice processes preceding a decision to use. As an example, if one male student has similar biochemical reactivity to alcohol as his friend, but is socially impulsive by nature, he may be differentially motivated to drink than his more reserved compatriot. Personality also influences the non-chemical incentives in one’s life, such that a person may not be motivated to achieve career or family goals, and so that person may choose to consume alcohol in order to cope with life frustrations.

Finally, socio-cultural variables speak to the healthy or unhealthy drinking practices that accompany a particular cultural reference group, and the various modeling and reward
factors that exist within those cultures. For example, the Jewish religious culture incorporates alcohol into various rituals and promotes moderate consumption, resulting in low incidences of alcoholism among Jewish people.

Cox and Klinger’s (1988) three historical factors combine with two sets of current factors to influence motivation: situational factors and current positive and negative incentives. A situational factor is the immediate environmental context when deciding to drink or not and the degree to which alcohol is available and the environment is conducive to drinking. The situation will add or subtract weight from a person’s decision to drink or not. The current positive and negative incentives are the various life factors that influence a person’s affective state and will add to or detract from the decision to drink. The affective state is important in that a person tends to choose alcohol in order to obtain emotional effects (and changes in affect) not available through nonchemical incentives in life (family, work, hobbies).

The final component of Cox and Klinger’s (1988) model is the influence of cognitive mediating effects. People’s thoughts, perceptions, and memories determine the nature of expectations about the positive and negative direct (chemical) and indirect (instrumental) effects that drinking will have on their affect. Some effects can be immediate, and some delayed, and the extent to which an individual gives more weight to one or the other will influence the decision to drink. In addition, cognitive conflict is involved in all decision making, and the motivational model implies that a drinker will experience conflict when faced with a choice between alternative decisions. As an example, a student may experience
conflict between tension reduction, a positive immediate expected effect, and a negative reaction from a friend to their drinking, a negative delayed effect. This conflict is resolved by balancing the anticipated affective change that accompanies the conflicting choices.

The motivational model is not complete without the influence of Cooper (1994). She took Cox and Klinger’s (1988) initial framework and expanded the theoretical assumptions to consider the fact that drinking is motivated by different needs, which results in phenomenologically distinct behaviors. Through this new lens, Cooper (1994) hypothesized that understanding different motives underlying different drinking behaviors should provide insight into the circumstances in which an individual is likely to drink, how much they are likely to drink, what probable consequences are, and how best to intervene if warranted.

Following Cox and Klinger’s (1988) model, Cooper (1994) developed the motivational model across two different sets of dimensions, a positive and negative dimension, and an internal and external dimension. These dimensions result in four distinct classes of motives: internally generated, positive reinforcement motives; externally generated, positive reinforcement motives; internally generated, negative reinforcement motives; and, externally generated, negative reinforcement motives.

Internally generated, positive reinforcement motives describe drinking to enhance a positive mood. Externally generated, positive reinforcement motives describe drinking to obtain positive social rewards. Internally generated, negative reinforcement motives describe drinking to reduce negative emotion. Externally generated, negative reinforcement motives describe drinking to avoid social rejection. The classes are most commonly referred
to in the literature as enhancement, social, coping, and conformity motives (Carey & Correia, 1997; Cooper et al., 1995; Perkins, 1999; Kuntsche & Cooper, 2010; LaBrie, Hummer, & Pedersen, 2007; Lecci, MacLean, & Croteau, 2002; Mertens, Rocha, Martin, & Serrao, 2008; Windle & Windle, 1996). In her landmark study, Cooper (1994) set out to test each class of motive to determine if they are in fact unique, distinguishable, and useful frameworks associated with distinct patterns of consumption and consequences.

**Predictive value and differential outcomes of motives.** Across Cooper’s (1994) and several other subsequent research studies, results have shown consistent and significant fit between classes of drinking motives and predictive drinking and drinking outcomes (Carey & Correia, 1997; Cooper et al., 1995; Kuntsche & Cooper, 2010; LaBrie et al., 2007; Lecci et al., 2002; Martens et al., 2008; Perkins, 1999; Windle & Windle, 1996). Enhancement motives are significantly and positively associated with heavy drinking and social drinking, yet only indirectly associated with problems (via heavy consumption). Social motives are significantly and positively associated with quantity and frequency of consumption in social situations, but not associated with problems. Coping motives are associated with solitary heavy drinking habits and predict problematic drinking behaviors. Conformity motives are negatively associated with heavy drinking, but are positively associated with drinking at social events where pressure to drink is high. Interestingly, although conformity motives predict light/infrequent drinking, this motive is predictive of problems such that among people who drink similar amounts, drinking to conform places one at increased risk of problems versus those that drink for social or enhancement motives.
The association of both negative reinforcement motives (coping and conformity) with problems suggests a maladaptive approach to drinking, as opposed to more normative approaches for enhancement and social motives (Carey & Correia, 1997; Cooper et al., 1995; LaBrie et al., 2007). In fact, Cooper et al. (1995) found adolescents who possess coping motives to be more depressed, more likely to hold strong expectancies for tension reduction, and to report far more drinking problems despite drinking less, when compared to students who possess enhancement motives. In addition, the association of internal motives (enhancement and coping) with heavy drinking suggests a more consistent pattern of drinking, less influenced by environmental cues (Cooper, 1994; Kuntsche & Cooper, 2010; Windle & Windle, 1996).

Adding to our understanding of this differential effect of coping motives, Perkins (1999) focused primarily on stress-motivated drinking and problems in college and post-college individuals. He found that college students who hold greater tension-reduction alcohol expectancies drink more frequently than other students do. The combination of tension reduction expectancies and coping motives for drinking is especially significant for students in highly competitive academic environments with a high demand for academic achievement. Additionally, there is pressure associated with transitioning to a new place where students view alcohol as a significant component of the social scene and misperceptions in peer norms influence drinking decisions. In these contexts, students may turn to high-risk drinking behaviors to relieve anxieties and the sense of pressure to perform. Although enhancement, social, and conformity motives to drink likely dissipate for most
people after college, Perkins (1999) found that coping and stress reduction remain highly salient factors for drinking even after graduation. This adds to implications for high achieving students, who may be more likely to pursue advanced degrees and enter high-stress work environments such as medicine, finance, and law.

While coping motives represent serious concerns for problematic drinking, enhancement motives have indicted heavy drinking habits that could have longer-term consequences (Kuntsche & Cooper, 2010). Kuntsche and Cooper (2010) found the most strongly endorsed motive for drinking in college to be enhancement, which students defined as drinking to have fun, get high, and to compensate for everyday responsibilities. This motive translates to heavy weekend drinking over and above more typical drinking patterns.

Clearly, the motivational model and findings from studies in this field of research have important implications for the current study. High academic achieving students are likely to bring many of the same social, enhancement, and conformity motives for drinking with them to college as any other student, although the coping motive could prove to be a most salient factor. If these students, as the research suggests, experience stress, anxiety, and pressure to succeed at both an internal and external level, view alcohol as a means to reduce tension, and are motivated to drink by this belief, these students are likely to experience significant problems.

**Key variables within the motivational model.** While research has shown relative consistency for the utility of motivation across age, race, and gender to help understand drinking behaviors, there are some research findings that suggest gender and academic goals
could have some significant differential influence (Carey & Correia, 1997; Cooper et al., 1995; LaBrie et al., 2007; Lecci et al., 2002; Perkins, 1999; Vaughn, Corbin, & Fromme, 2009).

First, it is important to recognize that although women’s drinking in college has shown significant increases in both quantity and frequency over the last several decades, college men still drink more, drink more often, and experience more problems from drinking than women at every stage of college and post-college life (LaBrie et al., 2007; Perkins, 1999). However, the increases in drinking rates for women combined with different definitions of motives for women lead La Brie et al. (2007) to posit that socially motivated drinking could have significantly greater negative consequences for women.

Although people may drink for a variety of reasons or motives depending on context, females may experience more socially related negative consequences from drinking, such as relationship and interpersonal issues, and may engage in social drinking for different reasons than men, such as low self-esteem, a need for attention, or a desire for intimate relationships. Although they found consumption levels to be independently predictive of negative consequences, LaBrie et al. (2007) found social motives, including conformity, to be the strongest predictor of problems for women.

This gender difference extends to the academic arena as well. Vaughn et al. (2009), in a study examining the competing influences of heavy drinking and academic pursuits for college students, found significant but differential impacts of academic goals on drinking based on gender. Preexisting research informed the study, indicating that the extent to
which a student is academically motivated has an influence on alcohol use, with higher motivated students less likely to consume alcohol and an academic orientation serving as a protective factor (Bryant, Schulenberg, O’Malley, Bachman, & Johnston., 2003; Porter & Pryor, 2007; Rhodes & Maggs, 2006; Singleton, 2007; Wechsler et al., 1995). However, Vaughn et al. (2009) recognized that academic pressures may also lead to increased use as students engage in drinking as a coping mechanism.

Across both genders, Vaughn et al. (2009) found social motives to be positively associated with alcohol use at all college time points. A small inverse relationship between academic motives and alcohol use and problems existed for women at all time points. For men, the protective factor of academics for use and problems existed only pre-college. Once men entered college, increased academic motives and behaviors were no longer protective for alcohol use or problems. While women holding social motives for drinking may be at greater risk for alcohol related problems, these problems are less likely if they also hold academic motivations.

The gender and academic variables found in the literature have implications for the current study. It was important to understand and interpret the lived drinking and academic experiences of female participants as distinct from male participants. While the findings across the participants did not result in a completely monolithic experience, there were unifying experiences of being a heavy drinking, high achieving college student, with a mix of men and women in the participant pool. The protective value of academic motivation for women and lack thereof for men was a valuable lens with which to understand the meaning
different participants ascribed to their experience as a heavy drinking, high achieving students. In analysis, the following questions were asked: do women tend to experience different problems than men, aside from academics, because of their drinking; and how are men successful academically if their academic motives do not reduce their drinking motives?

The implications of drinking motives are similar to other perspective-oriented frameworks already discussed. Students who hold enhancement, social, coping, and conformity drinking motives are more likely to drink than those that do not hold these motives, and certain motives predict heavy and/or problematic drinking (Kuntsche & Cooper, 2010). For the current study, this area of research adds to an existing body of literature that implies an overriding influence of beliefs, perceptions, values, and motives beyond personal characteristics on drinking decisions and outcomes.

Closing thoughts on cognitive decision-making. The influence and implications of the motivational model are the final pieces to a larger framework of understanding college drinking through cognitive decision-making. Why do students drink? In addition, and more important to this study, why do students who have so much at stake from an academic perspective, drink heavily? How to they make meaning and understand their own drinking through cognitive processes that also create expectancies for studying and being academically successful, that develop perceptions of how their peers value academics and engage in academic pursuits, that see academics to be at the center of the collegiate experience, and that are driven by academically oriented motives? These four cognitive frameworks for understanding drinking decisions help to provide some of the answers to
these questions and provided exceptionally valuable in understanding and interpreting the lived experiences of the subjects in this study.

**Chapter Summary**

In this literature review, I have attempted to provide insight into seminal research studies over the last 25 to 30 years that connect to a central concept of contexts, thoughts, or situations that have typically influenced or affected experiences of heavy drinking, specially drinking in the context of academics. These studies overwhelmingly present a quantitative approach, using methods such as cross-sectional snapshots and small, single campus samples, which limit generalizability and present varying degrees of response bias via self-reported data. In addition, most have concerns with including or not including pre-college variables, making any causal inferences specious. The few qualitative approaches seem to offer an expanded understanding of perspectives on alcohol use while clearly limited in generalizability as well.

Collectively, these studies help shape the current landscape of research into how drinking impacts the central focus of higher education, namely academic success, and why college students drink. Although the extent to which drinking impacts academic performance in any meaningful way is highly contextual and individualized, there seems ample evidence to suggest alcohol consumption is connected to the academic lives of almost all college students, regardless of level of achievement. It also appears clear that many students come to college with positive expectancies for alcohol use, believe alcohol use is prevalent and accepted, perceive alcohol as playing a central role in the college experience,
and may be motivated to use alcohol for a variety of reasons. If that is all true for a high achieving student, there may be significant competing values at play. Students come to college with a variety of motivations to drink or not to drink. While a student may be academically motivated and therefore wary of heavy drinking, motivation to drink may lie in the socially enhancing properties and expectations of alcohol use, such that again they face competing motives for use. This study and the interpretations and conclusions to come were situated within this compelling historical and theoretical framework of research.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Higher education professionals spend a great deal of time and resources trying to understand and help students for whom the negative consequences of alcohol use include readily apparent indicators such as academic failure and/or objectionable social behavior. There is a forgotten group of students in both the literature and on campus. These students seem, at first glance, to have it all figured out. They are the students who excel academically, are involved in the public life of the campus, and engage socially, yet drink at exceptionally high levels.

The recent field of research on alcohol and college students has a strong focus on several key areas, including: student characteristics that influence drinking behavior (Baer, 2002; Huang et al., 2009; O’Malley & Johnston, 2002; Spear, 2002; Wechsler et al., 1995), environmental conditions that influence drinking behavior (Chaloupka & Wechsler, 1996; Clapp et al., 2007; Kuh, 1991; Presley et al., 2002; Toomy, Lenk, & Wagenaar, 2007; Wechsler, Kuo, Lee, & Dowdall, 2000; Wechsler & Nelson, 2008; Weitzman et al., 2003), consequences of drinking (Califano, 2007; Ham & Hope, 2003; Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2005; Hingson et al., 2009; Jennison, 2004; Neal & Carey, 2007; Perkins, 2002; Presley et al., 1998; Wechsler et al., 1994; Wechsler et al., 1998; Wechsler et al., 2000; White & Hingson, 2014; Williams et al., 2003; Zeigler et al., 2005), and the efficacy of various policies and interventions (DeJong & Langford, 2002; Hingson & Howland, 2002; Marlatt & Witkiewitz, 2002; Mayhew, Caldwell, & Hourigan, 2008; Mitchell, Toomey, & Erickson, 2005; Toomey et al., 2007; Rubak, Sandbæk, Lauritzen, & Christensen, 2005;
We still have many questions about alcohol use and college students, and specifically connections between drinking, college students, and the academic success of those students during college. One approach that appears limited in the literature on this topic is an exploration, from a qualitative and student focused perspective, of their lived experiences. There are questions concerning why high academic ability and high achieving students drink, given the large and mounting evidence that doing so frequently and heavily results in common and measurable negative outcomes. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe and understand, through qualitative research methods and a phenomenological approach, the lived experience of high academic achieving and high-risk drinking, traditionally aged college students, at a selective research university.

Research questions

The central research question that guided this study was what is the lived experience of college students who excel academically and engage in high-risk drinking behaviors? Accompanying research questions included:

- What is the essence of the lived experience of college students who excel academically and engage in high-risk drinking behaviors?
- How do high academic achieving college students come to understand and make meaning of their high-risk drinking behaviors?
Through these questions, this study sought to expand understanding of drinking experiences among an often-overlooked population of students in terms of their health and overall wellbeing through an interpretive approach.

Research Design

The following sections will describe, in detail, the design elements of the methodology and method by which this study was carried out. It includes a discussion of qualitative research and phenomenology, a description of the site selection, approach to data sampling, and data analysis process, thoughts on the study’s validity, reliability and generalizability, a statement of researcher subjectivity, and an elucidation of ethical issues that arose during the research process.

Qualitative research. The central research question that guided this study was what is the lived experience of college students who excel academically and engage in high-risk drinking behaviors? This question warranted in-depth descriptive data, based on meanings and interpretations ascribed to the phenomenon. Qualitative research “involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Mertens, 2005, p. 229). As opposed to a traditional scientific approach, using quantitative methods to confirm or deny a pre-existing hypothesis, qualitative research is an inquiry into the meaning of experiences.

The decision to employ qualitative methods in collecting data for this study began with three considerations: my philosophical perspective on the world around me; the nature
of research questions I begin with; and the practical aspects of qualitative research (Mertens, 2005). My constructivist philosophical perspective is grounded in several assumptions about the world that include how I view the acquisition of knowledge (epistemology) and the nature of reality (ontology). The constructivist paradigm accepts the epistemological position that knowledge is co-created through an interaction between individuals, and the ontological position that reality is not absolute, but is rather a construction of conscious consensus between people (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Jones et al., 2006; Mertens, 2005). Given these assumptions, it holds that I selected qualitative methods to gain an understanding of how the participants in this study constructed the experiences they had.

The nature of my research question also influenced the selection of a qualitative design (Mertens, 2005). The question was not seeking an answer to a hypothesis, or a statistical significance, or any universal truth; rather, it sought new understanding and insight into the lived experiences of individuals. This question, by its very nature, required a qualitative approach and spoke to the constructivist paradigm, which both take advantage of an interactive process of meaning making and interpretation to create reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Practically, qualitative methods made sense in this study (Mertens, 2005). Given the humanistic values of the social sciences and my field of Higher Education, personal interaction between myself and participants and data grounded in the narrative voice were preferred. In addition, there is a significant field of study into college drinking from the
quantitative perspective. This study builds on existing data by adding meaning and understanding to numbers and statistics.

**Phenomenology.** Within the field of qualitative research, there exist several approaches to conducting a study. The approaches, including grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology, each come with a unique set of assumptions, outcomes, and guidelines. Phenomenology “describes meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). This simple description led me to the phenomenological approach for this study.

Many people assume that there are real objects in the world that exist independently of our conscious knowledge or awareness of them. Phenomenology questions that viewpoint, and “argues that true reality is, and will forever remain, both unknown and unknowable to us” (Spinelli, 2005, p. 6). What we know and experience as real is enmeshed in our consciousness and our human capacity to construct meaning (Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Spinelli, 2005). A phenomena, literally translated from Greek, means, “that which shows itself” (Spinelli, 2005, p. 6), and can therefore be understood as “the appearance of things, as contrasted with the things themselves as they really are” (Spinelli, 2005, p. 6).

Husserl, considered the primary, but not the first developer of the phenomenological approach, intended for others to use the method to peel away variants of experience among individuals and arrive at a clear and shared interpretation of the invariant experience, the essence (Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Spinelli, 2005). The research method has three
distinguishable and interrelated components, the rule of “epoche” or bracketing, the rule of description, and the rule of horizontalization (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010; Moustakas, 1994; Spinelli, 2005).

Epoche, a Greek word meaning “to refrain from judgment” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33) is the need to set aside initial biases and prejudices, to suspend expectations and assumptions, and to bracket these temporarily as far as possible to focus on the experience at hand (Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Spinelli, 2005). The goal is to impose openness on the immediate experience, which allows conclusions based upon the experience itself as opposed to an assumption (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010).

Description, rather than interpretation, is the focus of phenomenology, specifically Husserl’s transcendental approach (Moustakas, 1994; Spinelli, 2005). Spinelli (2005), interpreting Husserl’s original work, states:

Rather than step back from our immediate experience so that we may instantly explain it, transform it, question it or deny it on the basis of preconceived theories or hypotheses which stand separate from our experience…description allows us to carry out a concretely based descriptive examination of the intentional variables which make up our experience. (p. 21)

Horizontalization avoids placing hierarchies of significance or importance on certain items. It allows viewing of each element of the experience as initially having equal value or significance. Spinelli (2005) describes it as being like having a puzzle to put together without a picture to reference.
None of these rules is completely possible. “Once you have followed the three steps, you are able to arrive at an explanation of your experience whose adequacy rests upon data closely derived from your immediate experience and not upon abstract, biases speculation” (Spinelli, 2005, p. 24). The value of epoche, for example, is not in perfection of a completely unbiased state, but in that it “inspires one to examine biases and enhances one’s openness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 61).

Moustakas (1994) has developed a systematic approach to phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). He believes that all qualitative research methods and specifically phenomenology hold essential qualities, including: searching for meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations; obtaining descriptions of experience through first person accounts in informal interviews; and, viewing experience and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject and object and of parts and whole (Moustakas, 1994). In the present study, I employed a variant of Moustakas’ (1994) methods and procedures to carry out the research.

I selected the research design for this study in order to address the specific research questions related to the lived experiences of college students who are both high achieving and heavy drinkers. The focus of the method is on eliciting a clear understanding of a contextual and subjective phenomenon. These methods both allow and encourage an interpretation (mine) of an interpretation (the participants). Qualitative design, a constructivist paradigm, and a phenomenological approach, each informed the overarching
methodology of this study and directed all aspects of the research including sample, data collection, and data analysis.

**Site selection.** In considering the selection of an appropriate site to conduct research for this study, I considered several important questions, including: Am I welcome there and will I have people there that can help me gain access to potential subjects? Am I likely to find subjects that will provide a typical or general example of this phenomenon? Does the campus culture seem to represent the phenomenon generally, or is this phenomenon in some way disconnected from the prevailing campus culture? All colleges and universities have students who span a spectrum of achievement from low performing to high achieving. However, among the diverse institutions of higher education in the U.S., there are a few highly selective schools that attract the best and the brightest students and possess a culture of competitive excellence.

In order to capture the experience of high-achieving students in an academically rigorous environment, I chose to conduct my study at a highly selective, medium sized, private research university in the southeast. This institution has an undergraduate population of less than 10,000, and an acceptance rate lower than 20%. *U.S. News and World Report* ranks it among the top ten “national universities” and calls it a “most selective” institution (http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges). I chose this site because there is a pervasive culture of both academic success and alcohol consumption. It is a concentrated campus environment, where most of the students are by in large smart and driven, and the campus has generally liberal policies when it comes to drinking. It was an
ideal site to examine the lived experiences of high achieving students who engaged in heavy drinking and active participation in the social life of the university.

**Sampling criteria.** Sampling of participants in qualitative research is fluid, open, and flexible to meet the specific needs of the study (Mertens, 2005). In a phenomenological approach, participants must clearly reflect the phenomenon of interest (Jones et al., 2006). The most important consideration in sampling is to connect strategies that generate a purposeful sample and the purpose of the study. In this study, I researched college students who were both academically high achieving and socially heavy drinkers. Therefore, I employed an intensity sampling strategy, a form of purposive sampling that seeks information-rich, but not extreme cases, as an attempt to ensure that the phenomenon of interest was present (Patton, 2002).

I began the sampling process with some specific baseline criteria for my phenomenon. I wanted to interview college students who attended the same school, given the variance in and influence of college environments and the unique social contexts of a particular institution (Weitzman et al., 2003). I identified a highly selective research university in the Southeastern U.S. with an active social environment, including Greek Life and major college athletics programs, as these are environmental/contextual factors shown to be indicative of heavier drinking in college students (Weitzman et al., 2003).

I looked for students who were 21 years of age or older for two reasons. First, I believed that students who were of legal age to drink would be more likely to share details about their past and present experiences without concern for getting in trouble. This
consideration, quite frankly, also had implications for this study being approved through the institutional research process. Second, these older students would mostly be upperclassmen and could reflect back on several years of college and any changes in experience, and would have likely undergone some opportunities for self-reflection. In the end, all of the participants were 21 or older, and were either juniors or seniors, with the exception of one graduate student.

In order to place an objective measurement on high academic achievement, I wanted students who had at least a 3.75 cumulative GPA. While somewhat arbitrary in nature, this was found to be above the campus average GPA and met the most recent selection criteria for Dean’s List/Academic Honors at the selected site. This high benchmark proved challenging, and mid-way through the sampling process I requested and was granted permission to lower the GPA. By the close of data collection, all but one participant had a cumulative GPA above a 3.5. The one participant had just below a 3.5, but diversified the sample in several ways and was ultimately included. From a philosophical standpoint, I believed that a group of 21-year-old or older students, at a highly selective research university, most of whom met or exceeded standards for academic honors, were likely to be representative of high achievement relative to their institutional peers.

Finally, to place an objective measure on high-risk drinking, I looked for students who had a regular pattern of drinking. This was initially defined as consuming at least 4 drinks for women, and 5 for men, at least once over the last 2 weeks, on average. These are standardized high-risk, binge drinking, criteria used by many alcohol prevention specialists
and college drinking researchers in the field (Ham & Hope, 2003). In practical terms, all of the participants ended up exceeding these standards, with the exception of the graduate student, who drank slightly less than the quantity measure on average, but more than the frequency average. Again, his inclusion diversified the sample in multiple ways.

Because of my professional background, I had access to professionals in higher education and student affairs at the selected site that helped me identify initial students that meet my criteria. My goal was to use snowball sampling after meeting an initial selection of students through my staff contacts. Unfortunately, this approach only ended up yielding one of the eventual participants. I ended up focusing my efforts on emailing student organizations on campus and placing flyers around campus, in both academic and non-academic buildings, to promote my study. This approach proved much more successful. The snowball sampling technique also resulted in some success, as the students who were identified through the flyers were able to refer me to their peers that met the study criteria.

Although there are no strict rules for sample size in qualitative research, phenomenological studies typically have smaller numbers of participants due to the in-depth emphasis on a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Jones, et al., 2006). I utilized a theoretical sampling approach guided by a goal of data saturation, which occurred when my phenomenon of interest seemed to have been reasonably covered and similar kinds of information were being shared by each successive interview participant (Creswell, 2007; Jones et al., 2006). Based on my understanding of data collection in qualitative research and
some personal experience in qualitative data sampling, I anticipated interviewing between 8-12 individuals. I ended up with eight participants in total.

One potential issue for my snowball sampling process was a concern that students would reference me to same gender and/or race peers. The research shows that there are clear differences in drinking motives and effects based on gender and race (Presley et al., 1998; Taylor et al., 2006; Treise et al., 1999; Wechsler et al., 1995). In order to create as diverse a pool of participants as possible, I anticipated tracking these basic demographics for my first few students. When I saw a homogenous gender and racial pattern emerge, I started to be more intentional in asking participants to refer me to women and students of color with similar high achieving, heavy drinking backgrounds. Ultimately, I ended up with a largely white group of participants, with two students identified as minority, and five men and three women. Each, in my estimation, represented “information-rich cases that hold the greatest potential for generating insight about the phenomenon of interest” (Jones et al., 2006, p. 66). The relative homogeneity of the sample and implications of this will be discussed later in this study.

**Data collection.** Following Moustakas’ (1994) guidelines, I engaged in a data collection technique of person-to-person interviewing. For each participant interview, I met them on campus in a place that was convenient for the students but private enough to support confidentiality goals. I used a digital audio device to record each interview. I had used this device previously with outstanding results in terms of sound quality and reliability and had no issues with recordings. The primary interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour
and a half and I used an interview guide approach to questioning. Before each interview, I sent the participants background information about myself and the study, the research questions, and some sample questions that helped get us started. While the interview guide had specific questions and topics, and interviews followed a similar format, each interview proceeded based on the direction that the individual student and their story took us. The question guide helped keep us on topic and lent some consistency to the subject matter, but allowed the context to be highly conversational and individualized. Each interview focused generally on academic experiences and influences from childhood on, social experiences and influences from childhood on, and the participants’ lifetime experiences with alcohol and drinking. Discussions tended to include significant attention to motivations for drinking and the process by which the participants navigated a college experienced defined by high academic achievement and frequent, heavy drinking.

Data analysis. As mentioned previously, Moustakas (1994) presents general guidelines for conducting data analysis and offers modified approaches based on the work of Giorgi (1985). I used Hycner’s (1985) more detailed guidelines for data analysis, which also reference Giorgi’s (1985) methods. Hycner (1985) presents fifteen detailed steps for data analysis, including several that will proved especially relevant to my study, such as: bracketing and the phenomenological reduction, delineating units of meaning relevant to the research question, clustering units of relevant meaning and determining themes, identifying general and unique themes for all the interviews, and establishing a composite summary. I began the process of epoche long before transcribing, through preliminary development of a
subjectivity statement. After transcription of each interview, which was done by a company called VerbalInk that I had used previously with very good results and had also been suggested to me by a member of my committee, I listened to the audio and read through the transcripts of each interview several times, making sure that the transcription was accurate and getting a feel for the verbal context of statements (i.e., laughing, nervousness, seriousness). At this point, I also sent each participant a copy of the transcript and had them report back any questions or concerns. Each participant responded that the transcript was accurate and reflected their experience as intended. Moving forward from the initial process of getting familiar with each narrative, I followed Hycner’s (1985) guide systematically.

In practical terms, the data analysis process involved taking each individual transcript and methodically reducing the information from statements of general interest to more specific passages that spoke directly to the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1985). First, I took hard copies of the transcripts, re-read each again and highlighted and made margin notes around statements and passages of significance to the phenomenon. Then, I engaged in a process of open coding, taking the passages of significance by copy and paste and putting them into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, separating the passages by participant and intuitive coding designations. Once this was completed for all participants, I began to categorize the open coding designations and moved the passages of highest relevance for each participant into common units of meanings. The next step was to consolidate redundant or overlapping units of meaning. Next, I created separate Word documents, by unit of meaning and by participant, and moved related passages from the spreadsheet into these documents. At this
point I could open a document labeled by the participant and see all of the passages from that student’s narrative, grouped by unit of meaning, and I could open a document labeled by unit of meaning, and see all of the passages from each of the students that related to that unit of meaning. This allowed me to start clustering units of relevant meaning and to identify themes within each cluster.

An important step in the process at this time was to write up composite summaries for each participant. I used these summaries to revisit the original transcripts to make sure I had not missed relevant passages within a particular narrative. I was then also able to take these summaries and the themes that had emerged across the participants back to the students for feedback and insight. Although three students elected to not participate in a follow up meeting with me, they each had the opportunity to read their summary and review the themes. The five that did elect to meet with me, some in person and some via Skype, all provided helpful insight to the themes, said that the themes resonated with them, and all affirmed that their summary reflected their experience. I did make some minor modification to the summaries and themes after participating in these important member checks. At this point I took all of the units of meaning and coded them within the primary, overarching themes that had emerged. Although no one, singular essence was identified, four major themes of significance that resonated across all participants’ experiences were identified. The main goal of this entire process was to answer the primary research question using the voices of participants.
**Validity, reliability, and generalizations.** Traditional scientific research, based on quantitative data analysis, is primarily concerned with issues of rigor, validity, reliability, and generalizability of findings (Krathwohl, 2009). While qualitative research is concerned with many of these same issues, each must be understood and appreciated within a varied context. Merriam (1995) aptly explains,

> In assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research, it is important to back up and ask what kinds of questions or problems qualitative research is designed to address. Qualitative research is ideal for the following: clarifying and understanding phenomena and situations when operative variables cannot be identified ahead of time…the question of trustworthiness becomes how well a particular study does what it is designed to do. (p. 52)

Trustworthiness here is a way of describing the rigor, or “goodness” (Jones et al., 2006), that qualitative research aims to achieve.

Merriam (1995, 2002) goes on to describe three ways qualitative research achieves trustworthiness, through: internal validity, reliability, and external validity. Internal validity speaks to how congruent one’s findings are with perceived reality and asks whether reality is fixed and stable, or constructed and interpreted. Qualitative research and the constructivist paradigm assumes reality is constructed and fluid; therefore, there are only interpretations of reality. According to Merriam (1995), “the researcher offers his or her interpretation of someone else’s interpretation of reality” (p. 54). The following steps in a research design can strengthen internal validity: (1) triangulation of data (multiple data sources); (2) member
checks (allowing participants to look over the transcripts prior to the analysis phase to confirm accuracy); (3) peer/colleague examination; (4) a statement of researcher bias; and, (5) engagement in research situation (Merriam, 1995, 2002). Utilizing these strategies “can help ensure that the interpretation of reality being presented is as true to the phenomenon as possible” (Merriam, 1995, p. 55). In the course of this study, I employed three of these strategies: member checking (on two occasions), peer/colleague examination (via my committee chair and many trusted colleagues within the field of Higher Education), and a statement of researcher bias (the subjectivity statement and the process of epoche).

Reliability is concerned with the extent to which findings would remain consistent if someone replicated the study. In many ways, reliability is antithetical to assumptions that underlie qualitative research, the constructivist paradigm and phenomenological philosophy. Reliability, in the scientific sense, assumes replication is possible because reality is fixed. Human behavior is fluid and always changing (Merriam, 1995). Qualitative research, by nature, seeks new understanding of experiences through the perspectives of those that are living it, whose realities are always subjective to time, meaning, and consciousness (Merriam, 1995; Moustakas, 1994). Qualitative research seeks dependability and consistency of findings through steps such as triangulation, peer examination, and the establishment of an audit trail, a detailed account of how the study was conducted (Merriam, 1995, 2002). In this study, I engaged in peer examination and kept a detailed audit trail of my methods.
External validity, known as generalizability in traditional scientific approaches, is the extent to which one can apply findings to other situations. In quantitative research, a sample, if it meets certain criteria and statistical significance, can be representative of a larger population and one can make inferences of the data. Merriam (1995) offers three conceptualizations of generalizability consistent with the philosophical assumptions that underlie qualitative research:

1. The Working Hypothesis: findings reflect situation-specific conditions of a particular context and can guide practice.
2. Concrete Universals: particular situations convey insights that transcend the situation from which they emerge; one can apply what they learn in one context to the next one.
3. User Generalizability: the extent to which findings can be applied to other situations is determined by people in those situations (the reader determines the extent to which findings are generalizable to their experiences). (pp. 57-58)

Researchers can strengthen external validity through: (1) thick description of the phenomena; (2) use of multi-case designs; (3) modal comparison (a comparison of the case to other cases); and, (4) sampling within (looking at different parts of a phenomenon) (Merriam, 1995). The findings section of this study offer an in-depth description of the phenomenon of interest, and a critical mass of subjects participated in the study such that I achieved a saturation point of data. The literature review provides many opportunities to compare findings to other studies and draw inferences. However, it was not my intention to assert
external validity in this research project. My hope was that readers would find the data compelling enough to explore the phenomenon further, and can see connections to the literature to draw new understanding and appreciation for this topic.

**Researcher Statement of Subjectivity**

In this particular research study, a statement of subjectivity serves two purposes. First, it gives me an opportunity to share with readers my philosophical orientation to research, the underlying assumptions and theories that guide my understanding of knowledge, and my personal and professional background that undoubtedly influenced both my choice of subject matter and approach to conducting the study. There is an inherent bias that accompanies all research, in that who we are influences what we do and the decisions we make. My aim here is to be as open and transparent as possible with regard to these biases and prejudices so that the reader can understand my position within the study and make determinations about my influence on the findings.

Within phenomenological research, the subjectivity statement takes on another important purpose. Bracketing, or “epoche”, is the attempt within phenomenological research by the researcher to set aside presuppositions, hypotheses, prior knowledge, and experiences so that the experiences of study participants can emerge on their own, unbiased (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010; Moustakas, 1994). The first step for the research investigator is to make explicit all of these elements and acknowledge them, so that they rise to a conscious level and can be set aside as much as possible. Epoche is difficult, if not impossible to achieve. However, by making available what is known about the phenomenon of study prior
to engaging in the research study, the investigator creates a collection of ideas, theories, and concepts that can be returned to throughout the data collection and analysis process to ensure that these elements are being bracketed from the research process as much as possible (Moustakas, 1994).

I have been interested in the phenomenon of academic success and alcohol consumption for a long time. I grew up in a quintessential college town. My father, a college professor and scientific researcher, was the smartest person I knew and he would invariably share perspectives on the state of intellectualism in the college environment. My own academic success, even through elementary and junior high school, was a clear expectation. So clear in fact, that little needed to be said at home about what the expectations were. My understanding was that good grades were the only option. As I got older and entered high school I began to experience more social opportunities that included alcohol, and I began to develop an intellectual malaise. I knew I was smart, and I did not have to try very hard to make good grades and get into honors and Advanced Placement classes. At the same time, I recognized the social dynamics of high school that seemed to give more value to being “cool” than being smart. I did not try as hard as I could have in class and engaged in heavy drinking on weekends, mostly due to growing tired of trying to live up to others’ expectations and a desire to enhance my social standing.

College provided new academic challenges and new social opportunities. By most accounts, I was a successful college student. I took some challenging classes, but not too many. I made a lot of A’s, but not enough that anyone would mistake me for a “straight A”
student. I tried as hard as I needed to in order to satisfy my family’s high expectations and my own intellectual curiosity, but not so hard as to take away from an active social life and fragile social self-confidence. Although I would question whether anyone could have observed it on the outside, on the inside I was self-conscious about my physical appearance, focused on others liking me, and stressed over the balancing of academic expectations and social life. I drank alcohol several times a week and in high quantities, both to fit into the prevalent social culture and as a coping mechanism for my internal challenges. I was a stereotypical “burning the candle at both ends” college student, partying hard and making good grades, joining clubs and managing a job, just waiting for the flames to join and burn out.

Thankfully, college ended before the flame extinguished, and I went through an almost decade-long, post-college, intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual revival of sorts. After living in Wyoming for almost 5 years and working with at-risk youth for part of that time, I returned to school and earned a master’s degree in College Student Personnel. I served for one year as a counselor in the college counseling and wellness center and had many clients dealing with substance use issues, stress and anxiety over academic expectations, and combinations of the two.

After graduate school, I worked for the next several years in Student Affairs at two different colleges, primarily in the areas of student leadership development and Fraternity and Sorority Life. During this time after college, I had many opportunities, both via personal introspection and course related reflection, to think about and make meaning of my
experience as a smart, academically successful, and heavy drinking student. I encountered numerous professional opportunities to engage students in similar reflection. Through my work in Fraternity and Sorority Life, I began to present programs focused on alcohol education and harm reduction. I enjoyed the conversations I was having with students around their social experiences and their desire to balance academic demands and social desires, and found many students struggling with this dilemma.

Over the last few years my work with harm reduction and alcohol abuse prevention programming has expanded, as has my depth and breadth of knowledge related to all subjects alcohol-related. Today I am a 41-year-old married man, completing my doctoral studies in Higher Education Administration, and a student life professional and alcohol education specialist. My professional goal is to work with students to enhance their college experience such that they maximize their capacity for intellectual, social, and personal development. I am concerned about students who drink heavily, because I look back on my own drinking with concern. I put myself at risk for many years and shrugged off my substance use as stress relieving and fun. I minimized my drinking, rationalized my under-achievement, and generally hid behind a thin veil of academic success and social involvement. I do not regret the many good times I had in college, but I cannot help but look back and wonder what could have been. Did I miss out on being the best student I could be?

My personal philosophy of life leans toward openness to new experiences and new knowledge primarily through interacting with people and hearing their stories. This orientation has led me to focus most of my professional research interest on the field of
qualitative inquiry. As a theoretical perspective, the constructivist paradigm speaks to my understanding of knowledge, in that our experiences and meaning making of those experiences inform what we know, and there exist multiple realities of what is “truth” subjective to individual and collective interpretations (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In a research process, the constructivist paradigm leads me to believe that any findings or “data” are discovered only through a mutual, interpretive process between the researcher and the research participants (Jones et al., 2006).

I know I did not bracket all of these experiences and knowledge, but it was my hope to engage students in an honest and open process that allowed them to share their experiences unfiltered. I focused as much as possible on describing the essence of their experience, rather than imposing my presuppositions on an interpretation. The result is an opportunity for readers to understand the lived experiences of college students who are both high academic achievers and heavy drinkers in a more comprehensive way.

**Ethical Issues**

In qualitative research, there is a generally held ethical principle of “do no harm” (Jones et al., 2006). This principle refers to more specific ethical issues of confidentiality, anonymity and privacy, informed consent, physical and/or mental harm, honesty and transparency in the gathering of data, and respect for the dignity of participants, and the power and control of the researcher. These issues can arise at virtually every stage of the study, from establishing research questions through data collection and on to the presentation of results, and must rely on my ability to use common sense, have an ethic of care, be open
and forthcoming about my methods, and keep the best interests of the research participants in mind throughout the process (Jones et al., 2006).

Within this study, it was my ethical obligation to do whatever I could to protect confidentiality and anonymity during the data collection process and writing of the dissertation itself. Confidentially led me to not share any information I acquired from participants without their consent to do so, and anonymity informed my understanding that when and if I shared information about the study with others, these was not any overly identifiable data (Jones et al., 2006). My first step in addressing these ethical issues was to engage in a private approach to identifying subjects for the study. I did not share the names of the participants with anyone. I interviewed students in private settings on campus and followed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols before asking them to sign a Statement of Informed Consent. The consent form clarified their role as a participant and the expectations of their participation, summarized the potential benefits of their participation, explained the voluntary nature of their participation, and delineated their ability to exit the study at any time. The consent form explained the extent and limitations of confidentiality and the steps that would be taken to protect data and records.

During the data collection process, I took care to design questions and an interview environment that created an inclusive and safe space for sharing, and was sensitive to the personal nature of the subject matter and did not press subjects for information in areas they were uncomfortable talking about. All of the participants selected pseudonyms, which were used throughout the research process and any details that emerged in the narrative that could
have compromised anonymity were redacted or altered to retain meaning but avoid identification.

As mentioned, I used a transcription service that I have used previously and that one of my dissertation committee members recommended. This company has a strong reputation for confidentiality and protection of information. Upon receipt of the transcripts, these files along with all of the electronic data for this project (audio recordings, memos, journals, analytic documents, and drafts) were stored on my personal, password protected computer, external hard drive and encrypted cloud folders. In addition, I kept all papers and files related to the research at my home. These steps helped to protect the privacy of the participants and protect against unauthorized access to data.

While I used direct quotations from the transcripts in this study, I took care not to include contextual information that could identify specific individuals. Like many studies, mine cannot guarantee anonymity, but through the aforementioned steps, I significantly minimized a breach of privacy.

My study and I benefited greatly from the student participation in this research project. Participants in my study stood to benefit as well, in two primary ways. First, they were given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in college in such a way that creates meaning and the chance to learn from their behaviors. In prior experiences with students, they have described the beneficial nature of talking about their drinking behaviors. Most students do not have these types of conversations with friends, family, or university staff or faculty outside of a counseling center environment. I gave these students a chance to
engage in critical reflection around a subject that has important short and long-term implications for their personal and professional success. Second, it was my hope that these students, and students like them, might benefit from the findings and conclusions that this study produced. If professionals in higher education can learn even a little bit more about student experiences with alcohol, I believe they can advise these students more effectively and from a position of greater awareness and understanding of what it like to be a student who is navigating the academic and social challenges of the college environment.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have developed a detailed explanation of the methodological approach for my study, as well as a thorough description of how and why I conducted my study with the specific methods of choice. Readers should see a clear connection between the research questions that guide the study and the philosophical underpinnings of the phenomenological research methodology. I have addressed and provided a rationale for my site selection and sampling strategies, as well as a systematic approach to data collection and analysis. Readers should have a strong understanding of how this study connects to me both personally and professionally, and should be able to gauge to what extent my biases and assumptions influence the finding and conclusions in later chapters. This chapter is primarily concerned with how I proceeded through the study and why that approach best accomplished the stated purpose of this research. The remaining chapters will introduce readers to the participants, detail the research findings, offer discussion of those findings and outline implications for future research and professional practice.
CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANTS

The following chapter will offer a demographic overview and summary profile of the eight student participants that took part in this study. While the intent of the research was to look across the participants and find themes that resonated broadly within the experience of a shared phenomenon, it is important to understand the individual contexts that these experiences emanate from. Each of the students has a unique story and background that informs their perceptions of what it is like to be a high achieving and heavy drinking college student. The first section of this chapter will present demographic data in the form of an overview and accompanying table. The second section will provide eight participant summaries, based on analysis of interview transcripts and researcher observations and interpretations.

The demographics table below provides information about the sex, age, race, geographic area of hometown, academic classification, academic major(s), grade point average, frequency of consumption (how often students drink) and quantity of consumption (how much they drink) for each participant. There were more men than women in the study, which would be an oversampling of both the national student body and for the study site, but representative of the drinking demographics in college. All of the participants were over 21 at the time of the interviews, per methodological protocol, but none older than 23. The large majority of participants defined themselves as Caucasian, with one African-American and one Asian/Pacific-Islander, which are relatively consistent racial and ethnic demographics for colleges and universities that fit this study’s profile.
The students came from a broad cross-section of geographic locations throughout the U.S., plus one international student, and generally represent the diversity often found at private, highly selective colleges and universities, including the study site. Consistent with the age range, the participants were predominantly seniors, with a couple juniors and one graduate student included. Interestingly, the majority of students were engineering or science majors of one type or another, which are often rigorous and demanding major fields of study. The rest fall into a variety of fields, but none would be typically thought of as “easy” in the milieu of college campuses. The students fell between a 3.3 and 3.9 on a 4.0 cumulative grade-point scale at the time of first interview, with the majority in the 3.7-3.8 range.

Finally, each of the participants met and exceeded the basic and generally agreed upon criteria in the research literature for “binge” drinking, defined most often as drinking at least 3-4 drinks in sitting for a women and 4-5 drinks in a sitting for a man, at least once every two weeks (Wechsler et al., 1998). On the low end of frequency, a few participants reported drinking on average 2-3 nights per week, with one participant estimating that he would typically not drink more than twice and more often once. On the high end, the majority of participants reported drinking at least 3 times per week—defined as “frequent” binge drinking (White et al., 2006), with a couple drinking 4-5 nights per week in a typical week.

Perhaps more emblematic of heavy drinking, were the reports of quantity of consumption per occasion. While the student who drinks least often also drinks the least,
usually no more than 4 drinks, most participants described drinking at least 3-4 drinks every time, with many drinking upwards of 8 or more on a fairly regular basis. Taken together, the frequency and quantity reporting describes an experience where most of the participants are consuming in the neighborhood of three or more times the binge drinking rate per week, putting this group overall at the high end of college drinkers. Table 1 below provides a summary overview of the significant participant demographics.

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Region of Hometown</th>
<th>Class Yr.</th>
<th>Academic Major</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Avg. Freq. of Drinking (nights/week)</th>
<th>Avg. Quant. of Drinks (drinks/occasion)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gilbert</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Northeast US</td>
<td>Sr</td>
<td>Statistics</td>
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<td>3-5</td>
<td>2-7</td>
</tr>
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<td>Buck</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Northeast US</td>
<td>Sr</td>
<td>Public Policy/Econ</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>8-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>Grad</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JT</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Western US</td>
<td>Sr</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>3-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Southern US</td>
<td>Jr</td>
<td>Biological Sciences</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>2-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Southern US</td>
<td>Jr</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Southern US</td>
<td>Sr</td>
<td>Biological Sciences</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>4-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Northeast US</td>
<td>Sr</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>6-9</td>
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Participant Summaries

The following composite summaries were written to give readers an opportunity to understand and appreciate the context behind each participant’s narratives. These summaries
were based on the interview sessions, follow up conversations, and interpretations of the narratives.

**Buck.** Buck had both a unique story and a big personality. He was raised in a rural part of the Northeastern U.S., with divorced parents, each of whom lead a somewhat easy-going existence (referred to by Buck as “bohemian”), and was heavily influenced by successful members of his extended family. He attended prep schools, which influenced him academically in terms of the structure. The school environment and his teachers ingrained strong academic habits in him and taught him to make choices about how much work to do to accomplish all of the expectations. The teachers introduced him to subjects that he enjoyed and challenged him to maximize his talents. Buck also learned social lessons, in terms of navigating varying socio-economic classes and cultural differences.

He did not have much access to alcohol as a youngster, but alcohol was clearly part of his family’s social norm and there was and continues to be a permissive attitude (primarily from his mother) regarding drinking. His first drinking experiences were in fact with his parents. He had a limited number of opportunities to drink with school peers early on in high school, each influenced in part by the excitement of the risk involved in getting caught by the ever-present prep-school administrators. His first, as he would describe it, “real” drinking experience, did not come until his senior year in high school on a trip out of the country with friends.

Buck was the most externally influenced participant I spoke with from a social standpoint. He was cognizant of not being the most popular growing up, and despite being
outgoing, did not have a ton of friends, particularly in the highest social strata. He was also aware of his lack of social skills relative to females.

Buck recognized his academic prowess early on and that seemed to have solidified a confident academic identity. He was pushed hard by one of his extended-family role models to make something of himself, and was pushed by teachers who did not hold back when he produced less than his best. Buck also described being influenced in his achievement in contrast to others—his mother and other friends and relatives who did not either live up to their own abilities or who did not meet expectations. While he recognized that for some students, getting to college can be a blow to an achievement oriented identity because everyone is smart or smarter, Buck seemed to have become more, not less confident in his academics, albeit still aware of his strengths and limitations. In addition to confidence, Buck carried a competitive attitude with him to college as well, which influenced both his academic and social successes.

For someone that did not drink much in high school he arrived at college with a very apparent goal of being a more social person. His few drinking occasions in high school seemed to teach him two important lessons…he could drink a lot, and drinking equaled social achievement. Buck was one of the only participants who acknowledged that his own drinking is excessive at times, that he has had some scary moments involving alcohol, that he could be a better student if he did not drink/socialize as much, and that his drinking is an unsustainable pathway. He even called himself “fortunate”, because he has seen peers who have let social life supersede academics and go down a bad path. At the same time, he was
also the most socially driven student I met. In his own words, he wants to be the coolest, most popular, and the best at everything he does, and he believes, in college, being the best means being highly successful academically, drinking and socializing as often as possible, and being hyper-involved on campus.

Buck admitted that peer pressure drives him in addition to his own aspirations of achievement. He articulated a strong, almost essential core value of social achievement. He was aware that drinking has helped him attract desirable women on campus, has gained him entry into one of the top fraternities on campus, and has positioned him as one of the most recognizable and highly respected students. His drinking and lifestyle attainment are highly reinforced and supported by his fraternity and his family. In our follow up session, Buck acknowledged that he was initially attracted to his college of choice specifically because of the work hard/play hard culture.

Buck clearly has intellectual skills, is very organized, uses his time efficiently, relishes being busy, and his high school challenged and prepared him in such a way that college feels easy to him. He also has developed an understanding that while he wants and expects an A, he is only going to do as much work as is minimally necessary to attain those goals. He knows what classes and subjects play to his strengths and which ones are likely to require either more effort or a lower standard. Confidence overflows with Buck, to the extent that you are almost surprised that he has not always been the most popular kid in school, which speaks to his recognition of college as being a chance for him to reinvent himself and be the guy that is good at everything, both a scholar and a “Big Man on
Campus”. Upon reflection, Buck came to realize that life after college presents many of the same challenges that college did, and he takes personal pride and offers advice to those that come after him when he says that if you can navigate the college environment he came from and be socially and academically successful, you will be well-prepared.

David. As the lone international student and graduate student in the study, David provided a unique perspective and interesting background. Growing up in the Far-East, in a relatively affluent family and social class, David had certain academic expectations placed upon him by his parents. He seemed to also bring a sense of competitiveness to his schooling. Grades and academic performance are public knowledge where he grew up, and he wanted to have his name at the top of the list. He did not have many hobbies or outside interests growing up, other than working hard to be the best student, which would allow him to get into the best schools and eventually would open doors for him to study in the US. He articulated a significant amount of external pressure and motivation, from both the general youth academic system and his parents.

The school structure he grew up in seemed to reinforce whatever pressure might have come from his own internal sense of self or his parents, as the better you do in school, the better schools you go to. It is not wholly dissimilar from the U.S. system once you get to college, but it appeared to be a more straightforward tracking system that he experienced. David also described the complex nature of intellectualism in his home culture, which was disrupted by government policies and created an environment in which being smart is a double-edged sword. Some people view intellectualism as honorable, but not necessarily a
positive or socially desirable trait. As a son with wealthy parents from a strong social status, he did not have to worry too much about acceptance from peers, so he let his career goals guide his success.

David was introduced to alcohol at a very early age, through both family and geographic custom. In his homeland, a very cold part of the world, it was common for people of all ages, as young as five in David’s case, to drink a type of liquor that had to be heated and have sugar added. David had a keen taste for it early on, and he said it was very common for him and his father to drink it together during his youth and through his teenage years even more heavily. Although kids drank in his culture fairly openly, as he got older and ascended the academic ranks—tracked into better schools as a result—fewer of his academic peers drank for fun or purely social purposes.

David’s perception was that for most of his country’s upper social order and business ranks, being able to drink is an essential tool for professional interaction and social good manners. Much of the business is done over long meals with a lot of drinking, and toasting over drinks is a common form of respect. While David had experiences of social drinking with friends and even some related negative consequences, it was apparent in the interview that David did not view drinking through a purely social lens, unlike most U.S. students.

After coming to the U.S., David incorporated drinking into the social fabric of his graduate academic cohort, and he saw it as a way to relax and enhance social connections. He was clearly not a very heavy drinker compared to most of the undergraduates in the study, and even described needing to brush up on his drinking skills before he goes back home if he
was going to be able to live up to expectations in the professional world there. David spoke of enjoying his academic work, working hard, having his priorities in line and seemed well adjusted to handle whatever downsides there were to his drinking. As he put it, drinking does not hurt him, but he knows it does not help either.

Gilbert. Gilbert appears to have always been gifted academically. He was curious and intellectually more inclined than most of his peers from an early age, so much so that has often found school boring and less than fully challenging. His parents seemed to have created an intellectually supportive climate but did not appear to directly impose expectations on him. There seemed to be more of an innate environment of, “I will be good in school because that’s what you do”. He called his academic expectations, a “given”. He developed good habits that stuck with him, and had a sense of life balance from early on, with a solid friend group and an interest in sports.

Gilbert had a fairly typical level of exposure to social life, drinking, and drug (marijuana) use in high school. He was not in the most popular social group, and was aware that social structures were influenced by drinking. Drinking became part of his social experience his sophomore year in high school, and was driven primarily by the opportunity to socialize with a more popular sub-set of his peer group. He learned what alcohol and smoking did for him and these were largely positive outcomes. He also experienced some negative consequences and seems to have developed an early awareness of his tolerance. Not for lack of trying, but high school social life did not revolve around drinking in the same inherent way that his college experience would eventually.
Gilbert talked at length about being highly organized, managing his time exceptionally well, not procrastinating and investing himself into his academic pursuits. He also acknowledged that while he works hard, he does not need to spend hours and hours studying. He has some intellectual gifts that serve him well. He knows that he wants to be successful academically and is proud of his high achieving identity, but also believes very strongly in the college experience being inclusive of a robust social life, including drinking.

Alcohol was the primary catalyst for Gilbert’s social experience. He seemed comfortable having conversations with people in class, but to transition that conversation to an out of class friendship, he believed drinking was the bridge. He felt like much of the social experience in college would be awkward and difficult, if not impossible, without drinking. Interestingly, his girlfriend provided an alternative in that she seemed to be more comfortable with social sobriety than he did.

Gilbert’s experience appeared highly integrated. He saw little distinction between his academic life, his living environment, and his social experience. Each was supportive and interwoven. It is clear that his friend group helped to create a protective element. He spoke about morality and ethics a good bit and seemed to be very aware that drinking should be fun…and hurting people or hurting yourself would be a line he could not cross and be comfortable. Although Gilbert was not in a fraternity, he recognized that his social life existed within a fairly insulated bubble of the few hundred most socially active students, and was self-aware enough of his environment to understand that the stereotype of white, prep school/frat boy, work hard/play hard is just that. He knew that the majority of students
outside of that bubble were much more tempered. That being said, his perception was that his university represents the quintessential work hard/play hard college environment.

Gilbert articulated a strong locus of control, did not seem to get too caught up in the competitiveness or stress of high achievement, and seemed to have built up several protective habits, in addition to his innate intellectual ability, that allowed him to stay ahead of his work. He built up a buffer of sorts, that accounted for the occasional hang over…which for some other students might, over time, cripple their success. When faced with a choice of work or play, he prioritized work. He also created his own definition of success, which satisfied himself, presumably his parents, and lined him up for a successful future. Among all the participants, he seemed the most grounded and least stressed. Upon graduation, he had achieved all of his goals, primary among them to have had a great time without sacrificing any of his intellectual identity or aspirations.

**Hannah.** One of the things that stands out most from Hannah’s experience was the extent to which her identity as a high academic achiever was solidified early on in her childhood. It was quite clear that a reinforcing effect developed through encouragement from teachers, support from parents, and her own success in school, to build up a strong internal motivation to work hard and excel academically. She challenged herself by taking the hardest classes, and developed a self-awareness around which classes she had to put in extra work because the material did not necessarily come naturally. Hannah possessed, and continued to rely on throughout her academic experience in high school and college, a helpful combination of intellectual acumen, enjoyment of learning, and healthy work ethic.
Like many participants in this study, Hannah articulated being a socially adept and socially motivated person in her pre-college years, but not necessarily someone who sat at the top of the social-class ladder. She had a large circle of acquaintances, but her immediate friend group was, as she described, fairly middle of the pack. Although her perception was that she may have come to drinking later in life than some others—her junior year at age 16—the occasional, if relatively infrequent drinking events she described still made her one of the more experienced drinkers in terms of pre-college from within this participant group. She “held out” on drinking for moral reasons until, as she said, “it felt really comfortable” to drink within her small group of girlfriends.

Another common theme in Hannah’s story was the extent to which her drinking was highly controlled, safe, and socially oriented. It was obvious that her desire to be in control and “not get too crazy” influenced both early and later drinking experiences. In our follow up, Hannah touched on her general anxiety in social situations—manifested in a motherly approach to taking care of friends, and even a level of awkwardness that tempered over time as she became less concerned with going out to parties and bars and more focused on spending time with close friend groups. She also acknowledged that turning 21 reduced the stress and anxiety of social life a good deal for her.

Hannah’s description of her college experience was in many ways the model of having it all. She said she had very good grades, was involved in organizations that garner campus-wide recognition and prestige, and was socially connected and career-focused. Not that there is a need to find one, but it would be hard to pick an area of her experience that did
not go as she would have hoped. Even the (very) few negative experiences that resulted from her drinking have an almost scripted element to them. If you drink as much as she did, you are bound to get sick once or twice, but she was so controlled and organized in her approach to school and social life, that rebounding from these experiences seemed effortless and only served to reinforce the protected way that she managed her drinking and academic preparation. Hannah described herself as organized, someone who plans ahead (even her self-described procrastination would be considered ideal preparation by most standards of academic success), and appeared to have developed a set of skills and self-awareness that was almost formulaic in terms of setting her up for success.

It was interesting to explore the reality of her drinking habits with Hannah. She was cognizant that in the big picture, she drank a lot. She talked about having a high tolerance, and an appreciation for drinking in a socially facilitative way. She was also aware that the social/drinking culture she was a part of both normalized her drinking and made her part of a fairly small sub-set of the campus and larger collegiate environment. Her drinking was exclusively driven by the social experience, which also contributed to a healthier and less-risky approach...in other words her drinking was done in a largely protective manner. This drinking approach was further influenced by a strong academic identity and buffering academic skill set. By her own admission, she also did not have the most rigorous curriculum, but she filled her time with other meaningful experiences.

Hannah possessed and resonated with many of the thematic elements that have been elicited from this study. She valued the work hard/play hard approach to college...she
believed in the “this is college” mindset around the role of alcohol/drinking and fun within
the academic experience, and developed a strong sense of self-defined satisfaction around her
sense of achievement—she set her own goals and brought her own expectations around what
college should be, and achieved those. Although one could argue that Hannah’s ultimate
academic potential was not fully achieved (she presents as someone that could easily manage
a far more rigorous curriculum), she also made a persuasive case for being happy, enjoying
what she has studied and heading in a promising career path, and she got as much if not more
out of the college experience than she could have hoped for, with very few battle scars to
show for it.

Hannah was quite self-reflective around her academic identity as “smart” in our
follow up session. She came to college with a very strong intellectual identity, but had that
identity challenged to the point that she felt she had lost some of it, particularly while at
school. When she described travelling outside of her college environment, where she
perceived everyone was as smart if not smarter than her, she re-gained a level of confidence
and perspective about herself. On campus, she fortified her somewhat diminished academic
identity through recognition of her hard working approach, motivation, and accomplishments
within her chosen field of study.

JT. JT identified himself as a very smart, straight-A student through childhood and
into junior high and high school, and made very conscious choices about his social
interactions so that nothing would interfere with his academic success. His parents provided
the educational environment that was typical for many of the students interviewed, which
was this almost unspoken expectation of success. JT did not have an overt pressure from his parents to be a high achiever, but their educational backgrounds, support for him, and encouragement/rewards for success made it an understood that he would do well. He described a sense that his parents would not be as proud of him if he were not academically successful.

JT described himself as very competitive, and he articulated this through various experiences in high school and college where the achievement of the grade was more important than the love of learning. He was also a three-sport athlete in high school, helping him develop a sense of balance, fueling his competitive nature, and providing his one primary social outlet. JT seemed to possess a significant level of stress and pressure to succeed, much of it self-inflicted. In our follow up session, JT expressed that it would be hard for him to imagine a world where people did not think of him as smart.

JT’s drinking pre-college was almost non-existent, by choice. He experimented once with friends in the eighth grade, hated the experience, and then drank on two other occasions on overseas trips, once when he was 16 and again when he was 18. As he stated, “there was no first high school party”. He made an intentional decision early in high school to take a different path than that chosen by some of his friends, who went a more social route and got deeper into drinking and drug use. He acknowledged that he sacrificed social life for his academic goals. He was very driven toward his goal of getting into a great college, and would not let either the side effects of drinking, or the potential for some legal ramification, derail his chances of being the best student possible. Upon leaving for college, JT had
clearly established academic habits, was aware of his intellectual ability, and had a relatively negative outlook on the more destructive elements of the college social scene, including fraternity life.

JT possessed a solidified “high achiever” identity coming into college; however, there was a sense that JT knew some things would change when he got to college. He knew he would no longer be playing sports, which had filled all of his free time in high school. He had social interests and had made friends in high school easily…any social isolation from individuals or a certain social group was by choice. JT made, again, very intentional choices as he waded into the college social experience. He used the alcohol-fueled orientation week—where he knew he didn’t have to worry anymore about something negative on his transcript keeping him from getting in, and he didn’t have class work yet, to begin what would become a semester-long learning process around how to drink and party at the college level. His perception was that he was among the very few students that he socialized with who did not drink much in high school…and he believed he had a lot of catching up to do. He did not know how to play drinking games, or how much he could drink, so he “tested the waters” a lot his first semester, while also getting used to the more rigorous academic environment.

JT expressed a good deal of appreciation for how his college environment did not force fraternity life on him right away—as he said, they probably would not have wanted someone as inexperienced as him 1st semester, and he also perceived a more permissive philosophy on campus towards alcohol as facilitative and positive. He did not worry about
getting in trouble, knew there were people looking out for his health and well-being, and did not have to venture far to find the parties and social scene he had forgone in high school. JT expressed a sense in our follow up session that while he was able to be social and interact with friends in high school without drinking, that same interaction would not have been possible in college without drinking.

It was also clear that despite his enjoyment of a new found social experience, JT’s drive and competitiveness in all things intellectual did not diminish. He chose, as he described it, the hardest major, influenced by a family member—a role model in many ways for him. He articulated a good deal of pride in being able to be a top student, in a hard major, and have a social life...something he saw few of his academic peers being able to match with equal success. He possessed a strong confidence in his intellectual prowess, and took pride in the reality that he could go out with friends drinking when many of his classmates were sitting in the library. That being said, JT placed academics first. He drank when he absolutely knew that he was able to, with the least amount of impact on his school work. That doesn’t mean he did not drink a lot, but he seemed so in control of his life and schedule that the likelihood of his drinking impacting his academics was negligible.

JT talked about his experience as being about “balancing grade points and life points”. Like many others, he rationalized away any lost potential, arguing that if he did not drink he would not have enjoyed college and would have done worse. It is also important to note that he enjoyed sober elements of college life as well. He recognized and acknowledged the socially facilitative benefits of drinking, but also talked about the non-
drinking activities he enjoyed with his friends and fraternity. Perhaps indicative of his sense of self-control and achievement orientated identity, JT noted that if he had experienced a significant legal consequence early on in college as a result of drinking, he would have likely stepped back and changed his approach to alcohol. As he said, “that’s just not me”.

JT presented as a very confident student, having ample social skills, and having enjoyed what drinking contributed to his college experience. He talked to me about a perception that society paints a picture of college which includes drinking, and he just could not imagine going through the experience and not being a part of that picture. He was exceptionally driven and competitive, and took great pride in being able to successfully navigate the highest academic and social environments within a rigorous university culture.

Katie. Throughout our interview, Katie presented as perhaps the most clear example of the tension and challenge that can exist for college students who try to manage a strong academic identity and a strong social identity—both in terms of when those identities are not perceived to mesh (i.e., smart people can’t be social and vice versa), and when they are expected to mesh and doing so may not come so easily.

By the time she was in high school, Katie had developed into a top student, possessing an internal drive to succeed, an enjoyment of learning, a hard working approach to her studies, and a sense of pride in her level of accomplishment. She had parents who were well educated, and they both encouraged and pushed her to be academically high achieving. At the same time, Katie wanted to be socially connected, and seemed to have a level of teenage rebelliousness that steered her towards friend groups that were less interested
in school and more interested in drinking and social life. More than any other participant, she walked in two almost entirely separate worlds through much of her pre-college experience...never able to find an interpersonal connection between the intellectually driven and socially driven crowds. She articulated this as a continual source of frustration and tension, and it was not until a summer academic enrichment experience late in high school that she discovered that it was possible to find friendships that bridged these two identities.

Katie was socially active in high school, and seemed to drink a fair amount, insofar as it was accessible through parties or an occasional swipe of alcohol from her parents’ inventory. Her first drinking experience was early in high school, when she and a friend went to a party with her friend’s older brother. As she described it, “it felt so cool”. From that point on, her father was permissively ignorant of her alcohol use, essentially knowing she drank but not inquiring about it, while Katie took intentional steps to lie or hide her drinking from her more concerned mother. However, Katie seemed to possess a discomfort with the rule breaking—again a source of tension—and so always tied in an element of responsibility to her drinking.

Katie found what seemed like a perfect fit in college, a place where she could finally bridge the intellectual and social worlds that she lived within. Although she said she greatly enjoyed her experience, it was clear that navigating this intertwined environment of study hard, make good grades, and party hard had not been as smooth as she might have anticipated or hoped for. Katie found out early on that the heightened academic rigor and large pool of students who are as smart, if not smarter than her, combined with a social environment that is
not just confined to weekends and house parties required a level of extreme mental and physical effort that was hard to maintain. Her straight-A identity took hits as she began to immerse herself into the social fabric of college, and eventually she recalibrated her academic expectations to a place where she felt she was still giving a worthy effort, still making good, if not great grades, but also leaving herself time to engage in a social experience that matched her perception of what college should be about.

Katie clearly found a very supportive friend group—primarily within her sorority. She achieved the intertwined social and academic experience she was looking for, found a major and career path that was intellectually fulfilling and exciting, and articulated satisfaction and “no regrets” with her college journey. However, it was apparent in her story that her academic identity remained in a state of tension. She had accomplished a lot, but she was the straight-A student…that was what people knew her as and that was what a large part of her internal sense of self was based on, and there was a sense of tension and lingering level of “what if” for her as she looked back on her experience.

One could hear a level of resignation in her voice when it came to Katie’s academic identity. She said she worked as hard as she could, that there was no way she could have done more and still had a social life and her sanity, but there seemed to be some rationalizing within that which protected the desire to have it all, even if that meant sacrificing a little along the way. This give and take was evident in her talking about the ideal students that she looked up to and strove to be like…the students who made the top grades, were hyper-involved, sat at the pinnacle of the social chain and went out partying hard four, five and six
nights a week. While she may have wanted to be those students, it is a credit to her and a recognition of her strength and internal motivation to succeed that she did not go “all in” on the social scene in college, and had maintained what by most accounts would be considered a very nice balance of academic success and social life.

**Stephanie.** Stephanie brought a maturity and an intellectual curiosity that stood out somewhat from the other participants. Stephanie grew up the youngest of three, with parents that encouraged early academic exploration and skill building. She attended, as she described them, average public schools, but she had a competitive academic spirit and was tracked into gifted programs. Her family moved when she was young, and she eventually started attending a more rigorous supplemental academic program in addition to her regular high school. She described herself as a bit of an outsider and loner, both by nature and by virtue of the move to a new place, but not unsociable. She played sports until realizing that academics, not athletics, was her strong suit, and finished high school as an outstanding student with early acceptance into a top university. Stephanie recognized her own intellectual ability early on, developed a sense of her academic strengths, and built habits that enabled her to achieve great success. While she recognized and respects the lives her siblings built for themselves, she was conscious of her superior intellectual talents relative to them and as such seemed to hold her career aspirations to a higher standard.

Social opportunities for Stephanie were limited in high school early on, with her first drinks coming courtesy of her older siblings. Her first drinking experience was at age 16 with her older sister and her sister’s boyfriend. Her parents were not permissive of drinking,
and it was not until she began dating a more socially connected older boy that regular access to alcohol and social opportunities opened up later in high school. Based on her descriptions of life after she began dating, and after her older sister began attending college nearby, Stephanie probably drank more in high school than most of the other study participants. While she was not partying all the time, and she was not, in her words, among the popular crowd—between her boyfriend and his social scene and attending college parties with her sister, she drank enough to begin to discern what she liked to drink and not drink and learn the facilitative role of drinking in navigating the social scene, as well as figuring out a tolerance limit for herself despite some trial and error overconsumption experiences here and there.

Although a self-described introvert who likes to read, loves animals, and likes to go for walks, Stephanie sought out and achieved an active social experience in college. She took advantage of the easy access to alcohol and permissive campus philosophy during orientation and never slowed down except for a particularly tough academic semester, when she notably drank and socialized the least and did the worst in her classes. Drinking was not a need, but a want for her…she saw drinking as a way to open up social pathways to people she would not have met otherwise, to experience the fun side of college, and to take risks that would not, in her view, be as inconsequential once the expectations of real life emerged. She experienced very few significant negative consequences, and interpreted the occasional hang-over or unintended make-out session as low-cost collateral given the benefits drinking offered in terms of relaxation, balance, and lifetime memories.
Significant to Stephanie’s story is that she discovered, by way of a class she excelled in, an academic interest and career trajectory that she was passionate about. She was very proud of being a student that faculty have taken under their wing and a student that was getting opportunities to present her research. It was obvious that she loved being a college student, and had a very supportive friend group who were both her academic and social peers. Stephanie also presented as having a gifted mind and a protective skill set. She planned and organized with almost obsessive attention, always prioritizing her school work, and was comfortable with sobriety in social settings when she knew she had obligations that required a clear head the next day. She was definitely an active drinker, evidenced by her laughing at the standards for binge drinking (“that’s just getting started”), but she had a maturity and sense of achievement that seemed to mediate the potential to let drinking interfere with her success.

**Tommy.** Tommy was the only under-represented minority student and student-athlete in the study group and brought some unique and valuable perspectives and experiences. He grew up in a fairly typical, public school environment, which was largely African-American in terms of peer demographics. He described his parents as “on him” from an early age regarding academics. He was not a particularly achievement-orientated student as a youngster, but when he got to high school it was made clear that low grades were not acceptable. This obvious pressure and tight-reigned approach from his parents combined with a message he was getting from college recruiters that were interested in his athletic
ability that he needed to keep his grades high, resulted in an excellent high school academic record and a scholarship to an academically prestigious university.

Tommy was tracked into AP and honors classes in high school, and acknowledged having his academic peers and social peers as separate groups. His social peers were the friends he grew up with and hung out with after school/practice and on weekends, but he had a completely separate peer group that he spent every day in class with. His social peers recognized his academic and athletic success, and rather than ostracizing him, became a strong support group and source of encouragement for Tommy. As such he developed a sense that he was a role-model, and carried that pride as well as the pride he gained from making his parents proud, with him.

Tommy did not drink much early on, mostly due to a watchful set of parents, but did have a few occasions to drink, mostly with older friends from his neighborhood. His first drinking experience was in middle school, around 13 years of age. He described those occasions as fun but limited. He knew he needed to establish himself academically and athletically to get a scholarship, and it was not until late in high school, when he was confident in his standing, that he allowed himself to socialize more and drink more. Public image and social standing seemed to be driving motivators for Tommy, and interestingly, these contributed throughout his experiences to both the promotion of a party/drinking lifestyle and moderation of that lifestyle in favor of academic and athletic success. It was during late high school that Tommy realized the value of what he called “liquid courage”. He found himself, after a few drinks, more comfortable talking to girls and more confident
overall in the social scene. Still, he was under a close watch, and dared not let his parents see him drunk, so his drinking experiences were fairly tempered and infrequent until college.

The college transition was significant for Tommy, academically and socially. He was free from his parents’ watchful eyes and in an academic environment that challenged him in ways he had not been challenged before. As Tommy made new friends and began to establish himself on campus, he described drinking less for the confidence it gave him and more because he could. It became part of his social routine, before going to clubs or parties, just to loosen up and relax from a tough week of practice or class work. The athletic season dictated a good deal of his social life, and he described he and his teammate’s excitement when they knew they would get back from an away game in time to go out.

Tommy experienced a few occasions of drinking too much and some relatively mild negative consequences. He seemed to both moderate his consumption with the understanding that he had a lot riding on his success and people were looking up to him, but also still drink a significant amount as his tolerance grew. Tommy seemed nonplussed that the amount he drank and felt fine consuming would put most people in the hospital. It was also clear that much of his drinking revolved around the interplay between social life and sexual conquests. The college hook-up culture seemed to drive or at least influence a pathway toward a good deal of his drinking.

Tommy seemed to have a very mature outlook on how the academic environment in college challenged him. He recognized that his high school was fairly easy, and few teachers pushed him. In college, his peers and his faculty critiqued his viewpoints and work,
and Tommy believed that is what needed to happen for him to be successful. He expressed clear career goals, and they did not involve illusions of professional athletics. He knew that his college experience was an opportunity for him to make something of himself, and he relished the chance to learn from experts in his field of interest. Tommy saw student-athletes who sat in the back of class and did not contribute, and these students got left alone. He chose to achieve, wanted to be a student first and foremost, and wanted the respect of his peers. He took pride in himself in all ways.

There was some limited discussion of the role that race and minority status played in his identity as a successful student, and his perceptions of life as a student-athlete and racial minority appeared consistent—he was aware of the importance of stepping up and representing himself, his family, and his team in the best possible light. He was also cognizant of the opportunity and support provided to him by his team and the coaching staff. They clearly instilled a value of academic success in him and his teammates, and had his best interests at heart. The team goals were as much about academic success, and developing him as a human being, as winning. This carries over to social life, where Tommy described a caring, team-oriented approach to going out and drinking. Everyone looked out for each other and kept each other out of trouble.

Like most of the study participants, Tommy had some well-established academic skills that supported his success despite athletic demands and an active social life. He reported never procrastinating and always getting ahead of work so that he never had to think about school when was is socializing. He was adamant that drinking did not impede his
academics, although Tommy’s grades fell on the lower end of the study participant group. However, he reported being on the high end of his teammates grades. He seemed very satisfied with his academic performance and was on track to achieve his goals and the expectations of his family.

Tommy presented as a proud son and teammate. He liked being looked up to and wanted to be a success, for himself and his family and friends that have supported his success up to that point in his life. He also enjoyed the college social scene, so much so that he articulated a social identity built around drinking. “It is part of me” was something he said emphatically.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a summary profile of all of the participants who took part in this study. Knowing more about each participant helps frame the context of the data and the findings that emerged. Each had a unique story and experience, but many elements of their experiences as a high-achieving, heavy drinking college student are shared across the group, and form the basis for the following chapter.
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

In a traditional phenomenological study, the goal is to ultimately identify one central theme or essence of the phenomenon. In this study, after thorough data analysis steps were taken to identify units of meaning relevant to the research questions, to cluster units of meaning into themes, and to return to the participants and modify themes based on relevance and resonance, four overarching or “major” themes emerged that represented, in a comprehensive way, the lived experiences of participants who are academically high achievers and socially heavy drinkers.

The following chapter will focus on the four major themes that emerged from the participant interviews. For each major theme, several general sub-themes, meaning those that resonated across most, if not all of the participant’s experiences, will be explored using quoted passages from various students that exemplify the sub-theme.

Major Themes

Through primary interviews with eight participants, using semi-structured question protocols designed to elicit personal perspectives and experiences on academics and drinking, several overarching themes emerged. These major themes were identified after coding all interviews for statements that spoke to the research questions, clustering those statements into units of relevant meaning, and determining a unifying theme for each cluster. The major themes, applicable across all participants and emblematic of their lived experiences as high achieving and heavy drinking college students are:

1. the development of an academic identity as smart;

2. the development of a social and drinking identity;
3. this is why I drink; and,

4. navigating the work hard/play hard philosophy.

Within each major theme are several sub-themes which represent an element or aspect of the overarching theme and collectively define the lived experience. Some elements within each sub-theme may only have been shared amongst a few participants, or only emerged within one participant’s story, but represented a significant element of the overall experience.

The following sections will lay out the major themes and within each, the sub-themes that were identified. For each section, passages from participants will be shared as examples and ways that participants expressed how they experienced that theme. There is no hierarchy among the major themes or within the sub-themes. The themes are however presented in the order in which most participants discussed their experiences. Table 2 below shows each major theme and associated sub-themes that will be explored through example passages to come.
Table 2.

Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Development of Academic Identity as Smart</td>
<td>Academic Foundations</td>
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<td>Internal Drive &amp; Motivation</td>
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<td>External Motivation</td>
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<td>Academic Expectations</td>
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<td>Development of a Social &amp; Drinking Identity</td>
<td>Drinking Foundations</td>
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<td>Drinking Environment &amp; Access to Alcohol</td>
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<td>Social Circles &amp; Friend Groups</td>
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<td>Negative Drinking Experiences</td>
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<td>This is Why I Drink</td>
<td>Social Facilitation</td>
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<td>Escape from School</td>
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<td>This is College</td>
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<td>Drinking as Capital</td>
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<tr>
<td>Navigating the Work Hard/Play Hard Philosophy</td>
<td>Work Hard/Play Hard</td>
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<td>Strategies &amp; Skills to Achieve</td>
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<td>Peer Influence</td>
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<td>Managing Drinking</td>
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<td>Rationalizing Use</td>
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Driven by both the questions that were asked and the chronological nature of their experiences, most participants first addressed their identification, often from an early age, with academics and a self-awareness of being someone who was smart. Next, participants discussed the emergence of social experiences, typically in high school, that included the use and prevalence of alcohol. For most, the social and drinking experience was altered significantly once they arrived at college, with a significant uptick in both their perceived importance of alcohol and drinking to the social experience and the amount they drank.
While not a distinctly separate line of conversation, interviews invariably turned to discussions about why the participants drank and the role of alcohol and drinking in their experience. This naturally segued into the intersection of drinking and their academic experience, and how those two, in many ways diametrically oppositional experiences, merged and became mutually reinforcing through intentional navigation of their academic and social environments and strategic management of their academic work and social experiences.

**Development of an academic identity as smart.** For every participant, a clear sense of self as being smart and high-achieving stood out. Most students had both an internal drive and ample external influence to succeed in their intellectual development. In the following section, general sub-themes that speak to the development of an academic identity as smart will be exhibited. The general sub-themes are: academic foundations, internal drive and motivation, external motivation, and academic expectations.

Academic foundations are the early-life experiences and environments that started each student down the path of high academic achievement and success. Internal drive and motivation describes the pride of being academically successful, and the intellectual curiosity and enjoyment of learning that kept these students engaged in their path toward academic success. In many ways this sub-theme evokes an elusive “something” about what pushes students to achieve. External motivation represents the academic and intellectual influence and support students received from parents, family members and other people and experiences. Finally, academic expectations are the various explicit or implicit standards and
benchmarks of achievement students perceived for themselves, the feelings of pressure and stress to achieve, and the environmental factors that shaped the students’ academic experience and ultimately their identity as someone who is smart.

**Academic foundations.** The first general sub-theme is one that emerged at the beginning of each interview, academic foundations. The leading statement that started each interview was, “Take me back as far as you remember and talk about your early memories of school and academic experiences”. Academic foundations describe the experiences that participants focused on as they recalled formal and informal academic environments, introductions to various academic subjects, and the early sense of self that developed through achievement, even in elementary school.

While some participants attended wealthy private schools or strong suburban public schools, and others attended less resourced rural or urban public schools, each identified their elementary and secondary school academic environment as being encouraging and supportive of their intellectual curiosity and development. I asked JT, “Were there people in your life that you feel like influenced how you thought about academics – parents, teachers, other folks around you, even peers, that maybe influenced that development of who you were as a student”. He responded with a focus on the place and environmental conditions.

It was – probably first and foremost was the environment that I’m in. The school was very, very – it prides itself on being a great liberal arts school, gets kids into college, and has a very rigorous program. And that drove me. There were other similar minded students around me.
Beyond school walls, there were cultural environments that influenced an orientation towards academics. David, who grew up abroad said,

Well, I grew up and received education…where the education resources is quite limited compared to the United States. So in order to get better resources, we have to work very diligently. For example, in high school, I studied more than 16 hours every day in order to get good scores in like the college entrance exam, which is equivalent to SAT in the States. I actually didn’t have any other time for my own hobbies and things like my own life. So every day, I just took classes and work out math problems and remember English vocabulary and things like that.

Teachers played a significant role in participants’ academic success and most students spoke of an educator who drove, pushed or provided a high level of encouragement. One teacher, who saw something in Hannah that she did not see in herself, served as a motivator for a future goal.

A particularly influential teacher of mine was my fifth grade teacher who kinda sat me down a few weeks into school and was like I think you're gonna be the valedictorian of your high school. I really believe in you. I think you're gonna do amazing things. And she was known throughout our school as a particularly challenging teacher. And I had worked really, really hard in her class. I think it was the first time I was really academically challenged… I was on the honors track, the AP track, always got straight As. The only B I've got in – well, excluding college,
the only B I got in my academic career was sixth grade social studies and my English class. I got B pluses in both of them. And I can tell you exactly why. [laughter] And after that I never got a B again. So I got straight As all through high school. I took like six AP classes my senior year, was editor of my newspaper and really involved. And then I was valedictorian as my fifth grade teacher predicted.

In addition to the influence of the academic environment on their early intellectual development and identity, the participants also discussed examples of experiencing academic achievement early in life. Several could recall instances in preschool and elementary school of being recognized for success or identified as being special or gifted. Hannah said,

So as far as back as I can remember I was always a pretty academic kid. I started reading when I was three. So one of my first memories is making my whole preschool class sit down and listen to me read a story to them.

Similarly, many participants discussed experiencing self-awareness of being different from peers and possessing academic skills ahead of the curve. Katie remarked,

So I did second grade and academically I was really up to speed, up to par, above grade level. I was taken out for enrichment sessions with four other students who also were performing really well and we’d have these enrichment sessions twice a week and I always really liked being able to leave class and go to these because I felt special and smart.

Somewhat comically, Buck recalled the experience of taking over his class.
I remember at one point the teacher asked me who – I learned to read in first or second grade, I can’t remember, and the teacher asked me to teach the other students how to read so that she could take a cigarette break.

Participants shared these early academic environments and experiences with great clarity and spoke at length about the influence each played in grounding their early sense of self in academics.

**Internal drive and motivation.** From a developmental standpoint, one might expect most of these students to have been primarily influenced, at least through high school, by external forces—parents, teachers, peers. The themes do point to those influences, and findings related to external factors will be shared in a subsequent section. However, each student also talked at length about their own intrinsic motivations and personal desire to be successful academically. This group possessed an important internal element that drove them towards academic excellence. Some students were able to describe this internal drive clearly, while others talked about an almost innate “something” that pushed them. For Gilbert, it was curiosity that fueled academic interests.

I was pretty driven and I had some teachers that I really liked and always found the material that was challenging but there wasn’t anything in particular that was like, “Oh like now I’m really curious about the subject,” or anything. I was always just pretty curious about a lot of things and that’s what drove me, I think.

For JT, the goal of college served as a motivating force.
I quickly found out that it starts very young to be able to build up that resume to be able to get into college, and that was really important to me. I didn’t want to just go to a state school. I wanted to do something cool, something new, one of the better schools.

Tommy articulated a forward thinking mentality towards career and life aspirations as his main influence.

You know some people have high aspirations; some people have just low aspirations and just plans to just get by. And just depends on how you are, what type of person you are and what kinda school work you’re doing. Got some people you know majors are different so got some people who are earth and ocean sciences major and you got people who are pre-med. Of course the pre-med person is gonna put in work ‘cause look what they’re trying to do. The earth and ocean sciences, you don’t even know what that is. They act like they can do a limited amount of work and just get by…it’s not acceptable…’cause I want – I know what I wanna do.

For Hannah, the internal drive was hard to articulate, but she knew one thing above all else; she had to do well in school or she would be unhappy.

I don't know where the motivation comes from. [laughter] I've always wanted to do well in school, and it pains me if I don't. And I wish I could give that to everyone because there are a lot of people, I think, who could benefit from that motivation, but I don't know where it comes from. It's definitely not external. It was never someone
telling me to do well in school. It's always been internal, and I've always had these standards for myself. Like, if I don't get an A or an A minus, I get pretty upset… So there's really not much pressure for me to do well this semester, and I still have to get A's. I wanna graduate with honors and things like that. I don't know where it comes from. I was thinking about this the other day actually because I was thinking about my classes, and I was like I could really – if I got B pluses, nobody's gonna care. And I was like well my GPA will go down. And I don't wanna say I graduated college with a 3.4, and that's just too – and it was like these standards I set for myself that it all really comes internally. I don't think anyone would be disappointed in me. I got a couple B pluses my second semester of senior year, but it's still – I have a complex against it, I guess.

Beyond a self-awareness and recognition of their academic prowess, many students experienced a sense of pride in their academic success. For some, the pride was articulated through a sense that they could handle school in ways they believed others could not. Gilbert commented, in a way that was representative of his overall confidence, “So I think that I’ve always been really proud of being smart and being able to handle problems at a more sophisticated level than other students”.

Several participants expressed pride through being different and being seen as different and special, as well as simply working harder than their peers. Katie said,

I think school work was always one of my refuges per se in the sense that I channeled everything into that and I worked really hard...that kind of continued in third grade. I
was taken out to do extra – we did ____ math, which was for people who were doing really well in third grade. We’d do extra enrichment and there were eight of us in a group and I was the only girl and I was also still the youngest. So I just felt really special and academics always was a point of pride for me. So I think that’s how I kept developing and working really hard in the school setting because it was something I was naturally good at and because it made me feel good and talented. I just worked really hard at it.

For others, pride was expressed in the way others look at them and the respect from peers that comes with doing well in school. Tommy, who was the only participant that spoke about himself as a role model for others, shared,

‘Cause that does play into my happiness level and so much of my identity is based on my performance in the classroom and so I always want to maintain that. I feel like there’s a certain level of respect and admiration and I just feel that academics is a really important part of my life and so I will always work hard but I also give myself time to enjoy life, too.

Tommy spoke several times about his identity as a role model, for both his peers in school as well as friends and family back home. I asked him what it felt like to be someone who was a high achiever academically and athletically in high school.

I can honestly say that it felt different ‘cause I stood out from a lot of people. You know a lot of people just had academics and didn’t have any athletic ability and some
people had vice versa. But I was one that actually incorporated both. And I had a lot of the younger boys just looking at me, like looking up to me like that’s what I wanna do but they weren’t actually performing that well. And teachers really looked up to me and they was like well, he’s gonna set the example.

A dominant theme for the majority of participants, which stretched from elementary school through college life, was an interest in learning and an enjoyment of learning. While many students focused on getting an “A”, that goal was universally coupled with an appreciation for the intellectual process. For Gilbert, the enjoyment of learning was rooted in the stimulus of a challenge.

I think the thing, the times in school when I was most interested were in math classes because math – this was math and like high school science which are just naturally challenging because you’re being exposed to material that you wouldn’t have otherwise encountered in your everyday life...and then particularly in social science and like history and political oriented classes where we were dealing with very gray ideas where there wasn’t a clear this is correct, this is incorrect. I really enjoy classes where there are other students that were interested in the material and had opposing viewpoints because I was always a really argumentative kid growing up and I really like the classes where the teacher facilitated interesting discussions and there were other students in the class that also wanted to disagree with me about my views. I enjoy that being a challenge and having to defend and adapt what I believed in.
In a similar vein of being challenged, more than one participant’s enjoyment of learning was most strongly influenced by great teachers who introduced them to new material and pushed them to achieve their full potential. Buck recalled,

I took a very early interest in literature and history at the time, and it was because I had two really outstanding teachers, one in literature who…was a very, very huge influence on my academic life and he was a very difficult teacher. You’d submit your essays and they’d come back with markings all over the paper. I remember one time he drew a shovel and a steaming pile of excrement on my paper because that was the bullshit. He was like, “This is the bullshit paragraph. I can detect it,” but as a seventh-grader you’re not used to that type of treatment. So it was just really – he was a fantastic professor.

For some students, enjoyment of learning was driven by a sense of where academics could take them in life and what they could accomplish. Here, David discussed his intellectual curiosity and aspirations for life after graduate school.

I will say that I’m kind of a student or a person that has a very broad interest. Once I spend some time into a subject I study, I will become interested in it and probably because I get very good educations, both ____ and here. The instructors give me very promising future both in terms of what I can get and what I can contribute. Sometimes, when I – especially in graduate school, sometimes I learn that there are so
many unsolved problems in engineering and I sort of have much stronger interests in what I’ve learned than before.

For Stephanie, a true passion for learning for learning sake did not fully materialize until college and even more so until her major classes became her focus.

And, well, in college, grades are important. They are always gonna be important. But it’s so much more to me about do I understand that material? Am I learning it? And, yeah, I mean I think I’m definitely learning more – even though my grades aren’t as good as they were in high school, I’m enjoying myself more and I’m learning more, more importantly. I’m studying smart. You know, I’m learning things and rendering them. I’m not cramming the night before for a test because I’m studying things that interest me. And I like it. And it’s easy to keep up with in my head...My parents are happy. I’m making good grades and doing well in school, and I’m studying things I like. I’m enjoying it. For the first time, really, this semester, you know, I’m done with all my recs, there are classes I look forward to going to. That hasn’t happened to me since elementary school, honestly. This class is like, man, I’m really excited. What are we gonna learn next? This class is like awesome. I can't wait to go here…it’s a lot of fun to learn and have fun. Sometimes it’s hard, but it’s worth it.

Perhaps most salient to the experience of the participants relative to an appreciation of academics was the recognition that this was something they were good at. It makes sense
that one will enjoy something more if they are successful. Katie expressed her experience this way:

I liked doing my homework...and then that continued up just all the way through until high school. I always felt like I was doing really well. I really liked my math classes. I really liked my science classes. I really liked standardized tests...I don’t know why. It’s just something I’m good at and I’m really thankful for that because I know a lot of people struggle with it but I like standardized tests. And I just always really liked learning and I would consider myself very intellectually curious. I like to learn about things and my friends joke that I’m like a walking encyclopedia because I can spit out facts about the fish or the clouds or just like anything. I just enjoy picking up those types of things.

**External motivation.** While the participants each articulated a strong sense of internal motivation, there was an equally universal sense that external forces drove their academic interests and success. As seen previously, even aspects of intrinsic motivation, like an enjoyment of learning, were often precipitated by the influence of an external factor, such as a teacher. This section will focus more directly on those findings specific to the external motivations and influence that shaped students’ experiences and identity around academics.

Parents and family were the people most often referenced as influencing the participants’ experience. For some, parents and family pushed them, in many cases harder than teachers. Gilbert, who at times felt less than fully challenged at school, said about his parents,
I think my parents much more than school encouraged my questioning attitude and were very – could easily challenge me when I wanted to be challenged and help me develop as a writer when I was younger when my English teacher wasn’t especially challenging. So for sure I think that my parents were a huge influence.

For Buck, whose parents were less involved in his academic experience, his grandfather provided the encouragement and to some extent, pressure to succeed.

My grandfather from a very young age has identified me as sort of his last great hope is what he calls me and he’ll literally even though letters are totally obsolete now he’ll send me letters every other week with words of wisdom and that sort of thing.

Several participants talked about the academic achievement of their parents and family members as more or less setting the benchmark for their academic attainment. JT shared the following about the influence of his uncle,

My parents were very influential, but not to the point where I’d be in trouble if I didn’t have good grades. But it was – promoting good grades was very important…both my parents were very successful in school, but went to the state universities. But my uncle is an engineer, has his PhD in engineering. I would say he would be one of the outside influences. I remember one college essay I wrote. It’s who you look up to. I wrote about my uncle who does very well in engineering. And we joke we’re the nerds in the family, but we still have – consider ourselves funny and social and do sports. He’s someone I looked up to a lot for academics.
For Tommy, a major influence was his parents’ desire to see him exceed their own levels of academic attainment. I asked him why they pushed him so hard and he replied,

Because they were kids once as well and they didn’t wanna see me do the same things they did and they wanted to see me make it further than they did. I’m the first one in my immediate family to go to a four-year institution.

Stephanie reflected on the influence of her competition with siblings and the support her parents provided.

I guess it probably was competition with my siblings, but I always did want to be the best, and it was largely self-driven. There were times that my parents thought I did too much, and they told me to slow down. But I’m glad. They were always very supportive with driving me, which is I feel like a very difficult balance for a parent. And in retrospect, I appreciated that greatly.

In addition to parental and family influences, most students articulated other external forces and motivators for their academic success and identity. Several participants shared norms that were promoted by other successful peers. David saw competition with classmates as a significant influence.

In my college study, I just kind of driven by others instead of my inner motivation. What I mean by others, our first competition with others and then expectation from parents. One of the most important reasons for me to come here to seek my graduate
study is because the most excellent students in my own country are coming to the
United States and I was a part of them. That’s very simple.

Tommy was asked who else besides his parents influenced his success. He discussed
being encouraged by his coaches.

You know I’m here on a full athletic scholarship and I’m here, I’m a student first then
an athlete second. And my head coaches gave me the opportunity and I never wanna
bite the hand that feeds me...so he’s a big part and he always strives on being the
number one team in the nation as far as academics and athletics.

[To take pride in not only the scoreboard but take pride in being an academic all-
American or take pride in having the highest grades in the conference, highest
graduation rates. That’s something that you all talk about?]

Yeah it’s talked about very often.

In fact, the influence from college coaches on his academic success started in high school.

At sophomore year you know I started getting interest in sports, started getting
college letters and things like that and the one thing they kept telling me is you gotta
get your academics together. Like that’s what’s gonna be key. So I listened and all
through high school from my sophomore to my senior year I kept above 4.0 GPA
average.
Whether through parents, siblings, extended family members, peers or teachers, the participants all recognized some level of external influence on their academic development and motivation to achieve.

**Academic expectations.** The precursor to academic motivation, and a significant influence on their academic identity, was awareness among students that they had expectations placed on them pursuant to their success in school, whether extrinsically or intrinsically influenced. For some, the expectations for their level of achievement were specifically articulated, but for most, the bar was set through more subtle and tacitly understood standards.

Gilbert was cognizant that although his internal drive was enough to create his own high expectations, had that internal drive not existed his family would have set the bar for him. He shared, “Well I’m sure there was a threshold below which had I not done as well as my parents expected me to there would have – the external motivation from them would have been significantly higher”. This quote is a good example of a sense from many participants that this unspoken measure of success existed between themselves and their parents.

For Tommy, who did not start out his academic career as a straight “A” student, his parents were far more direct about their expectations for him in school.

Ok, going all the way back to elementary school you know my parents had a big impact on me and my academic performance. I’ve always wanted to be the one to have fun and run the streets with my homeboys and my parents kept me in line really. They were very disciplinary so they kept me in line in that regard. I really couldn’t
bring a C home. That’s how I was going through elementary school. I brought a C home then they would strip me of my videogames and tell me I couldn’t go play with my friends and things like that so that really kept me in a tight knot like okay, I can’t bring a C home so I gotta get my education. So that stuck with me, the not bringing a C home, that stuck with me all through basically high school. So I’ve kept that in mind but I did actually bring like one C home through the whole experience and it got ugly.

Two students talked about sacrificing elements of their social life in high school for their academics due to their own benchmarks for academic achievement. For JT, college was the goal and therefore he made the decision to forgo certain social elements in order to attain his high standards.

I joke that I sacrificed fun in high school. A lot of kids would go out and have fun and that sort of party scene and whatever, and I totally sacrificed that because I had sports and school. And that was my entire life in school...it was homework and sports.

Different from an understood or clear-cut set of academic expectations, most participants also discussed varying levels of academic pressure and stress that influenced their achievement oriented identity, either placed on them by people and environmental conditions, or wholly internalized. For the vast majority of students, they were aware of the pressure but seemed to shrug it off or cope well and use it as a motivator. For a few,
academic pressure was a challenge that was sometimes hard to deal with. Gilbert discussed his ability to manage pressure better than most, based on his observations of his peers:

Like my parents, my parents I will – one time I was like, “Oh my friend… like every time he gets an A on a report card, he gets like $50 or something, why don’t I”, and my mom was like, “You don’t need $50 to get an A on your report card, you’re gonna get an A regardless.” And I mean she was right, like I would have been disappointed with myself and it would have just been unnatural for me to not succeed, so they’re never…there was never any pressure from them to do well just because I put that pressure on myself…so I’ll just say some kids haven’t really been able to balance the pressure, but I feel like because I had been prepared from an early age to handle all those things that I’ve been able to do it.

Several students talked about the shock of academic pressure when they transitioned from high school to college. JT faced a swift introduction to college expectations:

The thing I didn’t like is, “Wow. Now I’m around all these other smart kids. It’s not that easy anymore.” And there’s some of those weed out classes where you don’t get the perfect A’s each time. My worst GPA was first semester. It was a 3.5, freshman year – first semester freshman year – but it’s only gone up there. But it was a rude awakening.

Tommy added his own perspective on the ramping up of academic expectations once in college:
Oh it was very different. That was I wanna say challenging to me ‘cause I haven’t been in that situation. You know coming from high school you’re kinda superior in regards to education. When you’re here you’re equal or even inferior. So that’s very different...Everybody’s a shark. Everybody’s equal or better.

Even though students coped well with stress and pressure to succeed, many shared the sense that it was always there as an influence, even when things were going well. Several conversations revolved around the notion of school as “work”. JT discussed the influence of stress and his ability, and at times inability, to manage it.

But, as you said, it’s a job. When you come home you’re done. I wish that was the case, but in college it’s not. Because when you get home you’re still thinking there’s still a grade on the line like, “Oh, I still have that test next week.” I wish it could all drop when you went home, but it’s still kind of there, I guess. I’m one that stresses out a lot over school. And so that stress is always in the background, and – I don’t know – I wish I could leave it, but I don’t always.

In contrast to the pressure and stress of academic life felt by most participants to one degree or another, Buck and Gilbert communicated the experience of school being easy. Not surprisingly, these students were consistently the most overtly self-confident in their high-achieving academic identity. In a conversation about how his high school experience prepared him for college, Buck shared his overall sense of collegiate academic rigor.
So I was well-prepared by my high school to handle college. As I had mentioned, it was one of those things where you’re busy all day long and then you have a ton of work to do at night, and you find a way to get it done, and it was very, very difficult and challenging. And I came to college and I literally just thought college was a joke. I was like, “This is summer camp.” You’re telling me, as somebody who wakes up at 6:00 in the morning, goes to class, sits in class all day, and goes to sports, goes to dinner, and then goes to extra-curriculars in the evening and then does homework all night that now on Monday I don’t have any class and on Tuesday I only have to sit in the classroom for half-an-hour and then – this is a joke...I would say if I had struggled academically I would have put my academics first and said, “I need to go out less. I need to do this, that, or the other thing,” but I really didn’t feel – I felt underwhelmed by the academics here and it just was sort of easy for me.

Similarly, and in many ways connected to the perspective that school is easy, is the experience of being bored in school. Again, only Buck and Gilbert articulated this experience. When asked what influence the boredom had on his college experience, Buck said,

So I was just like I have so much time in my day. What am I gonna do? So I piled on extra-curriculars. I did as many things as I could. I joined an a capella group. I started playing rugby. I joined a business club. I did this ambassadorship society. So I say I’m more involved than anybody else I know on campus just in terms of doing stuff outside of class just because I was bored.
Like early academic experiences, and intrinsic and extrinsic academic motivation, the academic expectations that defined what academic achievement should be for each of these students played a role in shaping their academic identity as smart.

**Summary.** These findings make up the major theme of the development of an academic identity as smart. From an exploration of the start of the participants’ academic journey as young children, to the influence of various internal and external motivators, and finally the multitude of academic expectations that framed their academic experiences in high school and college, a sense of these participants as intellectually-minded and high-academic achieving beings emerges. They are not just students as defined by their enrollment in school, but they are students as defined by their sense of self. They each recognize their academic abilities, and to one degree or another know, “I am smart”.

Their sense of self as being smart is influenced and reinforced by repeated academic success, the development of an enjoyment and appreciation for learning, the support and encouragement of others, and the internal and environmental cues related to what the expectations are for success. These students are proud of their accomplishments and for most being a high-achiever in the classroom is a given. To be unsuccessful academically would not only be disappointing to them and their families, it would disrupt a core component of their identity. These findings will be explored in greater depth in the discussion chapter of this paper. The following section reveals another identity and major theme, being social and a drinker.
Development of a social and drinking identity. Just as participants experienced the development of an academic identity that drove their sense of intellectual attainment, they also developed an identity as being a socially engaged individual. For each student, that social engagement was eventually accompanied by heavy alcohol consumption. In the following section, sub-themes that speak to the development of a social and drinking identity will be exhibited.

The sub-themes explored in this section are: drinking foundations, drinking environment and access to alcohol, social circles and friend groups, and negative drinking experiences. Drinking foundations are the high school and early college drinking experiences that set the stage for the development of a social identity bound together with alcohol. Drinking environment and access to alcohol describe where participants did their drinking and how alcohol was introduced into their social experience. Social circles and friend groups are sub-themes about the people who influenced participant’s drinking most saliently. Finally, negative drinking experiences will illuminate the impact of the dark side of drinking and how it influenced student’s drinking expectations.

Drinking foundations. Each student’s social experience, and more specifically social experience involving alcohol, had a beginning that shaped the development of their social identity. The statement that led into these conversations was, “take me back and tell me about your first experiences with drinking as a part of your social life”. Drinking foundations describe the first experiences with alcohol, the experience of being an inexperienced drinker, and the process of learning and developing skills to drink.
Although many participants discussed an awareness of alcohol and drinking before they themselves chose to drink, among the most salient experiences that ignited the development of a sense of a social identity around alcohol were first instances of drinking. Everyone had a story and everyone could recall with great detail where they were, who they were with, and what they were doing. Some experiences were described as positive, and some resulted in some negative consequence. Some were early in high school, and some were as students approached college, but every participant had tried drinking at least once before college.

Many participants talked about experiencing their first drink, and then really drinking. This usually meant reaching a level of perceived intoxication as opposed to just consuming some alcohol. Gilbert described his first time drinking and then really drinking with friends:

So I started drinking my sophomore year of high school and I can – I’m – yeah, I can remember definitely the first time that I went to like a party and drank, and it was really exciting because I guess in my high school there was like a group of like really cool popular kids that I was friendly with but I wasn’t in their circle where we hung out consistently on the weekends… I remember one of the first times for a lot of us when we started drinking was at this one party where like my friends’ parents were out and he got like a case of beer or two for like 20 people. We were mixing with coke which now actually I’ve gone back into like ten, you know, however many years down the road but you know at the time we only – we just didn’t know what we were
doing. No one really got especially drunk but I remember that was like the first time and then we all ended up getting in trouble. My parents found out somehow then the first time that I like really drank was probably a couple of months down the road when my friends and I – like it was like me and two other friends got a whole of a handle of vodka and we just like drank ourselves stupid and puked and everything.

Buck differentiated drinking with his parents from his first real social experience.

So I didn’t really drink – so just to answer your question; the first time I drank was with my parents and they let me drink all the time at home. We’d have a glass of wine with dinner and have a beer here or there, but that’s not really the type of drinking that I would describe as drinking. You might as well be drinking water if it’s gonna be with dinner. So the first time I remember drinking was in high school one of my friends was – his mother was the dean of the boarding school, and so they had a house on campus and I remember he invited me over and we went into his basement and there were a bunch of us. We had a couple of drinks, and I felt so cool because it was like here we’re in the dean’s house. If she found out about this we’d all get expelled if she even just came down the stairs, but here we are drinking. And we probably had two drinks, but we’re all like, “Dude, I’m so drunk.” I think about it now and it’s funny, but that was the first time I can remember drinking in a social setting, and then I would say in terms of binge drinking the quantity that I drink now was the – it was senior spring in high school. My friends and I went to the Caribbean
which was just insane. It was so fun, but that was the first time I discovered my ability to drink heavily.

JT felt so disappointed in himself the first time he drank that it turned him into a virtual non-drinker.

My first experience with alcohol was in eighth grade. It was friends who stole beer from the fridge in the basement. And I had one. Felt terrible for myself. And I wasn’t sick. But I was just like, “This is wrong. I shouldn’t do this.” It was with the cool kids. It was the thing to do. And then after that, I did not touch alcohol for the rest of high school.

David drank earlier in life than anyone else in the participant group. He talked about the profound influence his culture had on the onset of his relationship with alcohol.

At the age of five or six, when my parents give me that kind of alcohol, I drink a lot because I liked the sweet flavor. My parents have to stop me before me get drunk, actually. In my teenage years, I drink with my father a lot. There’s no such regulation or laws in my country that prohibits teenagers from drinking.

Stephanie’s first experience involved an older sibling introducing alcohol.

My oldest sister was in college, and she was a junior, maybe, I don’t know. But she invited me to spend the weekend with her there…and she got us champagne, which was a good choice on her part. It was very sweet…I had my first shot that night as
well. And I remember thinking that I like the shots better… like, “Oh, it’s such a big deal. First shot. They taste so bad.” I was much more mentally prepared. The chaser was on hand. I took the shot. I was like, “Ah, I can do this. This is fine. It’s two swallows. It’s not a big deal,” you know, compared to the agonizing whole can of beer. That was nothing. But that first night was definitely – I’m trying to put this delicately…That first night was a shit show…I think between the two of us, we drank four bottles of champagne. It was a lot of alcohol. It was my first time really drinking. I did a good job of not being that like sloppy drunk girl who throws up everywhere. But my sister could tell I was drinking a couple – after a little while, she could tell. So we went back – I think I like stumbled a little and I might have spilled a little beer, you know, nothing bad, nothing horrific happened. But we went back and we went to bed. And a couple of hours later, I am throwing up in the toilet. A rough day and a rough night, and the next day, the worst hangover had in – well, ever, at that point. I felt terrible all day. I had to drive back home. I felt sick all day. Definitely a negative first experience.

Katie’s experience involved her and a close friend drinking together for the first time.

I went to my first party with my friend and she and her brother picked me up and it was a house party, as all high school parties are. And people were playing beer pong and I was just so overwhelmed, shocked. I felt so cool. Nobody knew that it was my first time drinking but I was very – and I think it was hers, too, although we never
talked about it because it was one of those things that you were embarrassed to say that this was your first time or whatever.

For some, their first time drinking was significant because they had held out when other peers had already begun drinking. As this passage from Hannah highlights, reaching the point of finally being comfortable enough to try it was momentous.

It was New Year’s Eve of my junior year of high school, I guess. And my friend had a party, and we all went over. And it was only about like ten girls. So I felt really comfortable. And I guess everyone had been drinking, and I had kinda been holding back. And then I just realized that I was ready. I didn't feel so bad about it anymore I guess. And so we all drank together that night, and that was kinda my first experience, I guess, my real – first real experience with alcohol.

Once beyond the first drink and experience of intoxication, a secondary experience for participants that proved universal was a recognition that while they had tried alcohol, they did not know how to drink. To become a drinker, there were rules to learn. For most participants, they perceived their lack of drinking experience in high school as something shared in common with their college peers. Students remarked that everyone they were friends with in college were probably “pretty nerdy” in high school, and therefore everyone was developing a drinking identity together once in college. Many participants also shared similar perceptions that the students who came to their college arrived with less drinking experience than students who might go to less academically rigorous institutions. As Buck
put it, “To get into this place is hard. So a lot of these kids in high school they’re not the partiers”.

Buck was one who described his high school as having more and less popular kids—with him not among the most popular—but drinking was not necessarily what separated groups because everyone was high achieving for the most part.

I had a lot of really good friends, but we were never the cool kids, and then I came to—and I never really drank really that much. Other than that trip to the Caribbean that I mentioned where I had my first experience ever binge drinking I hadn’t really had that much to drink in high school...I would say basically everybody in my high school didn’t really drink that much...Yeah, even the cool kids really didn’t drink that much.

A common experience was disliking beer as a novice drinker. Tommy summed up the experience of most when he said, “I actually hated beer until I got to college...it was terrible, disgusting. I really didn’t know how to drink it”. Several participants talked about feeling out limits with alcohol, and trying to figure out the difference between drinking and being drunk. Stephanie described the inexperience that she and her boyfriend shared together:

Yeah, so he, my boyfriend, had older friends who drink alcohol. So I would drink with him, and I guess I started to get a hand on things, although I was still—I’d say up until I went to college, I was still really bad at knowing my limits. Although there were definitely times where I’d drink too much or I’d get too drunk and he’d have to
take care of me, or vice-versa, he’d get too drunk and I’d take care of him. We sort of fielded it out together, I guess.

This sense of inexperience was further personified by Katie’s realization that she had no context for what being drunk felt like. The passage below also highlights the experience of being in control, or wanting to be in control as one incorporates drinking into their social life, which was shared by almost every participant.

I’m very obsessive. I have a very obsessing personality and I like to be in control and so for me when I was drinking the alcohol, I was very overly aware of how it was making me feel. So I remember being after one or two, I was like, “Okay, I’m drunk. Stop.” And I just didn’t let it progress any further because I was scared. I don’t know. And it was enough. Your first time drinking, you don’t know that’s not drunk. How are you supposed to know? You don’t have anything to compare it to.

This sense of control and knowing one’s limit will be explored in greater detail in a subsequent section looking at how students navigated their academic and social experiences.

The progression from inexperienced drinker to experienced drinker happened in different ways and at different times for each participant, but everyone articulated an evolution in drinking ability that allowed them to become a more confident and comfortable drinker. For a student who did not drink much before college, orientation week allowed JT to learn the ropes without the potential for academic consequences.
I guess something that’s in me—some kids get so drunk, so sick the first time, that’s—
I took it very slowly. And it was a pleasant experience. Didn’t get caught right
away or anything. So I’ve never had any issues with that. And it was just a very
positive experience. There was a week to do it before school started, so I wasn’t
worried about academics…I’d say I got really lucky with the people I was around that
made it a very unique learning environment, so that, okay, I didn’t know what it felt
like to be really drunk. I didn’t know how to play beer pong. I didn’t know any of
these rules. I felt like I was smart enough where I snuck in where people didn’t
know I didn’t drink in high school.

For David, the skills for drinking were ingrained in his cultural norms.

In the parents’ education, there is a kind of interesting saying that you have to get
good skills in drinking during meals, the kind of formal meals to achieve success in
society. You have to be well behaved. You have to have the ability to choose or to
say— to make your business partner happy.

Most students talked about the maturity in their taste for alcohol over time, or at least
an expanding taste for whatever alcohol they could get. Stephanie articulated a common
feeling among the women in the group regarding learning to drink what you were given.

You know, when you’re under 21, you pretty much drink whatever is given to you
because you can’t buy it. People are giving you what’s free. So you drink what you
can get. No one ever asks you what would you like to drink, so it takes you a really
long time to learn, “oh, this is what I enjoy, and this is what I don’t.” It takes a while to get a taste spectrum. But, yeah, you still retain the ability to drink crappy alcohol, but you’re aware that better things are out there at that point.

From first introductions to alcohol and the sensation of intoxication, to the recognition that there are lessons and skills to learn to grow from a novice to experienced drinker, drinking foundations launched the identity development of these students as social beings.

**Drinking environments and access to alcohol.** More than any other sub-theme within the overarching theme of development of a social and drinking identity, the topic of access and availability of alcohol, and the drinking environments that students experienced in high school and college, stood out. Almost every participant talked at length about the drinking culture in high school and college and the influence of that culture on their understanding of drinking as an important element of their social experience and social identity. Several of the following passages demonstrate how students experienced their environment in the context of alcohol consumption. Even in the descriptions of high school where alcohol was not as prevalent, the importance of alcohol and its role in shaping who is social and who is not is clearly articulated.

The quote below from Hannah highlights the transition from non-drinker to drinker as influenced by her social environment.

So I guess regarding alcohol, as soon as we got into high school I remember going to parties. I refused to drink until I was 16, I wanna say. Most of my friends started
drinking like freshman year, like 14, 15 years old. And I was vehemently opposed to it…I had a massive moral compass. I believed it was immoral to drink. I guess it was mostly because the people I was friends with weren’t drinking either. So it wasn’t hard for me to go out and not drink. It was mostly the people who started drinking early were definitely not the people I was friends with. It was more people we thought were dumb, so there was no real pressure on me to be drinking at all. And so I guess when we were around, like, 16 years old, that’s when my friends started drinking. So then I started drinking as well.

It was often expressed that access to alcohol was predominantly influenced, especially in high school, by having friends who could get it. Stephanie’s boyfriend was the pathway to her increased drinking.

I drank a couple more times in moderation at 16, but then I started really drinking again reasonably heavily at 17. I had a boyfriend who was a year older than myself…I was a junior, and he was a senior, yeah, when we started dating. And, yeah, he definitely had friends with access to alcohol.

Several participants, including Buck, talked about how drinking environments and access to alcohol either helped or hindered their transition or the transition of their peers to the college drinking environment.

So obviously I went to a boarding school and it was very, very difficult to drink. In fact the rules were very strict on just about anything. You weren’t even allowed to
kiss girls or anything like that, and…my parents are very bohemian in their parenting style. My parents are like, “Do whatever you want as long as you tell us and do it in front of us,” and so I think that has been very successful for me. I’m not sure if it’s successful for everybody, that type of parenting style, but for me it’s been very successful because I know a lot of kids who in college who had parents that were very overbearing and strict. And these people, these kids, never really had an opportunity to experiment with whatever young kids do, drinking or anything like that, and so they come to college and they’re just off the charts. They really just lose their minds.

Almost every participant had some opinion or perspective regarding the drinking environment at college and the impact of restrictive or permissive attitudes by University administrators or the general philosophy of drinking on campus. The following passage from Buck is emblematic of this topic which came up over and over again.

So I can remember coming to college and being like, “Wow, these guys are so awesome. This is so cool.” And they literally just force feed you alcohol. It’s a great experience, very, very dangerous. The school has taken a lot of measures to regulate it. Basically if you throw a party during that week you risk getting kicked off campus and stuff like that. So they’ve wizened up to it, but when I was a freshman this was a very different school. The rules were so loose. We got away with murder.
Katie also discussed her observation of the permissiveness that had influenced her early college experience.

We were very naïve freshmen. We didn’t do any pre-orientation program so we didn’t really know anybody. We just stumbled around all week and went to frat houses. It was very different than it is now because our year, frats threw open parties so anyone could go and there was lots of beer. You could get as drunk as you wanted and the police were all there so it felt safe and it didn’t feel scary and it didn’t feel like you were breaking the rules or anything and it was just so much fun.

At the point in time of these interviews, most of the students expressed being fairly open with their parents about their drinking, but some talked about having a more facilitative relationship with their parents than others in terms of supporting alcohol consumption. Buck’s experience represented one of the more honest conversations between a student and parents, and his family’s financial support for his drinking habits.

I’ll tell my mom, “Look, I had a couple really bad bar tabs this month. I need some more money,” and that’s fine. I don’t work a job. I got a free ride to college so for my parents for them to pay – my parents literally give me money for alcohol. They’ll literally be like, “This is so you can go on spring break and whatever.” ...I called my mom this morning just to – she insists that I call her frequently and I love calling her. It’s just time consuming, but my conversations with my mom are like, “I
was blacked out the other night. I did some stupid stuff,” this, that, or the other thing. I’m very honest with them and I tell them everything.

David saw culture, tradition and environment as major influences on his access to alcohol.

I don't know if you know anything about geography in my country...I’m from the very northeast part of it, which is very cold and people there tend to be tall and strong compared to other people in the country. I don't know if it’s because of the cold weather. We have a famous hobby to drink a lot...So in my hometown where I’m from, we have this kind of traditions that a man should be drinking... The more you drink, the more respect you’re showed.

The women in the study perceived a gender influence on their access to alcohol. The following passage from Katie highlights the dominant female sentiment that if you were a girl, you could get alcohol. While her example is focused on the Greek scene, all women said alcohol was readily available to them, whether at a party or bar.

Once you join a sorority, it gives you the opportunity to drink more and to drink in better situations. We would have formal so we would drink before formal and then go to formal. There were just more opportunities to drink and it was more fun to drink because, I don’t know, everybody was drinking. It was just so fun. I think also, access to alcohol really increased with being in a sorority because freshman fall, you would just rely on the parties you go to or if you could get alcohol from
somewhere, you could, but I don’t have any older siblings and my roommate didn’t
so we never got alcohol...then once you join a sorority, you go to a mixer or whatever
and they provide alcohol. You didn’t have to worry about it. It was going to be
there if you needed it so that took some of the pressure off.

The development of a social and drinking identity, as exemplified in the previous
passages, was influenced by both the perceptions of alcohol’s role in social environments as
well as one’s ability to access alcohol. As students observed the increasingly important place
of alcohol and drinking within their desired social scene, and gained increasing access to
alcohol, regular heavy consumption became part and parcel of their social experience and
sense of what it meant to be social.

**Social circles and friend groups.** The immediate friend group and wider social
circles were influencing factors for most of the participants in terms of developing their
social sense of self. For most but not all, there was little distinction between drinking and
socializing friends and the friends that students had in academic settings. Gilbert talked
about the overlap between his academic and social peer groups:

> Let’s say – you say compartmentalize and it’s like interesting because as far as a
friend group like it’s completely integrated because I work with the same people that
I drink with, you know, like we hang out, we work, we discuss things, we help each
other academically then we drink together, and like friends in my classes, like I’ll see
them out, so like in that way it’s very integrated and that’s just unavoidable because
it’s too – you know – obviously you drink with your friends and you study with friends.

When JT was asked how his high school friends influenced his decision not to drink at that point in life, his response was telling both in terms of the power that drive and motivation to be successful had on his choice, as well as the challenge of staying in a friend group that engages in substance use when you do not.

Like I said, there was lots of kids that were motivated. But I almost have my sports friends, and then my school friends. It was kind of separated, and I was one that did both. So that was a difference there. And then, if we want to go into – I had a great group of friends in junior high. They were, quote, the cool kids. But then it got to the point where it was drinking and weed, and not – some of them did sports. So I actually changed friend groups. I had a friend that was in a similar situation who became my best friend sophomore year of high school because we both didn’t want to go down that path at all…my other friends, who I knew I was more friends with, I started to not hang out with them as much. When something was going on at night I was no longer really included because they knew it was gonna be something like drinking or smoking that I just wouldn’t do. I didn’t want to sacrifice any chances I had with academics or athletics. So it was just – So I definitely moved away. But I was still friends with them and everything. Face to face was fine. They weren’t mad or anything, but it was just a mutual understanding, I guess is how I’d put it.
Fraternity and sorority experiences were a strong influence on the development of a social and drinking identity for many of the participants. Even those students not in a Greek organization were influenced by that scene and some joined “fraternal like” organizations that mimic the social structure and drinking culture. Hannah talked about her transition from residence hall life to the sorority community this way:

So we would do a lot of – like we would all drink together in our dorm. Our RAs were pretty relaxed. So we had like dorm-wide pre-games. So that's like I guess where I did most of my socializing freshman year is within our dorm structure. And then we go to whatever open parties there were where all the freshmen were going...and then I had a couple of older friends who were in fraternities, so they would invite us to their parties sometimes. So we'd go to like a couple fraternity parties, but for the most part I just remember we would all like drink together and then go out to the bar or wherever everyone else is going that night. So that was first semester. And then I joined a sorority second semester. So that definitely altered my social life a lot because with a lot of sorority they have planned social events. So I would go out with my sorority a lot more than I would – I guess it was, like, half and half. When my sorority was having something social, I'd be out with them. Otherwise, I'd like be with my friends from my dorm...my social life definitely was dominated by my sorority rather than my freshman year friends. So that's, I guess – and that's kind of been the way it's been ever since.
For a small handful of participants, the perception and feeling of being outside the dominant social circles in high school had an impact on their social interactions with peers and development of a social sense of self. These discussions came within a larger conversation about wanting college to be different from high school and wanting to be more social. The students talked about being a social person, liking being with friends, but sometimes struggling in high school to find a friend group that was compatible with their academic aspirations. In other words, while most of the participants began to develop a salient social identity while continuing to develop their academic identity, the academic identity of these students dominated and made socially oriented friendships more difficult.

For these students, their social isolation was aggravated by a geographical or school-based move. Interestingly, there were several instances of these participants saying that college felt like a collection of kids who were not very popular in high school and then finally had a chance to be popular and social with similar people. Katie’s experience is a good example of the wall these students felt between their academic success and their social aspirations.

But starting in ninth grade, it became really apparent that I was not on the same track as most of my other friends. I really enjoyed my AP classes. I was taking all the honors courses available. I just really enjoyed school work and I was doing really well. My friends were not. They didn’t feel the same. They didn’t have the same passion for academia and so I wasn’t able to relate with them on that level. And I had a really hard time socially in ninth grade, a very hard time, one, because I loved
class time and I loved the school work and I loved learning and I tended to do really well even if I wasn’t trying. I felt that my friend group – I’m gonna sound conceited...they resented me but I do think that there was an uneasiness about our friendship because most of my friends would just be happy with B’s and if they got an A, it was amazing, and I would be distraught if I got a B. Socially I became more isolated because I was really into my school work and they weren’t.

Social circles of peers and immediate friend groups served to influence the students in a number of ways throughout their high school and college experiences. Just as family members, peers and teachers had informed and influenced their academic identities, peers and friends helped to establish social and drinking expectations and behaviors.

*Negative drinking experiences.* An important topic of discussion within each interview was an exploration of negative consequences as a result of drinking. Although the passages below will highlight the widespread nature of negative consequences that the participants experienced, as a group they universally experienced very few severe negative consequences. No one had been arrested. No one had been in a drunk-driving accident or received a DWI. No one had suffered a lasting serious health consequence. No one felt they had suffered an irreparable academic consequence. Negative consequences, or lack thereof, were usually discussed as a contextual marker of whether the participant felt like they were a successful drinker—one who was meeting their own expectations.

Buck was one student who admittedly tested the limits of his health and was willing to share the story.
So I would say there’s a couple of times in my life where I’ve scared myself how drunk I got. This scar on my head, we had a party where we only bought vodka. And it’s this shitty, $10.00 handle of vodka, and I can remember – and so I am very susceptible to peer pressure I’ll say...So I was trying to look cool. It was a rush party. I was trying to look cool by doing a funnel of the vodka, which is like, good God, who does that? That’s just stupid. If I were sober I never would have done it, and I fell down the stairs, and one of my friends had to drive me to the hospital. They put 17 stitches in my face, and the next morning I woke up and the nurse came in and he said, “You blew a 0.40 last night,” and I’m thinking, “I could have killed myself.” That’s just stupid. Who does that?

Hangovers were a prevalent experience for participants, and a dislike of them was a common thread. Buck, more than anyone, seemed willing to be fully honest about the negative impact of being hung over. Of course, Buck also drank at the extreme end of the participant group, so his hangovers were likely more common.

I think in terms of health, physical health and mental health it’s a bit taxing. It’s frankly exhausting to go out as much as we do, to be hung over the number of times that we are a week, and it’s painful. Alcohol makes you feel I guess somewhat more loose when you’re drunk but when you’re hung over it’s a horrible feeling. So I feel like I go out so much that I never am not hung over. My hangovers last until Monday or Tuesday and if I don’t go out Tuesday night maybe I have Wednesday morning to not be hung over, but I definitely go out every Wednesday night.
Other consequences that students reported experiencing included fights, blackouts, and saying or doing things they later regretted—whether they wanted to fully admit it was not always clear. Often a negative consequence was couched in a rationalization that at least they did not do or experience something worse. Stephanie’s story is an example of such a thought process.

I can't really remember any time where I did something I regretted. Well, I think I kissed some guys or something that I maybe wished I hadn’t kissed later. Nothing like – I never like woke up face down in ditch or something with a kidney missing. [laughter] I never had that happen or anything on that level.

Although no one perceived themselves to have experienced a major negative outcome from drinking, the group was aware of the potential for negative consequences and seemed to want to avoid them when possible. There was a pervasive sense that these students did not want to be seen as the kind of drinker that would suffer repeated negative consequences. The drinking identity was shaped as, “I am someone who can handle their alcohol”. This concept of “knowing my limit” and managing alcohol will be addressed in a subsequent section.

Summary. These findings make up the major theme of the development of a social and drinking identity. From an exploration of the participants’ first drinking experiences and journey from inexperienced drinker to experienced drinker, to the influence of the drinking environment and access to alcohol as well as social circles and friend groups, and finally the influence of negative outcomes, an understanding of these participants as social beings whose sense of self is defined by being a drinker emerges. They are not just drinkers because
that is what young people in social settings do, but they are drinkers as defined by the role that alcohol plays in making them social. These findings will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter. The next section will reveal findings related to the major theme of “this is why I drink”.

This is why I drink. Perhaps more than any other, the question of “why drink” drives this study. The participants are a collection of some of the smartest, most academically driven college students one could find. The reasons why they choose to engage in heavy alcohol consumption, an activity that any health practitioner would acknowledge is detrimental to optimal brain functioning, are highly compelling. Not surprisingly, the motivating factors for drinking made up the bulk of the interviews and provide some of the most interesting insights into how these students experience this phenomenon.

Several sub-themes emerged within the overall concept of “this is why I drink”. These sub-themes are: social facilitation, escape from school, this is college, and drinking as capital. Social facilitation as a sub-theme will speak to the desire of students to fit in, bond with peers, have fun, and hopefully alleviate the perceived awkwardness of sober social interaction. Escape from school is about taking a break from the grind of academic work and relieving stress that accumulates day in and day out. The sub-theme “this is college” represents motivation for drinking derived from the fulfillment of student’s expectations for what constitutes the college experience. Finally, drinking as capital will highlight the pervasive belief that the best students and most desirable career candidates are successful
academically and socially, and that drinking is a necessary element of personal and professional development.

**Social facilitation.** The concept of “fitting in” dominated the discussions of both the importance of being social and why students drink. Although articulated in different ways, as the following passages will show, each participant talked at length about their desire to be social and the impact of alcohol on their ability to meet personal goals of connecting with desired peer groups or individuals. One of the characteristics found in each participant was a friendship orientation. This was not a group of wall-flowers. They were not all extroverts necessarily, but each student, before alcohol was part of the discussion, articulated the importance of friends and the desire to be part of a social group or “be cool”. Here, Hannah describes her desire to be social while recognizing her academically-influenced social status:

I've always been known as the smart kid, hopefully someone who is also — so my good friend and I when we were six, we called ourselves social nerds because we looked up the definition [laughter] of a nerd, and it was someone who's typically antisocial but very smart. So we decided we were social nerds instead.

Katie discussed some challenges she had breaking out of a perception in high school that you could not be both smart and social, and why she ended up at a college where she could fulfill both interests:

So I went to a summer program for gifted and talented, whatever, and I really loved that and I loved being around all those people who all were passionate about what
they were there for and there would be symposiums and moving screenings and just the day-to-day talk was on so much higher of an academic or intellectual thought. These people weren’t talking gossip. They were talking ideas…so that got me really interested and also it kind of changed my mind about socially what my options were. ‘Cause I always felt like I never really fit in with the super nerdy geek smart people. I still felt like socially I had more in common with the B students than with the A students. I went to a very small private school so there really wasn’t a whole lot. You were either really smart and not social or you were really social and not smart. There was no in between and so for me in the classroom, I tried to be the A student and then outside the classroom, I hung out with people who got Bs and Cs. It wasn’t until I went to this summer program that I really realized that it’s not an either/or. They’re not mutually exclusive but there are a lot more people out there and I think that contributed a lot to why I’m here.

From an international perspective, fitting in was less about drinking for David, and more about simply not being intellectually focused in his home country.

I don’t know the situation in the States, I mean in high school or junior high, but the phenomenon of anti-intellectual is also pretty prevalent. It’s not very cool to be smart, actually...especially, I would say the majority students wouldn’t think it’s cool. It’s just smart and you can get better grades, you can get into better colleges, get a good job, which is not cool...well, it’s not like I don’t want to be that smart. It’s like, sometimes people don’t think you are cool if you are that smart…to some extent,
people admire you as you being smart, but to another, deep in the heart, they sort of don’t think you are cool.

Stephanie, like Katie, wanted to be more social, and saw drinking and her boyfriend’s social connections as a pathway to that goal:

So I like to think I’m a reasonably friendly person. I get along with people, and they really get along with me. But, yeah, so a lot of people knew me as my boyfriend’s girlfriend, which I mean I was okay with it. It wasn’t the most flattering name, but yeah, I was fine with that. I definitely met a lot more people at that school through him and made a lot more friends in that way because a lot of people didn’t know me and assumed I was some like uptight academic nerd, who didn’t know how to have fun, or anything like that. So, yeah, I’d say it definitely helped. It helped me make friends. I don’t think – I mean it’s not like it put me in the popular circle or anything, but it’s not necessarily a place I wanted to be. So I was okay with that. But, yeah, it helped me make more friends mostly through him…I still wasn’t – even though I went out and had fun, I still wasn’t as socially accepted as other kids. I was not a tremendously social person. Yeah, I was at parties, but I was like hanging out in the corner like drinking with a couple of close friends. I wasn’t like that kid, like, taking shots and running naked.

The transition to college was expressed as a stark contrast to high school for almost everyone. The social opportunities grew exponentially, and drinking emerged as a critical
factor for fitting in. Buck addressed his increased drinking and new-found opportunities to fit in and attract women once he arrived on campus:

I’ve never really put these things together until this interview, but looking back on my life and all the relevant factors, I’d say going to an all-boys school and then going to this high school where I sort of felt ostracized, I’ve never really been that confident with girls. And I’ve never really been that – in social settings I’ve always been very outgoing, and I’m usually the loudest one of my friends and that sort of thing, and I’m always making jokes and that sort of thing. But I would say that I never considered myself – I was never cool really until I started drinking. When I came to college and my inhibition – I started drinking and that thought that goes in your mind where it’s like, “I want to go talk to that girl but I’m afraid because I’m not cool,” the I’m not cool part doesn’t really come up when you’re drunk. You just think I want to go talk to that girl and you do it. So I think that that was – looking back on my life and my background and my experiences, I think my high school and middle school where I had no girls and I was the only child in this small town and that sort of thing, that really influenced coming to college and finally discovering that alcohol just does wonders socially because you put all these people in a room and if they’re sober everybody’s talking to the people they know the best.

Tommy put his motivation to drink fairly simply when he said, “You don’t wanna be the only at the party without a red solo cup in your hand”. 
JT perceived being an adept drinker as so critical to being accepted socially in college that he needed the first semester to develop into the type of social person a fraternity would want to have as a member.

Like I said, I came in with such a negative connotation with fraternities. And if I’d have – jump into rush. I don’t know. And new to drinking. I’m sure they wouldn’t have liked me. Instead, I had a whole semester to meet the fraternities, go to fraternity parties, start feeling how it’s like, hear what rush will be like, hear what pledging will be like, in a whole semester. And I think that’s the best way. Feel your way out.

Linked to the desire to fit in and be a part of the social structure of college is the recognition, expressed by all, that alcohol played a significant role in social bonding and making friends. The passage below from Gilbert, which was expressed by a few of the participants, exemplified the perception that you could be acquaintances with someone in class, but adding alcohol into the social environment could transition a class acquaintance into a friendship.

I think that you also meet a lot more people when you’re drinking and when you go out to bars…so I found this interesting phenomenon where you’ll meet someone in class and it’s often like for meeting a girl or something and then you’ll – and you’ll have a relationship that’s within the confines of the academic world. But then once you see them out and you both realize that the other one is drunk, you know, then you
start talking about your class…whatever the class is you’ll just talk about it forever and that’s kind of like your icebreaker and now all of the sudden you’ve broken that confine of just knowing each other from the academic world but becoming like friends and if you don’t live with the person or somehow meet them outside the academic world which is very difficult in a university then going out and seeing them at a bar or at someone’s apartment when we’re all drinking is one of the few and definitely easiest ways to expand your friendship.

For Tommy, drinking was a way to connect with teammates and navigate the hook up scene with women.

Going out as far as my crowd, I was with – ’cause I really didn’t know anybody at first. Freshman year I was going out with a lot of the teammates and boys that were in my class that we were just all getting out and getting to know each other, bonding like this who we gonna live with for the next four or five years. So we just went out. You know girls were all over the place so that’s what we was doing, we were hunting basically. And we all really drank significantly.

David saw drinking as less about big parties and more about connecting with friends in his graduate cohort.

For me now, I have a pretty fixed schedule for recreation every week. We have a group of friends who like to play card games and most are international students and some are American students as well…we drink together while we play the games. I
think it’s just pure relaxation for us now...sometimes we go to bars, but not often.
The most frequent occasions are, there is a basketball game, we go to the bar to drink beer and watch the game…for the engineering school, we have social events every Friday and the departments, the school provides us beers to have a break and socialize. Sometimes I go there to meet friends and I can see a lot of friends that I don’t see. That’s good, I think.

There are obviously varied and more complex reasons why the participants chose to drink, but collectively they all experienced drinking in one simple way, having fun. Gilbert recalled that even in high school, having a good time was his motivating reason to drink.

I think the main – it was just fun, like it’s fun to drink, it’s fun to smoke. It in some ways balanced out my social life because there were so many nights that we didn’t know what to do and we could go over to our friend’s house, like watch a movie or like play pool or whatever but it got really boring doing that every night so it was fun to occasionally, or we’re like at a big party it was fun to just get together with our close friends, like smoke a little bit and like do weird shit.

The experience of having fun, sometimes random experiences while drinking was also shared by Stephanie, who said,

There are people I met while drunk that I don’t think I would have been as close with while sober. You play games. You do crazy things sometimes you wouldn’t do. It helps everyone relax. It’s a lot of fun.
Hannah expressed a common sentiment regarding her increased enjoyment of most social settings when drunk, in contrast to some sorority events when she would have to monitor the event as a “sober sister”:

I have more fun when I go out and I'm drunk, just as a general rule. I get, like, really tired if I'm sober, [laughter] which I've had to do for these events. And when I'm sober I just have no patience. So I like being drunk. Like, I have more fun in the social setting. I have a lot more tolerance for the social setting. So I guess that's kind of always why I drink with my friends.

Katie’s self-perception was that she is not fun to be around when she is sober, so she drinks not just to have fun but to be fun herself. However, she also recognized that drinking to have fun has its limits.

The more immediate goal of drinking is to get drunk or to feel the fun, social inhibition, definitely the social inhibition. For me at least, I feel like I am more carefree. I’m less uptight. I enjoy myself more...I’m an uptight person. That’s just who I am and I’m anxious and I worry and I’m very calculating and when I drink, I kind of just loosen up. It’s not always the right thing to do and so I don’t drink in situations in which I need to be able to be responsible and practical and whatever. But I do think that in social situations, I can be very inhibited and drinking does let me loosen up a bit and allow myself to have more fun. But there is a fine line
between drinking and having fun and drinking and having too much fun and I’ve learned that the hard way.

Participants discussed the beneficial role that drinking played in making their social interactions more comfortable and natural. Some expressed an outright awkwardness of sobriety while others focused more on how drinking conversations were just different. Gilbert exemplified this perspective when he talked about the difference between hanging out with his friends and going out to meet or interact with peers at the bars. He could not even imagine entering that environment without drinking.

So alcohol makes it much easier to hang out with people that you – aren’t in your immediate friend group and that you’re not very comfortable with. Like my group of 40 guy friends here, I hang out with almost all of them on a one to one basis and it’s not awkward at all, you know, it’s just not weird, but like you can’t go out to the bar, my girlfriend does sometimes, I don’t know how – I can’t go there sober and I mean I can and you just have to be – you have to put yourself in this mindset where I’m going to be as outgoing as I would have been had I been drinking but it’s difficult to force yourself to get into that mindset.

Gilbert continued to discuss the notion that without social conversations mediated by alcohol, a whole element of his social experience would go missing.

Right, the conversations – right. The conversations aren’t your normal conversations. They’re like your drinking conversations and if you’re sober and
you’re having a drinking conversation it can seem very weird. So like it allows you to experience that other part of your social life that would be absent without alcohol.

While many participants focused on the awkwardness of conversations without alcohol, Hannah felt like she was social enough to navigate parties sober but was aware that drinking made the whole experience easier through a lowering of inhibitions.

Well, I think I said, like, I'm a pretty outgoing person. So when I go out and I'm sober I'll still interact with other people. It definitely makes it easier. It's definitely you have less inhibitions when you're drunk. So when you drink and you go out, you're, like, more likely to go dance like crazy or more likely to talk to more people because you don't care as much.

Just as Hannah viewed drinking as a precursor to dancing and other experiences she might not have if her inhibitions were in the way, several other participants articulated the value in and motivation for drinking as being more confident or willing to try things they would not while sober. Influenced by “liquid courage”, talking to women was paramount in Tommy’s case. He said, “It gives you a good feeling inside like you can just do whatever. And there’s a true meaning behind liquid courage ‘cause literally you have no regrets. You have to basically no scare factor at all in you”.

One of the more enjoyable, and at times frightening, aspects of the interview process was when participants told drinking stories. Unfortunately, most of those stories were too detailed to share in this study without directly identifying people, but more salient to the
theme of motivations to drink is the fact that all the students talked about having stories to tell. There was a universal desire to want to leave college with great stories, and a belief that great stories do not come without alcohol. As JT put it, “people want to hear fun, cool drinking stories…they want to hear wild stories beyond just what you did in school”. Several students expressed that no good stories come from students who sit in the library on Saturday nights. Gilbert reflected on the irony of making memories from experiences that were often hard to recall:

It’s much more fun to talk about that crazy thing that that kid did that you don’t really know but you met the other night because you’re both hammered then…I think the stories are ironically you don’t remember what you did but those are the things that long-term you end up remembering the most.

Despite each of these students presenting with maturity and confidence during interviews, the preceding passages clustered within the sub-theme of social facilitation speak to the challenges, real or perceived, that these students had navigating social environments in college while sober. Alcohol was perceived to be a tool to ease the pressure of talking to new people and to facilitate expectations of the hook up culture. Drinking was viewed as a shared experience that college students could bond over, and the key ingredient to having good stories to tell. Perhaps most importantly, drinking was seen as the mechanism by which fun is had within an otherwise mundane campus environment.

**Escape from school.** Although everyone did not share the sentiment directly, several participants talked in some way or another about stress relief and a desire for relaxation after
a hard day or week as a motivator to drink. JT, who acknowledged that school stressed him out at times, talked about the coping effect of drinking:

I’ve had a terrible week, tons of work, and yeah, it was just this is fun. This is something new, not - whether I was – I don’t know – I could be out playing golf. That could be stress reliever there, but I guess drinking is what people do, so that’s what I did. And yes, it did relieve stress.

Stephanie adopted drinking as a way to deal with the rigors of academic life in high school and continued to use alcohol as a relaxation mechanism into college.

It also helped that I was able to do my homework during the day, and drink at night, so I think it definitely helped me with drinking because it was less stressful. It was a time when I could relax and just forget about all the work that I had to do. Just forget about what’s coming on Monday, just enjoy the moment, relax, and have another beer...I think it helped me. It was definitely mentally very – much more relaxing for me, to not always be so stressed about it and not always be uptight. And I think that if I hadn’t started drinking in high school and used it as a way to relax early, I probably would have burned out, so I think it probably helped me.

While drinking to cope with stress was a way to use free time away from studies, a few students actually discussed drinking as being a way to just fill free time, in addition to any stress relieving utility. For JT, despite the pressure he put on himself to do well, college
was not as hard or busy as high school, or as hard as he thought it would be, and drinking became a way to pass the time that used to be filled with studying and sports.

All of a sudden hours upon hours of free time opened up. So it’s, “So what this gets filled with drinking,” as long as I don’t drink that Saturday night when I have a test and other stuff it’s fine. Or even if I do, I’m able to suck it up and get the work done anyway.

Although perhaps not as strong a motivator to drink as social facilitation, participants shared expectations of drinking as a way to step outside the daily rigor of academics or to pass the time between obligations in a relaxing way. The somewhat downplayed aspect of this sub-theme by participants will be explored in greater detail in the discussion chapter of this paper, given the evidence within the field of research that drinking to cope and escape has been linked with greater negative outcomes.

*This is college.* When asking participants why they drink, a common reaction was a confused expression followed by some variant on the matter-of-fact response, “because this is college, duh”. The passages within this section reflect a normalized perception and expectation of college as a time of few obligations and responsibilities and an opportunity to let loose. Drinking is viewed as an essential component of the college experience. It is a chance to do all of the crazy things that cannot be done “in the real world” without incurring far greater negative consequences.

When JT was asked about why he drinks, he shared, “It’s how you meet people. It’s how – I don’t want to say that’s how you’re socially accepted, because I feel like that’s cliché
and not exactly true. But that’s just what…this is college. This is where you do that”.

Tommy expanded on the common perception that drinking is an inescapable component of college for most of the students he knows.

I feel like drinking is a I wanna say a high component as far as college ‘cause everywhere you go that’s what everyone’s doing. You met some people who shy away say they don’t drink. I’ve actually seen people come into school saying that they don’t drink until they have their first drink and they become drinkers. So I rarely see anyone who doesn’t drink or hasn’t drunk before. And that is I feel like it is a very big part of college. Cause like it really does establish social grounds. Some people are built on how much they drink.

Stephanie articulated the popular dual concept that having the college experience has to be more than studying and that college is really the last time to have this unique period of self-determination and low accountability.

I love my roommate to death, but she is that kid who spends 12 hours in the library on a Saturday night looking up one obscure point. And I think she’s gonna regret it…she doesn’t really – she goes out probably not at all. It’s her junior year. She is studying for MCATs. She hasn’t been very much fun this year. I’m not gonna lie. But, yeah, I never wanted that to be me. I never wanted my college experience to be just studying. I wanted to have fun some. I mean obviously the academics was important, that’s why I’m here. It’s the main thing, but I also think it’s important to
make friends and make memories and have experiences that you are not gonna get a chance to have again. Soon enough, we’re gonna grow up. [laughter]. I hate to say it. But we’re gonna get jobs. We are gonna get married and have kids. And college is this fantastic point in your life when you can be so selfish because you have so much freedom and so few responsibilities compared to any other point in your life, where the freedom and responsibility ratio is really high.

For Buck, the perception of drinking as normal was also experienced as a required element and a clearly articulated social pressure.

That’s the one thing I’ll say is that the study focuses on drinking and academic achievement, and I would have been an academic achiever whether or not I drank. But coming to college and realizing that I have this opportunity in front of me to – you know what it really boils down to for me, and not for me but I think for everybody is it’s almost an expectation. There are the people here who don’t drink that don’t experience the social pressure, but I experience tremendous amounts of social pressure to drink frequently, and from day one. When I first came to college it was like are gonna be that kid who stays in during Orientation Week or are you gonna be that kid who lets the fraternities force feed you alcohol? And so from that point forward just the culture of the university and I think of colleges everywhere is that it’s an expectation really of your college experience to go out, and to be drunk, and all those sort of things. What’s the number one stereotype of colleges? It’s just they’re these wild parties and everybody’s crazy and school doesn’t really matter that much.
Participants all discussed, in a broad sense, perceptions and expectations of the college drinking experience that were formed prior to arriving at college and further developed when, in most cases, those perceptions and expectations were supported by their experiences once on campus. These perceptions and expectations informed what participants thought the social experience in college should be like, and several students talked about the need to live out their expectations. A significant amount of time was spent by participants talking about not just a generalized college drinking experience, but specifically their drinking experience on their campus. For most, their perceptions of drinking in college, and their patterns of consumption, began to form at orientation. Hannah shared a typical story of the first week at school:

It was a lot of parties...the first night, my friend who was a year older than me told me you have to come to her side of campus. There's a party over here. And so we got on a bus, and I knew where I was going. So we got off the bus and started walking with my friends. And I think there must've been 100 freshmen on this bus, and they all started following me because I knew where I was going. So we went out that night. We went to the bar that night. I think we went out pretty much every single night of orientation week [laughter] which is definitely more than I've ever gone out before in my life...so this was a whole new – we'd go to one place and then another place. Then we go to the bar. Then we go to the club. And it was crazy...there were open parties everywhere. So we definitely – we went out a lot. [laughter] But
it was really fun because everyone was still new, everyone was still meeting people. I had never met so many people in my life. So it was a really fun week.

Once the perceptions of college drinking were confirmed and expectations established, participants had a fairly clear sense of what their social experience would be like for the remaining four years. Hannah provided an example of what the students called, “FOMO”, the fear of missing out on the expected social happenings, during her 1st year in the sorority:

So I mean, we'd go out. We'd go to different fraternity events. And we had, like, our own social events like semis and date functions and things like that. So it was definitely – I guess what it did is just gave me a lot more opportunities to go out. And you also – you never wanna like miss an event. It was one thing if all my friends were going out one night, they were just like going to the bar and I wouldn't really care. But if have you have a date function, you're not just gonna skip a date function. [laughter] So definitely – I guess it was more like pressure to go out, but I always wanted to.

Another element of the normalization of drinking in college was the amount of alcohol that was seen as typical for consumption. When discussing with Stephanie the definition of binge drinking as being four to five drinks in a sitting, her reaction was, “I love that; three to five drinks is heavy. Three to five, I’m just getting started”. 
Several students, particularly those in fraternities and sororities, talked about a group of students, sometimes the number was 200, 300, sometimes 500, that made up the majority of students who were most socially active on campus. These students, and the social crowd they formed, created a strong and normative perception of drinking on campus that often hid the actual majority of students who did not drink or drank in low amounts. Hannah talked about her realization that not everyone drank as much as her and her social group:

I remember I did my AlcoholEdu...and it told me I was in the 99th percentile of drinkers, that only 1 percent of people drink more than I did which I thought was crazy because I'm not a crazy party girl. I'm just living within this context of the campus drinking culture. And I'm not at the extreme end. If anything, I'm pretty low down there 'cause I'm not the crazy drunk girl every time. So I thought it was hysterical. But, I mean, I guess you get so caught up in this bubble, this 500 bubble, and you think everyone's drinking, and they're really not. And I remember learning statistics through those courses about like how many kids really weren't drinking throughout their college experience, which made me, I guess, a little bit more aware of like I guess the fact that I go out two or three times a week is pretty excessive for some people. But I've never felt like I've been someone who's like drinking like a crazy person.

Many students, like Hannah, brought up widely published drinking statistics and research they had seen about drinking in college, and while they were not ready to dismiss
the data, the reality that the participants were in the small minority of the heaviest drinkers on campus always seemed to create some cognitive dissonance. Katie stated,

I always read those statistics in student newspaper about how – I couldn’t tell you the exact numbers, but it’s something around how like 25 percent of the students here drink two or more nights a week, I mean something ridiculously low. If you asked me that, I would say, oh, 80 percent of the students here drink twice a week, probably 95 drink three times a week or 75 drink three times a week.

When informed that research showed much lower drinking patterns among college students, she remarked, “Yeah, and that blows my mind but I guess it’s true. It’s gotta be true but when you’re in the midst of it, it just feels like everybody”. Even David, who compared to the undergraduate students in the study drank less and was around less drinking, perceived an anecdotal difference in drinking relative to his own self-described heavy drinking homeland.

I think more people are drinking here than students in my country. At home, most female students don’t drink that often. There is no like, university organized drinking events, but here, it’s like once every two weeks…it’s still much more than home.

All of the participants, except David—who lacked many of the perceived norms of college transmitted through American popular culture, arrived on campus with a social narrative of college dominated by drinking. In many ways, the students talked about their drinking as though there really was no alternative to drinking without shattering their concept
of what college was all about. Viewed through a motivational pathway, the “choice” to drink came from a desire to live out the only script they knew.

**Drinking as capital.** As an extension of the notion that drinking is part-and-parcel of the college experience, every participant discussed the human capital, or value, that comes with being a successful student and socially engaged, with drinking being the dominant conduit to high social status. Most students went so far as to say that they could not be successful, as defined by themselves or by others, if they were not a participant in the social drinking scene. Gilbert shared his personal drive to be well-rounded as well as his sense that investing in both academics and social life would be valued among his peers.

I want to have a really good time and have fun doing whatever I’m doing but I’ve also been really driven to succeed at the highest level and those two things have kind of always driven how I lead my life and I don’t think that they’re so oppositional like some people view being – you know – having a lot of friends and succeeding like some people want to be like the coolest person that they know and that’s their level of success, so I think succeeding academically and socially aren’t necessarily opposing ideas, especially a school that respects people that can do both.

More than any other student, Katie was able to articulate her own value of drinking and the admiration of peers that comes with being highly regarded academically and socially.

I am constantly redeveloping, rethinking what I feel is successful and I truly think that I have come to the point where I feel that the most successful people – and
success can be measured many, many ways, but to me, the most successful people are the people who have the right balance of work and play…but for me, I most admire and am just awestruck by the people here who are able to develop these huge social lives where they know just all of the 200 and they go to all of the bars and they drink lots but they manage it and they perform really well in school and they get all the job offers. And I know so many people who can do all that and that is so amazing to me that people are capable of that and it’s something that I strive to maintain…you have to be able to develop the skills that allows you to excel in both of those domains in order to really succeed in life…to me, the people that I see going really far in life are the people who are able to excel in both of those worlds.

Qualifiers aside, Buck’s sense of self-worth and his perception of how others assessed his worth were primarily influenced by being a drinker.

I can’t point to alcohol being – so other than the fact that I would be smarter, and I’d have better grades. I don’t think I would be doing better for myself in terms of jobs or any of those types of things. I think I’ve done better by being somebody who’s sociable and involved, and I think also that at here there’s a certain value in being somebody who is sociable and drinks.

Taken even one step further, beyond the capital involved in being both academically successful and socially adept, was a perception that drinking in college was in fact beneficial to professional life after college. It was not just socially beneficial to drink, but alcohol was
a positive influence on their career aspirations as well. When discussing the intense recruitment process for jobs, Buck discussed the near universal sense among participants that students who had partied hard in college and could carry on a conversation with a drink in their hand had a leg up on the competition.

I’ve also seen in the recruitment process for – all these companies come down and they do recruitment for these lucrative positions and they try and lure college kids into doing these jobs or whatever they want to do after college. And I feel bad for the kids that have the 4.0, that pull the all-nighters in the library because they get in that interview room and the person interviewing them asks them, “What do you do in your free time?” Or the questions usually are walk me through your resume and then I’ve had this happen a bunch of times because I’ve been through this whole process. So they ask you, “So, you’re part of a fraternity. What’s that like? I was in this fraternity.” The people that are recruiting are people like me who enjoyed their time in college and that sort of thing, and I just feel really bad for the people that worked so hard in college to not be able to bond with people like that. I will be in the same shoes. I’m gonna be one of those people ten years for now interviewing college kids for these jobs, and I’m gonna look at a kid who’s in a fraternity who goes out a lot and make a value assessment as to whether or not I think they’re a cool kid. And I’ll say, “If that kid’s able to pull that off he can definitely do this work because if he’s able to go out and get his work done and all that sort of stuff, he lives a balanced
life.” But that person who only studies and who doesn’t know really how to balance the social obligations, I think is probably less qualified.

David articulated the value of drinking and skills related to being able to comport one’s self while drinking in the international professional world he came from and expected to re-enter.

In _____, a lot of very serious business are actually solved or done or negotiated on the dinner table with alcohol. It’s like 90 percent of the business are done on dinner table...you have to have very good behaviors like manners and have good capacity as well.

For many participants, there was a more general sense expressed that drinking contributed to their overall personal development and maturity. In the passage below, Katie noted how her self-satisfaction and identity had been enhanced through lessons learned and experience gained through drinking.

I feel like to be able to call myself an adult, I need to be able to manage and handle myself in a situation in which alcohol is involved. So growing up in high school and in college, I feel like having these experiences where I drink prepares me better. I feel so much better prepared now as a 21 year old who has had four years of drinking in college – well, three full years, I guess, whatever – and then some drinking in high school. I feel like I know my limits. So I know when I’m starting to get tipsy. I know what drunk feels like and I know when I’m going to vomit or I know when I’m
going to blackout. Whereas senior year in high school, I vomited and I wasn’t aware that that’s where I was headed. And I think now I’m better able to control what I’m doing. So if I go out and I say I’m going to have a couple of drinks, I just have a couple of drinks. And if I say I’m going out to get wasted tonight then I’ll get wasted and I know the different levels and I know how I act when I drink. And I think that as an individual, it’s been really important for me to figure that out because there are so many situations in which alcohol is involved and it would be inappropriate to be drunk.

Tommy felt like how he handled his drinking was not only part of his identity, but had taught him valuable lessons about choices in life.

The reason I drink is just a part of who I am now. It’s just the whole college experience and who I’ve molded into. I rarely go to a party without drinking anything and I always have people to look up to me and people that I look up to so I wanna maintain a high level of excellence at all times. That’s what keeps me sane and that’s what really keeps me from doing just dumb things making a dumb decision.

Although few students outwardly expressed the experience of college being a chance to re-invent themselves or become a different person than they saw themselves in high school, almost to a person participants sought out more social opportunities in college, viewed those opportunities as essential to both their happiness and success, and ultimately
were more socially satisfied with their lives in college than in high school. JT talked about his evolution from non-drinker to drinker and shared his sense that social opportunities, predominantly influenced by drinking, provided a way for folks like himself to become the person they wanted to be and acquire the lifestyle that would set them up for their future goals. He said, “I like the thought that everyone’s reinventing themselves…and they’re forming new molds of who they want to be”.

**Summary.** The students that participated in this study represent a small sample of the best and brightest in college. Each shared that from an intellectual capacity perspective, they could spend all of their time absorbing knowledge, acquiring additional majors, and making straight A’s. Why then do they drink? What drives them to fill significant periods of their nights and weekends with socializing and drinking?

As evidenced by the preceding section, the answers to those questions are varied and complex, but generally make sense within the context of their developmental place in life and need for peer-to-peer connections. The answers also make sense given the dominant perceptions of expectations for the college experience that are so pervasive in America. These students want to fit in and make friends, and believe drinking can make that happen. They want to have fun and minimize the sense of awkwardness that comes with sober social settings, and believe that drinking can help achieve both. They want an occasional break from studying and the mundane routine of going to class and meeting other obligations. They want to be a part of what family, friends, and movies have told them college is all about. Perhaps most importantly for these students, they want success. Being a high-
achiever is not limited to the classroom. These students were at the top of the academic and intellectual ladder in high school, but that success did not translate into the kind of recognition or sense of self-esteem they were looking for. They are climbers, up the academic ranks and social ranks, and in college drinking paves the way to the pinnacle of achievement.

While this section shared finding related to the questions of “why”, in the final major theme section below, the question of “how” comes to light. Passages will speak to the process by which students navigate the experience of being both smart and social.

**Navigating the work hard/play hard philosophy.** If there is a recurring and dominant theme that reaches across and through the lived experience of each of the participants in this study, it is the process by which they navigate being a high achieving and heavy drinking college student. The students live within a college environment that expects and demands academic success and one where they believe the frequent and heavy consumption of alcohol is equally essential to social aspirations. As their narratives will demonstrate, they employ philosophies, strategies, and skills in order to achieve their social and academic goals.

This section is divided into several sub-themes, which each relate back to the overarching theme of navigating the work hard/play hard philosophy. The sub-themes are: work hard/play hard, strategies and skills to achieve, peer influence, managing drinking, and rationalizing use. Work hard/play hard refers to the philosophical foundation for navigation. It is a guiding motto and will be expressed in these findings as a feeling that this is just what
we do. Strategies and skills to achieve will reflect the toolbox of approaches students used to be both successful academically and able to drink as much and as often as they did without serious academic repercussions. The role of friends and classmates as role models and support mechanisms in balancing academic and social demands will make up the findings within the peer influence section. Managing drinking contains examples of the various approaches and tactics to drinking that mitigated negative outcomes for participants. Finally, rationalizing use will highlight the multitude of ways that students conceptualized, justified and explained their lived experience as being high achieving and heavy drinking.

**Work hard/play hard.** No four words were said more often than “work hard/play hard” when participants were describing their experience in college. Even when these words were not said verbatim, the implications were obvious. While subsequent sub-themes will tease out more complex elements of how and within what context they navigate this concept, the phrase stands alone as the maxim for their college lives. Buck articulated his lived experience of this rallying cry as much as anyone.

If I weren’t going out I could sit down and learn statistics overnight, but I’m not motivated really by being the best student. I’m not really motivated by having the 4.0 or being Phi Beta Kappa. I’m more motivated by being well-balanced. I adhere to a very, ever since college just a work hard, play hard mentality. Like I said, I’ll go out four nights a week and if I can go out four nights a week and graduate with good GPA and have a good job lined up then there’s nothing more I want out of life.
Gilbert got a sense of the expectations for working hard and playing hard during his 1st year:

I remember like during rush in the spring freshman year we were talking about these girls that we knew that would go out as dates of these guys who needed dates for these rush events and they’d drink and they’d get back at 2:00 and then they would work, they would write a paper and we were just like, “What,” like, “People do that?” It’s crazy. And so – and these were like sorority girls that you would never think were super-serious academically, and so that just kind of embodies the atmosphere that you’d get at this place I think much more so than you’d get at other schools.

For Katie, the work hard and play hard philosophy was not just an approach to navigating the experience, but was a benchmark that she strove to attain and took pride in living up to, but at times also struggled to reach. She realized that some people could work hard and play harder than her, in contrast to high school.

Okay, so I guess the best way for me to explain it is that in high school I felt like a big fish in a small pond in both senses. So I was the only person who was able to manage both and then I come here and everybody’s like me but more extreme. So within the first month, I quickly realized that everybody was able to do this really, really intense working and really, really intense partying, playing, whatever you call it, and it was frightening because it was something I was good at and now everybody’s good at it...that was my thing. I was able to be social and be fun and be
“normal’ and still be able to manage all my school work and get straight A’s, but the standards got moved up way higher once I came here. The effort that I was putting in at home that was getting me As and that was keeping me organized and involved in all these things was now just average, and so I had to work so much harder to get the same results, both in the classroom and outside of the classroom. So it meant better time management, better focus, better organization. Everything had to be the best it could be, which was stressful because going into college, I felt I could do anything. I was on top of the world. I could manage everything. That’s how everybody saw me and so I never once questioned that I could handle anything until I came here and realized that going out once a week, which was normal in high school, people went out three and four nights a week, sometimes five nights a week, and still was able to pull off straight A’s and I wasn’t…because if I wanted to get 4.0s and straight A’s, I would be in the library every day all day doing absolutely – not seeing anybody, just being alone and working and being unhappy and miserable. I realized that’s what I was gonna have to do if I wanted to get 4.0. This is what I’ve come to find is there are some people who are physically capable of getting three hours of sleep a night, focusing really hard all day every day, and then going out every single night, but I’m not one of them. And so it was a big struggle freshman year to realize that I needed to get seven hours of sleep every night at least and that I needed to spend this much time really focusing in order to have any social time.
As demonstrated within these passages, students saw the navigation of both academic achievement and social involvement as part of being a successful student. Working hard and playing hard was just what students did, and once the philosophy of navigation was in place, the strategies and tactics for accomplishing it, as explored in subsequent sections, fell into place.

**Strategies and skills to achieve.** Throughout the interviews, students brought up a virtual arsenal of strategies, tactics and skills that they employed throughout their college experience to be successful. While some methods seemed on the surface to be primarily relevant to academic achievement, there was a clear subtext that these approaches to school work served a secondary purpose—providing opportunities for social life.

As Stephanie made it clear by stating, “so to clarify; academics still come first; alcohol second”, if there was a perceived pecking order between academics and social life, academics trumped social. All participants discussed placing a priority and emphasis on school work first. As other sections will demonstrate, this claim was not always consistent, but it seemed to be a point worthy of frequent emphasis, if only to make participants feel better about the balancing act at hand. As an example, while emphasizing the priority of academics over social life, JT qualified his stance by stating,

Let’s say I have a midterm on Monday or Tuesday, but our big thing of the semester’s on Saturday. I’m still gonna go. Probably gonna be hung over on Sunday. Not gonna be as productive, but I’m just gonna have to suck it up and do it…if I can do both, like we’re gonna squeeze both of them to the point where both is gonna work.
Buck believed academics were his number one priority, in theory, but never had to put that theory into practice.

I would say if I had struggled academically I would have put my academics first and said, “I need to go out less. I need to do this, that, or the other thing,” but I really didn’t feel – I felt underwhelmed by the academics here and it just was sort of easy for me.

Perhaps not surprisingly, each of these academically successful students described possessing a plentiful set of academic skills. They discussed being organized and coordinating their busy schedules efficiently, reading and planning ahead for projects and exams, taking good notes and paying attention in, and going to, class, and taking time to learn, rather than simply memorize the material. These skills allowed them be successful academically and gave them the time they needed to be social and drink and have that experience have as little impact on their academics as possible. The passage below from Gilbert exemplifies the broad skill set that these students brought to bear on their navigation of school and social life.

So I’m the type of person who will go out, and set an alarm at 5:00 in the morning, and get three hours of sleep, and wake up the next day and do stuff with my day. A lot of my friends will – they have a lot of work and they do well academically but they’re the type of people who will sleep in till 12:00 or 1:00 every day and skip their classes and that sort of thing. I’m not like that. I don’t miss class. I don’t miss
assignments. Because I’m involved in a lot of things I have to keep my life’s schedule organized, and I think I learned those skills from a very early age because I went to a school that forced me to do those types of things…I can remember the first week I heard all these kids calling their parents and crying and being like, “I can’t do the work. I don’t know how to balance my life now that I’m in college.”

For Tommy, having a regular schedule and focusing on one thing at a time allowed him to be prepared for all of his obligations.

It just, it just becomes a normal, just a routine. Once you get yourself in a routine and you start to figure things out you start to figure out what works and what doesn’t work for you, what hurts you and what doesn’t hurt you. So basically if you figure out how to balance them all like me, I do, when I get my school work I get it done or try to at least get enough done to where I can still go out and have fun and come back to it and still have enough time to finish it. So that’s basically just me. You know I focus on one thing at a time. So if I’m out at a party then I’m not thinking about schoolwork. If I’m doing schoolwork I’m only thinking about schoolwork.

Tommy also took advantage of the structure and support his athletics team provided. We’re an early morning practice team so that means every day we gotta practice around I wanna say 10:30. So that leaves the rest of the day to you. So you gotta practice, you go to class and do your school work. So that’s like that’s really the everyday schedule and that really wasn’t much of a change for me… coaches, they
often preach. They often preach academic success regarding to you know doing what you have to do in order to get it done. Like always turn your work in on time. Always go see your professors, go speak to your academic advisors, your tutors.

Hannah, like many students, talked about “figuring it out”, meaning how to be smart and efficient once she had experienced some of what the college classroom would expect.

I think that my thing with academics is that I quickly figured out exactly how much effort I need to put into each class and what exactly that entails. So I quickly learned for this class I'm gonna have these quizzes every week, and I need to start studying two days before. And like I need to make a study guide or else I won't remember things like that. I'm pretty perceptive and self-aware of exactly what I need to get done in order to succeed in a class… I do a lot of working in between classes. I know I have to go to the library in order to get stuff done. I won't get stuff done if I go to my room and try to do things. So these are all kind of things I figured out freshman year.

For JT, hard work went hand in hand with smarts. He knows he is in one of the hardest majors, and although he sees himself as having an easier time with the intellectual demand of the work than some, he is proud, “cause of how hard I work”. Enjoying the work made working hard much more palatable for Gilbert. In a conversation about working smarter rather than harder, and the benefit of staying focused for two hours versus goofing off in the library for five hours, he noted,
I also find that if you’re – if you actually devote yourself to what you’re doing then you’re gonna enjoy it a lot more because there’s a reason why people write papers and think about math problems is because it’s enjoyable if you allow yourself to really absorb the material and get into it.

Participants were particularly adept at taking advantage of time available during the day and planning their lives in such a way that assignments would not sneak up on them, or interfere with social plans. Stephanie talked about how managing her schedule would prevent getting behind and would give her time to fit in the social opportunities.

I’d say it’s more like having a job for me; it’s more like 9:00 to 9:00, maybe 9:00 to 10:00 some days…so being scheduled and well organized definitely helps because I never have to be like, oh my god, there is an assignment that I forgot about. I didn’t know it was due. It’s taken longer than I thought it would, and stuff like that. I definitely do things the day they are assigned. I wouldn’t say always…what I won't do is wait…that definitely won't happen. So I’m not saying everything is done the day it’s assigned, but everything is always done at least a couple of days in advance of the due date, so that way if something unexpected does come up, I have time to put it in. I don’t have to be like – I don’t know. I don’t have to be like, oh, it’s 2:00 a.m. and I’m already drunk, and now I have to make myself study. I never put myself in that position.
Related to the concept of planning and organization, there was also a strong sense among almost all participants that they would put in whatever time and effort was necessary to get school work done, or at least as much done as necessary in order to feel good about socializing and the time needed for drinking. In the context of a discussion about utilizing all of the available hours during the day, Gilbert stated,

I work during that time and then that way come night time like Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, I’m not stressed out about work anymore, like I’ve done the work that I needed to do and then I hang out with friends and if that involves drinking then we drink.

JT acknowledged that it was almost impossible to get all the work done that was expected of him, but,

I work to the point I will get everything done like, “Oh, I – my friends have a party tonight. I want to get this done. I’m gonna work extra-long this night to get that done.” That’s important to me.

Hannah talked about feeling like she was not always as ahead of her work as she would like to be, but recognizing that her idea of being behind was probably way ahead of most people.

So it's interesting 'cause when I say I'm a procrastinator, I procrastinate to my own deadlines…like if you ask my friends, they would not say that I'm someone who leaves things to the last minute because I set my own deadlines, and then I wait up
until that deadline to get things done. But the deadlines are early, [laughter] if that makes sense...but it's always understanding that it will get done. It'll always get done. It's never not gonna get done.

Most of the participants learned how to balance multiple competing demands in high school. Between sports, extra-curricular clubs and organizations, classes and jobs, they could mentally and physically multi-task, and in most cases felt they were better students by being busy. These skills transitioned over to college, although in some instances sports and clubs were replaced by social life and drinking. Buck shared his experience at prep school as an example of navigating multiple competing demands, and figuring out what work was absolutely necessary and what could be set aside.

I loved the school. Academically it just put me light years ahead of everybody else in college just because it’s one of those schools where you have to do a sport and you have to be involved in extra-curriculars...I did a couple things on campus. I was in an a capella group. I did a lot of theater, that sort of thing. So we’d go do that for a couple hours in the evening and then by 8:00 you’re back at the dorm and you have eight hours of homework to do. There’s no way you can possibly do all the homework that you have assigned so you find a way to not, to do what you have to do and what you don’t have to do which was great preparation for college because obviously in college you don’t do all your work. You just do the work that you have to do, and in my case you do a lot less than you have to do but find a way to get by.
Hannah talked about not necessarily having the hardest major, but backfilling any extra time she might have with campus involvement.

I've been pretty happy with the way everything's turned out. And I've been able – and also taking like not as hard classes has enabled me to do is been really involved with extra-curriculars. So I've done – I've tutored every single semester since second semester of freshman year. Last year I had three tutoring – last semester I had three tutoring jobs: three classes and then volunteer work. And I've been on the executive board of my sorority, and I'm involved with an organization which is like ambassadors to the president. So I've created all this time for me to get involved as well. So I'm actually sitting here twiddling my thumbs waiting to go out or working all the time.

Guided by the philosophy of working hard and playing hard, students brought to college and continued to hone and employ several skills and strategies for being successful in the classroom and incorporating a robust social life into college. These dual purpose tools for success allowed students to maximize their intellectual talents, achieve desired levels of social engagement, and minimize any negative consequences of drinking on their academic achievement.

Peer influence. While family and teachers played significant roles in the development of students’ academic identity, it is peers who most directly influence these students’ ability to navigate the academic and social environments in college. Peers serve as
a benchmark of success, deliver cues as to what happens when you fall short of expectations, and can motivate, inspire and support the choices made in navigating the experience.

Whether in high school or college, most participants had to figure out how to cross between friend groups and academic peers that were not always one and the same. For many students, they found ways to integrate different groups, for others, they simply managed differences. Occasionally, this process created internal struggles and a search for more connection and integration. Tommy presented one of the more bifurcated high school peer experiences, with a clear separation between his academic cohort and his neighborhood friends.

In my high school you had your honors, you had your CP kids, you had your honors kids and you had your advanced placement kids. I had friends at all levels. Most of my friends were at the CP level…CP is like College Placement, basically the lowest level, so just general classes. I had a lot of friends in that area. But I was at the other area. And most of the courses were, most of the courses that I were taking were only designed for the AP and honors students. So only the AP honor students stayed together throughout the course of the semester. And all day everyday you’re taking courses with these same people. So I had a connection with these people just because I was with them 24 hours a day from doing work with ‘em and having lunch with ‘em, we’re talking, we’re cool. So yeah, I had a ball with them…CP level were my main friends I got with outside of school.
Katie struggled in high school with this divide between her intellectual peers and the social circles she wanted to be a part of until after a summer enrichment experience. The people she met there seemed to possess both academic interests and social goals consistent with her own.

I think that before that, I was struggling with whether I was an academic or whether I was a socialite and it wasn’t until senior year that I really started to stop fighting that and said I’m gonna do the social things that I like to do and I’m still going to do the academic things that I like to do. I still felt really out of place ‘cause I didn’t have any friends who would go to the party with me on this day and then be studying really hard the next day like I would.

David reflected on his experience that as he tracked into more academically rigorous classes growing up, fewer and fewer school peers drank with him.

For the social group, in the teenage social group, I have a feeling that – because when you grow older and get into better schools, because in my country, you are not required to attend high school. So high school is also selective. That means your classmates in your high school will usually be smarter than – well, better educated than your previous friends. I have the feeling that we tend to drink more with my childhood friends and drink less with my high school classmates...I mean high school friends don’t drink as much as childhood friends. I have the feeling that, better educated people are less addicted to drinking.
In a conversation with JT about his major and the students he has classes with now and will work with in the future, he expressed some concern about having his social needs met but also could point to exceptions.

I am friends with engineers here, and I can tell I would not have fun going out drinking with them. And they’re just – it’s not what they do. They’re great people. We work on our school work together well, but they’re not as fun. I’m worried about that, in the engineering industry. But I also have engineers, like my two best friends, who are very personable, and we can go out and do that.

For the majority of participants, college was a much more intermingled peer group. Students went out to parties and bars with the same people they studied with. Stephanie’s experience was emblematic of most.

I think the lives are much more blended in that the people I drink with are now the people I’m in class with. So in high school, it was always one or the other. I had my friends I drank with, and then I had my friends that I was in class with. It didn’t overlap at all. In college, they do.

Students reported a critical element of being able to manage a demanding academic work load and an active social experience was the support of friends, most of whom were navigating similar experiences. Gilbert, like most students, received permission to focus on school work without pressure to drink and be social, directly or indirectly, through peers.
I mean a lot of my friends there are really smart and they drink a lot. It’s— I’ve found that my personality works very well within that group and that also works well with my girlfriend. I mean she has a similar outlook on things.

To a person, the participants also discussed seeing the social environment on their campus and the friend groups they were a part of as being highly facilitative of their academic and social goals. The ability to be a high achieving, heavy drinking student was supported by the perception and expectation that, at least within their circle, that is just what you do. Buck’s fraternity provided a critical influence and social support network for his academic expectations and social ambitions.

My fraternity very heavily values academic success, and there are other fraternities here that are great social fraternities but they don’t really care about being good at school, and they actually pride themselves on having a low GPA and that sort of thing. But last year…we had the second highest GPA here and then nationally for our fraternity we had the highest, and our average GPA is a 3.45. So it’s pretty high. So we pride ourselves on being people who like to go out a lot, and we’re very socially active, and being people who excel academically and in other things.

Gilbert found a similar friend group that supported, and encouraged, academic achievement and drinking.

I’m in a living group which is fairly parallel to what you would think of when you would think of a fraternity. I feel like there’s a lot of respect in the group for other
people’s academic pursuits. You know we respect that they’re very intelligent people that we’re friends with. There is definitely – I think that there is like a communal mindset that we want everyone to succeed academically but we also want everyone to then come hang out with us and drink with us afterwards so we’re gonna talk about it. So I think that’s been a pretty positive effect on the definitely as far as giving me a frivolous outlet for my social life but also backing off earlier in the week when I need to do other things.

The participants in this study all shared experiences navigating between peer groups that fell within the academic and social worlds of high school. As most entered college, these peer groups merged, and became a source of support and guidance as the importance of social life and role of drinking elevated. The following sub-theme continues the exploration of how students navigate being a high academic achiever and heavy drinker through the management of consumption.

**Managing drinking.** By any scientific measure, the students in this study drank often and in high quantities throughout college. However, they reported few negative consequences, and by in large represent an objectively high academic achieving group. How the attainment of positive outcomes and avoidance of negative outcomes was achieved sits as a central question of the study. Answers to that question may lie in part in how students managed their alcohol consumption.
One self-described attribute that was shared frequently among participants was the notion of staying in control. Despite drinking a fair amount, Hannah was quick to point out that her ability to manage her drinking had only resulted in one or two problems.

I'm definitely not someone who gets out of control when I drink. Like a lot aspects in my life I'm pretty good at knowing my limits, maintaining control, things like that. I've really only badly gotten sick from alcohol like once or twice in my life...It's been two times in college that I've gotten drunk to the point of getting sick… Sometimes I'll get sick, but I never black – I've never blacked out.

For some students, managing consumption was less about control and more about having a physical limit for drinking that they could not push past. Gilbert discussed his physical limits this way:

I’ve never been one to get really drunk because normally I’ll puke before I black out whereas a lot of people will black out and do really stupid things before they’ll even puke...so that has just always been a threshold for me that I’ve never been able to cross physiologically.

Almost all participants talked about developing a tolerance and their ability to drink heavily without losing control. Tolerance was expressed in most instances as a positive attribute and protective factor, keeping them from experiencing the worst of potential negative health consequences. Buck acknowledged his ability to drink heavily several times, and noted his familial influence:
I’d say I have a very, very high tolerance for alcohol and it runs in my family too. All of my parents are very, very serious drinkers. Nobody has a history of alcoholism or anything like that or none of them are addicted in any way, but my family will always have alcohol with every meal that we eat. Even if it’s lunch, we’ll have beer.

When Hannah was pointed out as being a fairly heavy drinker as defined by national college drinking standards, she responded,

It's definitely – I've always been able to drink more just because, like, I am a taller person. So I've always been able to drink more than my friends. But definitely as college has gone on, I've developed a higher tolerance. And it's interesting because when I first get – like over the summer I don't drink that much. Like, I'm home. I'm with my family. I used to work at a sleep away camp, so there you really can't drink. So when I come back to school, like for a couple weeks I usually will get drunker off of less alcohol, but it builds up pretty quickly. It definitely takes a lot. I mean, and I have to drink to get drunk if I want to.

Most of the participants shared comments throughout the interviews that were reflective of some misinformation or ignorance of the biological effects of alcohol. This passage from Tommy is an example of a commonly held, and incorrect, belief that having a high tolerance means you are not as drunk.

Eventually my tolerance built up. As you get to drink more and more you can consume more and more until I got to a point to where I could consume a lot of
amounts of alcohol, lots of amounts of alcohol and still be conscious and in my right mind, still standing out wildly and can take a Breathalyzer and be good. I really – the cops were not even an issue, especially now like ‘cause we can all drink and just chill.

Hannah talked about her limits for drinking in comparison to her friend who drinks six or seven nights a week as being, “mind-blowing”. She continued, “I just don't have the stamina to do something like that. Then I say well, then I'm really tame. I went out on Friday night and Saturday night. That was it for me”.

Conversely, Katie talked about pushing the limits of drinking in college because the setting was conducive to greater risk taking, which allowed her to figure out how far she could take it.

I also think that that was also the time which I explored my limits with alcohol because I had more opportunities to drink and because I was more comfortable…I had nights in which I drank so much that I never made it to the venue. I don’t think I ever vomited. I’m not ever a heavy enough drinker that I black out or vomit, which has been lucky. I think that the end of my freshman year and the beginning of my sophomore year were the times in which I really pushed my limits of drinking.

In addition to engaging in drinking tactics to protect their academic performance, most students discussed the desire for drinking in safe environments and drinking “smart”.
Gilbert talked about his gratitude for being surrounded by safe drinking practices, but his concern that a different group of friends could have influenced him otherwise.

I’ve surrounded myself with a group of friends that aren’t gonna ask me to do something that’s dangerous. I’ve never felt pressure to do something that pushed me outside of my moral boundaries or something that could hurt me or someone else and I’m sure that if I had a different group of friends I would feel pressure to act differently –and who knows whether I would be able to resist that.

Like Gilbert, Tommy brought up a moral and ethical framework to drinking, which seemed to influence his drinking patterns. When asked how he was able to drink so much and not incur negative consequences, Tommy said,

Just wanna say learn ethics, what’s right and wrong and always revert back to your morals...It’s that part of it ‘cause – like I say, you’re always gonna have people on your back, like your life will eventually turn into not only yours but somebody else’s as well. Like I have high aspiration. My parents have high aspirations for me, coaches and stuff so you have a lot that’s riding on you and you don’t wanna make mistakes that’s gonna jeopardize that bond between the people that you have caring about you. So that’s what you gotta look back to. That’s what I look back to…like every time you drink. You know you just don’t wanna make any dumb move. Got some people who don’t care but I do care.
There was a perception expressed that there had been a time when the University administration was more permissive of drinking and lax in enforcement, and as a result things were safer. However, when the University became stricter about enforcing alcohol policies, students would drink in riskier ways. JT viewed this change as cause for concern.

This campus is also very open, the fact that it’s a wet campus, so there’s alcohol allowed. So you’re really not sneaking around. They’re very open. When someone’s too drunk you can call medical help. No one gets in trouble. Everything used to be on campus. That’s changing. I’m worried about that...I think the university is making a grave mistake in pushing everything away, and putting it underground. They feel like, “Oh, being more conducive. We’re having these party policies. We provided a police officer, people that do party training.” And you can do that, everyone there – but you’ll still get in trouble. It used to be almost no rules but rules, as long as everyone was safe. And I believe there was less problems. Now everything’s pushed away to off campus fraternity houses…someone’s too sick there, no one calls. So, I think they made a grave mistake in pushing everything away from off campus and these new rules. So, that’s my opinion. I felt like the environment, for someone just to kind of test things out, it was right there. I thought it was great for my freshman year. Obviously, other kids might have had a different experience and could have ended up a little differently than I am. But for the most part, I think everyone seemed really happy with it.
Almost all the participants mentioned, often as an aside or add on, that although drinking was exceptionally important for their college experience, it was not essential to everyone’s college experience. Gilbert’s viewpoint below serves as a good example of this somewhat conflicted philosophy of managing choices around drinking.

I mean I don’t think that drinking is a perquisite for having a vibrant social life. There are a lot of people that don’t drink that still do everything that everyone else does just without drinking but I think that’s difficult for a lot of people to do and certainly would be difficult for me to do and also it just wouldn’t be as much fun.

Stephanie differentiated between people who could be sober and have fun and “sober Simons”; people who were sober and boring.

There are people in the fraternity and people I know who don’t drink, and they still come out and they hang out with people who do drink, and there is no frowning upon that, as long as you’re not a sober Simon...However, I do know lots of people who are sober, and are not sober Simons. So you can be sober and still be fun. I have done that myself from time-to-time. Like it’s a Thursday night, and – the fraternity has an event “Thursday night cocktails”. You dress up and we drink nice things, as opposed to our usual cheap beer. And there have been times when I had an exam Friday morning, and I’ll just [go] for an hour and not drink. It’s still a lot of fun.

The belief that drinking is important but not essential serves as an interesting potential moderator of consumption. Students see drinking as prevalent and normative, but
when they need to stay sober or drink in limited ways, there is the freedom to do so without too much internal dissonance or external pressure.

These students, while engaged in heavy drinking, developed increased tolerance and/or employed both philosophical and tactical methods to manage their drinking in ways that did not overwhelm them in terms of time spent drinking, resulting physical harm, or any other obvious negative way. While increasing tolerance is correlated with a host of short and long-term potential negative consequences, for some of these students, it served as an important, if not healthy, means to manage the impact of drinking.

**Rationalizing use.** A central sub-theme within the major theme of navigating the experience was the way in which every participant justified their drinking or explained away not meeting their full academic potential. Creating legitimacy and a justification for the frequency and amount of alcohol consumed was woven into all discussions. Rationalization, in this context, is a navigation tool when academic skills and intellectual ability, supportive social environments, and managing consumption cannot overcome the impact of drinking.

In previous sections, students discussed having some minor negative experiences and/or acknowledged the potential negative consequences of drinking, and how these may have influenced patterns of consumption. In addition, narratives extolling the virtues and positives of drinking were shared. Not surprisingly, participants were less willing to acknowledge the negative impacts of drinking, particularly for them, in the context of achieving their academic and social goals. Rather, JT focused on the negative effects of *not* drinking:
Let’s say I dropped that whole social side, and I spent all my time with academics. Well, you have so much free time, maybe you actually don’t do as well, because you’re not happy. There’s no release. So let’s say either you have the extra time, you become lazy, so you push stuff off anyway, so it’s just the same. Or, it even can make you worse where, “I’m really not happy. School’s my whole life. Screw this.” Maybe I even do worse. Maybe I do better. So I think there’s three scenarios there. Better, the same, or worse. But, I think you can use the social as a release, and it actually helps you do better. Not better, but – wow, I’m the same. I think you really need to balance grade points and life points.

There were several examples of students talking about how drinking and social life had no perceptible impact on their academic life. Tommy pointed to study habits and note taking, but definitely not drinking, as a source of any academic deficiencies.

It really doesn’t have anything to do with alcohol consumption. What I’m doing academically that means I can just study a little bit harder or do something different. Doesn’t mean I have to stop drinking ‘cause it hasn’t impacted me in that area yet. So that’s how I feel about it...I think I can do a little better, you know everybody learns different so some people take really good notes, some people take average notes. That could be the factor like who really knows. But I know alcohol doesn’t have a – I don’t feel like it has a play into it.
In the passage below, Stephanie discussed how she does not let drinking impact school work. She admits that it has happened at least once, but dismisses any meaningful effect.

Yeah, I am still reasonably careful to not let the two overlap. They did once, I think. I think I had a really bad night, and something was going wrong. It was like a Wednesday. I think I got really drunk that night, and went to class still drunk at 10:05 the next morning on a Thursday. But I mean all that happened was I didn’t take notes in that class. [laughter]. I don’t know how much of an impact that is in the long-term. Probably not a lot.

When asked if she was aware of any time that drinking could have impacted her academics negatively, Katie said that she did not think so, “because I’m very obsessive…I’m really bad at breaking the rules actually. My school work never suffered...if I have to break a rule, I’ll break out in hives because it’s so nerve wracking”.

David tried to be completely honest about the influence of alcohol. When asked, “Has alcohol ever gotten in the way of your academic success? Do you think drinking has ever inhibited your academic success?” His answer was, “Not really, but it’s not helpful either”. Buck was equally up front, admitting, “I think if I were not successful academically, drinking would be the number one culprit really”.

Katie’s responses to questions about the effects of drinking on her academic life were among the most conflicted. She acknowledged that she could not keep up with the students on campus that she perceived to be the ones most able to party hard and still make A’s, and
went on to admit that she was not making the grades she had hoped to make coming out of high school. Yet, as this narrative demonstrates, there no willingness to concede an inch on the impact social life and partying could be having despite her evidence to the contrary.

I definitely would say that I don’t regret anything. I don’t look back and think, “Man, I could have really got an A if only I hadn’t gone out so much or if only I had worked harder.” Because I know that every semester that I’ve been here I have worked my hardest and I really have put everything I could – I did tutoring and I did extra – I worked my butt off and I was getting B’s and to me, it didn’t matter how much – well, it obviously does matter if you go out seven nights a week. I never felt that my social life was negatively affecting my school work. Sometimes I would go out and I would have a really hard time focusing the next day because I was hung over or I was thinking about what happened the night before and I was texting eight friends being like, “Did you hear blah, blah, blah, blah, blah?” At those points, I was like, “I need to get my life –” like a classic thing to hear around campus is, “I really need to get my life together” …but I always felt that I was able to pull it back in and refocus. Even though my GPA isn’t where I would love it to be, there isn’t anything I can change about it. I worked really hard and I just feel like I did the best I could do and I need to stop worrying about it and be proud that I could do that and still be this happy and have all these friends and great experiences that I have.
Even beyond impacts on academics, few students were willing to acknowledge a negative to their drinking. Gilbert could not come up with a single negative, outside of the occasional hangover and romantic quarrel.

Nothing stands out as being horrible. I never had like – like when I’m thinking of things that could have gone horribly wrong when I was drinking like I could have sexually assaulted someone, that would be horrible, you know, wake up the next morning and find out you did that, I could have had sex with someone that – and then really regretted it, not used protection or it had been someone that I was not comfortable with, you know, that’s never happened. I’ve never – can’t think of a time when I’ve like ruined any friendships or said anything really mean when I was drunk...Never been arrested, never got an underage...I’ve never – you know – I’ve woken up and like, “I should be doing work right now, I’m too hung over,” but I’ve never slept through a test or something, nothing – the worst thing that’s happened I think is I’ve like puked my brains out and felt really horrible that night and the next day. I’m a pretty happy person so when I’m drunk I’m also happy...I’ve gotten into fights with my girlfriend...but that happens regardless of whether I’m drinking.

In the context of navigating the college experience of being a high academic achiever and heavy drinker, one common element for these students seemed to be that in the grand scheme of things, drinking had not negatively impacted their goals or aspirations. Whether this is objectively accurate or not is immaterial in the phenomenological sense. Their
experience is the way it is, but thematically, this concept seems to play an important utilitarian role in explaining away any potential concerns.

A key component of rationalizing the drinking experience for the participants was a conscious recalibration of academic success and achievement, and the establishment of a personal definition of success. Although each student would present to most observers as objectively successful based on GPA and campus involvement, I had the sense that had drinking and social engagement not been as big a part of their college experience, they could have likely all been 4.0 students. However, because social life was important, and in some cases expressed as essential, most participants lowered, or at least adjusted their academic outlook accordingly such that they could meet their own definition of achievement and benchmark for self-satisfaction.

Buck, in his usual up front and honest way, talked about the give and take between academics and social life when asked about his own definition of success.

I’m as I mentioned, I’m very competitive and I don’t always win or succeed or anything like that, but I want to be the best at everything that I do. And for me in college, as you said with the expectations and that sort of thing, it’s been, “how can I be the best student I possibly can be”. I’m not but I’m pretty good. How can I socially be the most active? And for me it’s not necessarily about being cool or being popular. But it’s how can I be a presence? How can I be a face? How can I be recognized and that sort of thing? That appeals to me. For better or for worse, that recognition appeals to me, and it’s almost like a competition. It’s like can I be as
successful as I can be academically? Can I be the coolest I possibly can be? That sort of thing.

For Hannah, a definition of success in college was whether she was satisfied. Reflecting on four years of college, she said, “I really look back (and) wouldn't have changed much at all, especially not academically. I've been pretty happy with the way everything's turned out”.

Katie, who was not willing to place blame for any academic deficits on drinking, did concede a recalibration of her academic goals in light of her social pursuits. I’m a 3.52-ish student now and to me, even though sometimes it’s very much a point of insecurity because I really, really wish I could have a 4.0… I just feel like I have really missed the mark academically because growing up I only got A’s and it was not okay to get B’s and coming to college, I just feel like I couldn’t maintain that standard and it took me a while to accept it and I’m still coping with it because sometimes I get B’s and I’m like, “God, why? I tried so hard.” But I mean it’s something that I had to kind of accept that I don’t want to be in the library all day every day and I want to have this work-life balance and for me, that means accepting a 3.5, 3.6 and still being happy. Because I realize that now that I’m in a place where there’s so many people around me that have similar interests and who I have so much fun with, even doing superficial things like drinking and going out, it’s still so much deeper than what I was doing in high school. I find people who I connect with on such a deeper level and that makes me happy. And so for me, the social aspect has
increased and the academic has decreased. But I don’t think I will ever be content with a 3.0. There is a lower limit, too, with what I’ll accept... ‘Cause that does play into my happiness level and so much of my identity is based on my performance in the classroom and so I always want to maintain that. I feel like there’s a certain level of respect and admiration and I just feel that academics is a really important part of my life and so I will always work hard but I also give myself time to enjoy life, too.

Most participants came into college with the belief that they would and could continue to achieve academically at the same level they did in high school. They also brought an enhanced focus on the social experience, and desired an equal level of recognition and achievement in this area. When academic outcomes did not match expectations for some, the opportunity to preserve a high-achieving identity was expressed through redefining, internally, what they were willing to accept.

Students took a personal definition of success and expanded it into a discussion about tradeoffs and the idea that there has to be some give and take between academics and social life that involves heavy drinking. When asked if there was any lost academic potential—what they theoretically could achieve academically—students had differing responses but generally felt any lost potential was marginal at best. Even if potential was comprised, it was worth the investment in social life. Again, Buck offered an example that was almost universally echoed by other participants:

So I’ll explain this in a circular way. It’s not gonna sound for a minute like I’m actually answering the question, but this summer I was doing an internship in
investment banking, and the hours were absolutely atrocious. I would get to the office at 9:00 in the morning and I’d leave at 3:00 or 4:00. Sometimes I was there all night. It was just terrible. So I was talking to my parents about it…and I was telling them there are people who are motivated by the paycheck, by the money that they make, and those people want to do banking. And then there are people who are motivated by the lifestyle that the money can afford them, and when you’re working those types of hours you can’t have any kind of lifestyle. You just make the money and you have this mansion that just sits with the lights off, or you have a job that either you take a chance and make a lot more money, or you’d start a company or something, or you have a lifestyle where you make less money but you enjoy yourself way more. And so the way I’ll just answer your question is I’m in the latter group. I’m very, very confident that if I came here and didn’t go out I could have a 4.0.

Stephanie believed that any loss in academic output was at best marginal, and that even the occasional lapse in maximum effort was not always due to drinking. When discussing her justification for not putting in the extra effort to get a perfect grade, she simply said, “I want to live”. Gilbert added to this economic rationale and the limited impact of cognitive effects from drinking.

If something is going to marginally make me slightly less intelligent every time I take it but it’s like to the point where I’m still perfectly fine and successful, you know, if it’s something like alcohol that is almost indispensable in my social life, you know, what’s being a little less successful than having a great time while through your
life…I mean like I – you look at people that have been drinking heavily their entire life and they’re fine on an objective scale. Are they not hitting their potential? Probably but what is that potential? Is that potential in the one to two percentile range?...So yeah, I mean I – right, like I think it’s really fair to say that I recognize that there is some trade-off. I think that it’s a pretty marginal trade-off and I’m very satisfied making that trade-off.

In a related discussion about achievement, Gilbert’s point, and justification for investing heavily in social life, was that any reasonable definition of learning in college had to extend beyond the classroom.

I guess I feel like college is primarily for getting an education but that education isn’t just academic. It’s also very social and very coming of age of sorts, and if you didn’t – if you didn’t invest in your social life at school you would first probably not be able to look back on college as fun and second you wouldn’t be learning as much about yourself as you could if you invested that time in social life.

Buck was the most up front about the tradeoff between academic success and drinking.

I’d say the drinking holds me back definitely in terms of academic success. I’ve said it, but if I didn’t go out as much as I do I think I’d have a perfect GPA, and I think that’s true about a lot of my friends. A lot of my friends are really, really bright kids and we all handicap ourselves by drinking the amounts that we do, and what it does
for me is it gives me a sense of social satisfaction. I would not have fun in college if I
didn’t go out and drink.

Although it may have been used as a rationalizing mechanism to explain away their
drinking behaviors, for the most part participants seemed to offer an honest assessment of
what they were giving up in the classroom or within their grade point average in exchange
for the opportunity to drink and party.

For many students, rationalization appeared in the form of a perception of life after
college as having less freedom, more obligations and responsibilities, and greater
consequences for mistakes. The explanation for drinking was, “if I don’t do it now, I never
will again”. Here, Hannah compared her typical weekly drinking occasions in college to her
anticipated transition into the work world just a few months ahead.

Like especially now the next two years of my life are gonna be so hard. Work
intensive and I'm not gonna – I mean, when I'm a full-time teacher, I can't go out
every night. That's just not gonna happen...I'm probably gonna be too tired writing
lesson plans.

In a reflective moment, Buck offered a starkly honest assessment of his heavy college
drinking, and why, despite the absurdity of his consumption relative to his health, he was
going to go hard for one last semester.

So the other thing that I’ll say is that in the spirit of the looking forward part, four
years of college when you drink as much as I do or my friends do is unsustainable
beyond that point. So the one benefit of it is when you first come to college you say, “This is so awesome. I hope it never ends.” By the time you’re a senior, like I am now, you look at it and you say, “Oh, my God. I’m happy but I could never do this another four years.” If I go back and do this all over again there’s no way I would do it…but knowing that the light is at the end of the tunnel and I have one more semester here I’m trying to drink as much as possible…because I know this is the last chance I’m gonna have. There is never another time in my life where I will have such minimal – even as somebody who does a lot on campus – where I will have such minimal expectations for my obligations and that sort of thing…and I think leaving college obviously I’m gonna be working next year, presumably six or seven days a week in a difficult capacity where I have to be professional. And you can’t show up to work hung over. You can show up to class hung over and that’s fine. You just sit and take notes and you don’t show up if you don’t have to, but you can’t miss work…but I guess to answer your question, would I change my behavior? Yes. If I had to do this another four years I would stop drinking as much immediately.

Looking ahead to life after college was a way to both justify drinking during college and admit, as Buck did, that these patterns of consumption could not, and should not continue.

**Summary.** In trying to develop a balance between academic and social identities, “grade points vs. life points”, and partying hard and making the A, there is the real potential for a tension between the two to develop. As seen through the stories of the participants in
the preceding section, various academic and drinking skills and strategies were employed, and peers were relied upon, to navigate that tension. Part of the lived experience of being smart and social and the navigation of these two achievement goals was also taking ownership of the narrative of what it means to be successful, and re-writing that narrative to fit their own experience. Being a high-achiever in high school could be satisfied by making straight A’s. In college, there was a willingness to acknowledge that their academic output may not be their best but it protected their high-achieving identity in a public sense and allowed them the independence to go after a social goal that may have seemed unattainable previously. In sum, the preceding section offered findings that told the story of how these students experienced the merged phenomena of being a high achieving and heavy drinking college student.

**Chapter Summary**

The preceding chapter contained findings from interviews conducted with eight participants over either one or two in-person sessions. Interviews focused on the lived experiences of high academic achieving and heavy drinking college students. In a semi-structured question format, participants were asked to recall experiences related to academics and drinking, and conversations expended into themes related to the people and places that influenced these experiences, the motivations for academic success and drinking, and the processes by which they were able to accomplish their college goals.

Several key findings emerged which serve as the basis for the following discussion chapter. Participants were not only good students, but their sense of self was in many ways defined by being a good student. Participants did not just desire and seek out social
experiences, but their sense of self was in many ways defined by their social experiences, and those social experiences were synonymous with drinking. Participants did not just drink for the sake of drinking, but rather possessed a multitude of motivations for drinking that served many rational needs and interests. And finally, participants did not just compartmentalize and keep separate two parallel college experiences in terms of their academics and social life, but rather merged and navigated these experiences together with combined philosophy, skill sets, and justifications.
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

This study examined the lived experience of high academic achieving and heavy drinking college students. Primary research questions included: what is the essence or central theme(s) of the lived experience for college students who excel academically and engage in high-risk drinking behaviors, and how do high academic achieving college students come to understand and make meaning of their heavy drinking behaviors? Additional questions that served to guide the analysis of the data included: why do students, who have so much intellectual potential and academic motivation, engage in drinking behaviors that appear on the surface to be counter-productive and high-risk for numerous negative consequences; and, how do these students navigate the merger of two seemingly oppositional and equally time-intensive activities, academics and drinking?

Through in-person interviews with eight academically successful and heavy drinking college students at a highly-selective private university, several key findings emerged in response to these questions and considerations. First, participants’ responses indicated that a significant identity and component of their sense of self was defined by being a good student and someone who views themselves and is viewed by others as smart. Second, participants’ responses indicated that a significant identity and component of their sense of self was defined by social experiences and being a social person and someone who is viewed as highly engaged in the social scene in college. Importantly, this key finding was accompanied by an inextricable link to the understanding among participants that alcohol, and frequent, heavy drinking, is synonymous with the college social experience. Third,
participants’ responses indicated that drinking serves both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated interests, including personal enjoyment, social enhancement, expectation fulfillment and goal attainment. They drink to have fun, to ease social awkwardness and heighten opportunities for making friends and meeting romantic interests, to experience what popular culture has informed them is college, and to acquire the recognition, social skills and access to professional networks necessary to be successful in life. Finally, participants’ responses indicated that they navigate their college experience with a dual-purpose philosophy, skill set, and self-determined justification for their behaviors relative to academics and drinking.

The remainder of this chapter will first focus on a discussion of the findings within the field of relevant research, including theoretical frameworks, explored in chapter two. Findings will be discussed in connection to the relationship between drinking and academics, elements of achievement including attributes of high-achievers and motivation, and alcohol-related cognitive decision making factors including drinking expectancies, norms, rituals and rites of passage, and motivation.

Following this section will be a discussion of implications for professional practice within higher education and specifically student affairs and services. Findings will be discussed in connection to supporting student’s academic success and personal goals for college, harm prevention in relation to alcohol use, and social and interpersonal development. The conclusion of this chapter and dissertation will address this study’s limitations with
respect to methods and theory and how those limitations inform opportunities and directions for future research.

**Discussion of Key Findings**

The literature review section of this dissertation contains three areas of primary focus: research on the relationship between collegiate alcohol consumption and academic performance; research on gifted/high-achieving students and the relationship between their success and aspects of academic and social development; and research on the relationship between drinking and various cognitive decision-making factors. The purpose of the following sections is to weave together elements of the key findings from this study with these fields of research in order to frame a discussion of implications for this study on these issues.

**Drinking and academics.** Within the field of research on the connection between alcohol consumption and academic performance in college, there have historically been two approaches to understanding this relationship. Early research, conducted predominantly pre-2000, focused on bivariate associations between drinking and academic outcomes. Links between frequency of alcohol consumption and academic performance based on self-reported experiences of missing class, poor performance on tests, memory loss, and time spent studying overwhelmingly pointed to a significant negative impact of drinking on academics (Cook & Moore, 1993; Presley & Meilman, 1992; Presley et al., 1996; Wechsler et al., 1994).
The consensus of this research was that time spent drinking took away from necessary time on task to be academically successful, and that negative outcomes from drinking, including being hung-over, getting poor sleep, and lingering cognitive impairments had a direct impact on academic performance. From this research came the commonly accepted and often repeated assertion that there is a direct, inverse relationship between how much and how often one drinks and grade point average. The students who drink the least make the best grades, and the students who drink the most make the worst grades. Ultimately, if students make partying and drinking a priority over academics, their academic outcomes will suffer (Singleton, 2007; Thombs et al., 2006; Wechsler et al., 2000).

The students in the present study engage in heavy drinking, but the resulting outcomes that drive low performance findings in bivariate studies are not apparent. These students do not report missing class, performing poorly on tests, forgetting what they have learned or studied, or wasting time needed for studying. In fact, participants reported investing significant time studying and placing a high priority on attending and focusing in class. Unlike the participants in research studies that showed a direct, inverse relationship between drinking and grade point average, these students flip the priority model and make academics their first concern, but that does not mean that academics is their only concern. The findings suggest that academics are made a priority not only to meet academic expectations for achievement in the classroom, but as a component of a larger strategic plan to achieve social goals as well. These students understand that in order to drink as much as they drink and maintain academic success, certain elements of academic success must be
taken care of first, which will allow time for partying and drinking after, absent the stress and anxiety that comes with not getting one’s work done. The role of academic stress and anxiety on drinking habits and related consequences and the impact of drinking to cope with these issues will be discussed with greater detail in a subsequent section of this chapter.

In the late 1990’s and early 2000’s and extending to more recent studies, researchers began utilizing multivariate models to better understand the relationship between drinking and academics in college (Paschall & Freisthler, 2003; Powell et al., 2004; Singleton, 2007; Thombs et al., 2009; Wood et al., 1997). Several pre-college and during-college variables such as measures of academic aptitude, high school grade point average, concurrent drug use, parental substance use behaviors and college involvement experiences were factored into the relationship, and a diminishing link was found (Paschall & Freisthler, 2003). Studies found no significant impact of drinking on academic performance when a variety of factors were factored into the model, and argued that academic aptitude and pre-college academic success were far better predictors of college academic success than drinking (Paschall & Freisthler, 2003; Wood et al., 1997). The students in the present study clearly possess many of the pre-college and during-college elements of academic achievement that would influence the impact of alcohol as found in the multivariate studies. Nothing about previous studies or this one can or should be interpreted as suggesting alcohol and drinking do not have the potential to have a negative effect on academic outcomes. However, this study provides some context to our understanding that the effect of drinking on academics is influenced by a multitude of complex factors—such as academic self-concept, academic motivation, how
much one drinks, and when that drinking takes place relative to important academic preparedness activities such as studying—that can either aggravate or mitigate this relationship.

Even including pre-college and during-college individual factors did not complete the whole story about the relationship between drinking and academics. Singleton (2007) added a significant element to the field of research through an exploration of differing measures of consumption and the role of environment on drinking-related academic outcomes. His findings suggested that increases in quantity consumed, versus frequency, and homogeneous campuses with monolithic drinking cultures—particularly including strong fraternity and athletics scenes—have greater influence on pressure to drink, overriding pre-college variables and negatively impacting academics. The students in the present study attend a relatively diverse institution by race/ethnicity and geographic distribution of undergraduates, but socialize within a highly insular and homogenous circle of peers dominated by the Greek fraternity and sorority system and big-time athletics. Few students reported a pressure to drink, but all reported a clear expectation to drink as a component of the social environment.

The findings of this study suggest that this field of research should perhaps be less focused on an either/or proposition around effects of drinking on academics, and instead an investigation into the both/and reality of adding alcohol to a complex set of additional factors, some of which are individual and some of which are environmental. The important question may not be, does drinking impact academic outcomes, but rather how much, in what ways, and for who does drinking impact academic outcomes. Related questions may be,
how does research measure academic outcomes, what does a grade point average tell us about a student’s achievement, and what role does the institutional environment and academic culture play in the objective assessment of achievement?

Another suggestion raised by the findings of this study is that some students may be able to achieve academic success despite their consumption patterns because they are not being challenged by the curriculum. As research on grade inflation suggests, issues such as the effect of student satisfaction surveys on faculty tenure review could influence the academic environment such that less effort is required for higher grades than in years past (Rojstaczar & Healy, 2012). Does a 3.7 tell us much about the impact of drinking if almost everyone is making A’s whether they drink or not? The higher education community will need to consider, individual variables aside, whether it is comfortable with the notion that a student can drink 3-4 (or more) nights per week and 8-10 drinks per night (or more) and still make A’s. While we know that institutional environmental conditions such as large Greek systems and a focus on major college sports contribute to drinking patterns, other institutional conditions may influence how hard or easy it is to obtain an A, academic effort aside (Mallett et al., 2013; Wechsler & Kuo, 2003).

There must also be an acknowledgment that an A and a high grade point average may not reveal whether a student is meeting their full intellectual potential. As participants in this study reported, many could have been 4.0 students, taken on harder majors or additional focus areas. Potential future research around academic potential will be discussed more fully in the concluding sections of this dissertation, but here the discussion revolves around
the astute economic question that so many participants in the study asked: just how much am I really giving up academically as a result of my drinking?

Related to the field of research on drinking and academic performance is a smaller but relevant set of studies that inform our understanding of the relationship between giftedness and cognitive ability and the propensity to drink. There is some indication that gifted and high-performing adolescents may be vulnerable to and engage in early alcohol use as one way to compensate for any real or perceived social cost for their intellectual talents (Peairs et al., 2011). They grapple with balancing social acceptance and their own intellectual potential at a time in life when their peers may not value intellectual potential as highly. Drinking becomes a coping strategy to mask or minimize giftedness, and may occur out of insight into the social benefits of drinking. There is also some indication that for gifted youth, drinking does not necessary accompany negative behavior so long as moderate consumption achieves the desired goals of reducing the perceived differences between themselves and their less-talented peers (Peairs et al., 2011). For the students in the current study, there appears to be some indication from their stories that these factors were in play during high school, as they largely sat outside the top-rungs of the social hierarchy. However, once at college, there certainly seems to be far less concern for or perception of any price to pay for their academic achievement. The perception of the participants was that everyone on their campus was academically gifted. The social support and encouragement for both academic success and social engagement meant not having to hide your achievements.
Individuals with high ability (as evidenced by IQ for example) may drink as much if not more than the general population based on a variety of factors, including the associations between achievement and income and substance use, intellect, social engagement, and substance use, and tendency to be sensation seeking and interested in novel experiences, but they also seem to avoid many of the serious long-term negative outcomes associated with drinking and other substance use (Finn & Hall, 2004; Latvala et al., 2013; Peairs et al., 2011). Research suggests that people with high-intellect may retain more information about long-term consequences of drinking, learn to avoid socially deviant or delinquent activities with significant long-term consequences, possess strong problem-solving abilities, good insight, and perspective taking that would likely inhibit initiation of or engagement in delinquent behavior, and do not tend to associate with deviant peer groups (Finn & Hall, 2004; Peairs et al., 2011).

All of these concepts would seem to dove-tail with the experiences of the students in this study, who engage in frequent, heavy drinking but avoid—at least up until this point in their lives—many of the more serious negative outcomes associated with their drinking behaviors. They discuss safe and smart drinking, the role of their values and morals in guiding their behaviors, and the line that they do not cross. These students also report a strong desire to escape the mundane and inject fun and excitement into their otherwise work-driven lives.

Finally, the findings in this study indicate a set of students who work hard, put in the effort to be academically successful, and are highly intelligent. Previous experiences,
including internships, and upcoming career and post-graduate plans, speak to a future of promise and success. It is quite easy to see great things ahead for these individuals. I had a sense that these students might be successful because of their drinking, rather than in spite of it. Because they set clear goals for themselves, prioritized academic success, employed effective skills and talents, and adopted a balanced life perspective that includes relaxation and enjoyment, they are headed in a positive direction by any standard. These students may possess the right mix of intellectual capacity, motivation, skills for success, and drinking patterns such that all worked together, rather than in opposition. The following section will shift the discussion to research more directly connected to the experience of being a high-achiever.

**High-achievement.** The field of research on high-achievement is wide and varied, but is generally lacking when it comes to what we know specifically about college students. There is a great deal of research on giftedness in young children and adolescents, and some research on high-ability students in college honors programs, which does inform the current study and the findings. This section will explore the findings of this study in the context of two research areas on high-achievement: first, the various attributes of high-achieving students and the ways they are thought to be similar and different from less talented peers; and second, the relationship between achievement and types of motivation.

**Attributes of high-achieving students.** There is ample evidence that high-ability students, whether defined by IQ, grade attainment, or participation in a college honors program, possess a host of highly desirable and academically efficacious traits. They have
higher persistence in the face of adversity, need for achievement, work and study habits and seriousness for academic pursuits, and desire to reach their full potential (Mathiasen, 1985; Pufal-Struzik, 1999; Rinn & Plucker, 2004). They possess a cache of learning mechanisms that promote their success, including an ability to manage their own learning, set their own goals, and employ efficient learning strategies in a variety of contexts (Ruban & Reis, 2006). Gifted students have also been shown to have a higher self-concept, level of confidence, and ability to cope, solve problems and persuade others (Clark, 2008; Preuss & Dubow, 2004; Rinn, 2008).

One interesting differentiation between gifted and non-gifted students in the literature is in how they cope and deal with problems. While non-gifted students describe explicit strategies for dealing with problems, gifted students are more likely to process these events at an intuitive level. They simply get down to work, focus their efforts, and solve the problem, or employ an active strategy of problem management (such as choosing a less demanding major) as a way to relieve whatever stressor is a play, as opposed to less talented students, who often choose procrastination or avoidance of the problem as a strategy (Ruban & Reis, 2006; Shaunessy & Suldo, 2009). Gifted students also tend to cope with stressors by engaging in other activities that refocus their attention and are viewed as relaxing (Shaunessy & Suldo, 2009).

For the students who took part in this study, the indication is that there is so much more to their achievement than intelligence and cognitive capacity alone. They are not just smart; they seem to put in the effort, be motivated, and employ a number of strategies and
self-regulated methods to attain their goals. These attributes may not only allow them to be academically successful in light of their drinking behaviors, but these attributes potentially allow a vibrant social experience and accompanying heavy drinking behaviors to occur by making time available and protecting academic priorities. As several students said outright, they would not party as hard if they could not maintain their high academic standards.

Whether these students study more or less or have a higher intellect than less successful peers may not be all that important. These students believe that they study smarter, with more intentionality of purpose, at more effective times of the day and week, and with more efficiency than some of their less successful peers. Maybe it should not be so surprising that they drink and socialize as a form of dealing with the inevitable pressures and stressors of college life. They buckle down and get their work done and make time to enjoy themselves, which satisfies academic and social goals and eases any tensions that come from managing them both alongside whatever family, relationship, financial or other life issues might arise. The work hard/play hard approach creates a sense of balance and implies that you can have it all in college; that you do not have to pick one or the other.

Despite the research indicating all of the positive academic attributes of high-ability students, there is another set of studies that provide mixed conclusions on the ability of these students to adjust to social settings and manage life’s challenges (Clark, 2008; Ford et al., 1994; Harte, 1994; Holliday et al., 1996; Kerr & Colangelo, 1988; Laycock, 1984; Mathiasen, 1985; Peterson, 2006; Pufal-Struzik, 1999; Rinn & Plucker, 2004). While some studies indicate increased problems with respect to social life and emotions, others report
little difference between high and low-ability students in terms of dealing with all of what life has to offer (Holliday et al., 1996; Kerr & Colangelo, 1988).

Most research seems to fall somewhere in between, acknowledging that giftedness is both a benefit and burden and a conflicted experience for some (Ford, et al., 1994; Peterson, 2006). On the one hand, gifted students experience peer pressure to underachieve, perfectionism, fear of failure, a sense of differentness that can lead to social isolation, challenges transitioning into environments with increased competition, and the feeling of being overwhelmed by their own abilities and choices that come with those talents (Clark, 2008; Ford et al., 1994; Rinn & Plucker, 2004). On the other hand, as the research has shown, gifted students also possess a host of adaptive skills to address these issues in ways that others may not. Perhaps most salient to the findings of this study is Coleman’s (1985) research into the Stigma of Giftedness, which showed that talented students want normal social interactions, believe that people treat them differently when they are aware of their talents, and believe they can fit in and influence their interpersonal experiences by engaging in coping strategies, such as those that are perceived to be socially accepted.

Again, these attributes seem to have been more prevalent in high school for these students, where there were daily reminders of differences and more stratified social groups. Once in college, these students could let down their guard, realizing that everyone had come from a similar social experience. Their experience was less about hiding their talents, and more about integrating those talents with a strong desire for social interaction with other high-ability students. The differential high school and college experiences for these
students bring up questions about why students might drink in environments where they are seen as the smartest, versus those where they can blend in and just be another high-achieving student.

One anecdotal assumption of high-achieving students seems to be that they are somehow less interested or inclined to participate in social activities. As the research shows, gifted students are highly oriented toward sensory experiences and look for and expect to be involved in college activities and all that campus life has to offer (Kerr & Colangelo, 1988; Rinn & Plucker, 2004). Almost all of the participants in this study indicated that they actively researched their college choices to make sure those social needs would be met. Although at least one student indicated some dismay at going from being a big fish in a small pond to just another fish, she was so satisfied with the social experience in college that had been lacking in high school, that she adapted and re-calibrated her self-concept from being the smartest to just being smart.

**Achievement and motivation.** The majority of research on academic motivation and achievement focuses on the K-12 experience, and pays little attention to college students (Clark, 2008; Rinn & Plucker, 2004). However, the research available on motivation and learning is ample and has significant relevance for the findings in this study. First, motivation research makes clear that there is a distinction between gifted intelligence and gifted motivation. Intelligence is what you have; however, motivation is concerned with what you do and supports the pathway to achievement. The students in this study are
observably smart, but their motivation seems to speak more to what they have achieved and how they have achieved it.

Motivation research explores the differential impacts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation on learning, with a focus on self-determination and autonomy as predictors of high achievement, better learning gains, better memory, more enjoyment and satisfaction of work, more confidence, and greater academic persistence (Deci et al., 1991; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Ruban & Reis, 2006; Rinn 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000). As their narratives displayed, these students report a high enjoyment of learning, high value of education, and strong self-concept as being smart. Their parents, teachers, and friends, from an early age and up through college, each created and supported the critical elements of self-determined learning (Deci et al., 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). These students experienced a high level of competence through learning what it took to attain their own and others expectations; they developed secure and meaningful friendships within their academic environments; and, perhaps most importantly they were given freedom and choice to initiate their own learning, formulate their own goals, and regulate their own behaviors without much control or interference from others.

All of their motivation, either academically or socially, was not intrinsic. Certainly they engaged in some academic and social behaviors for pure enjoyment and satisfaction, but like most of what drives us, there were always elements of external motivation. Importantly, these external influences were largely integrated and internalized within their social contexts. There may have been social pressures to make the grade, but these pressures aligned with
internally held values for learning. There were undoubtedly social pressures to drink, but these were aligned with internally held values for social enhancement. Ryan and Deci’s (2000) concept of integrated regulation—whereby external motivations are aligned with a sense of self and assimilated with values and identity—seems to speak to these students’ experience. The potential for an academic identity and social identity, even if equally valued, to come into conflict seems likely, and in high school, many of these students struggled resolving competing priorities and separate peer groups. However, when these students arrived in an environment that encouraged, supported, and facilitated both identities, each became integrated and internalized and behaviors became an expression of self...such that the behaviors almost appear intrinsically motivated. In this way, both learning and drinking became self-directed and autonomous choices, that may have influenced students to feel in control and able to adjust behavior as personally desired versus externally forced.

This section focused on a discussion of the current findings within the existing research on achievement. A subsequent section on implications for practice will expand on several of these discussion points. The next section will address the findings in relation to the field of research on cognitive decision making factors and drinking.

**Cognitive decision-making factors.** Over the past 30 years, a significant portion of college alcohol and drinking research has focused on cognitive factors that influence why college students drink, how much and how often they drink, and to what degree these cognitive factors predict alcohol related problems. Although much of this research is
interrelated, several distinct themes have emerged, each exploring cognitive factors through different lenses and orientations.

Research into college alcohol expectancies addresses the question, what will alcohol do for me, and looks at beliefs students hold about the effects of alcohol use (Osberg et al., 2010; Osberg et al., 2011). These beliefs carry over from not only what alcohol will do for the drinkers themselves, but also what these same young people believe about peer’s consumption habits and the attitudes other students have regarding alcohol.

Perceived campus and peer norms studies examine the subjective reality students have regarding the frequency (how often do fellow students drink), quantity (how much do fellow students drink), and general acceptability (how do fellow students feel about it) of alcohol consumption around them (Baer, 2002; Osberg et al., 2010; Osberg et al., 2011). Expectancies and peer norms research connect to an interrelated cognitive factor that explores alcohol consumption as a ritual and rite of passage (Gilder, et al., 2001; Treise et al., 1999; Wolburg, 2001). Within this framework, students perceive alcohol as fulfilling various ritualized components of the college experience (Crawford & Novak, 2006).

Finally, through what many researchers believe is the final common pathway to consumption, studies exploring drinking motives focus on the needs and functions fulfilled by alcohol consumption and the balancing of positive and negative incentives to drink (Baer, 2002; Cooper et al., 1995; Cox & Klinger, 1988; Kuntsche et al., 2005; Osberg et al., 2010; Osberg et al., 2011). The remainder of this section will explore the findings of the current study relative to these interconnected yet distinct pathways to drinking.
Expectancies. In the process of understanding why college students drink, particularly college students who demonstrate a high degree of academic motivation, one lens of analysis is to look at what students believe will happen for them and to them as a result of their consumption. If the ultimate decision to drink is driven by motivation, the decision must be preceded by some concept of the positive and negative beliefs about what alcohol, and the act of drinking, will do. One way to think about this interplay of positive and negative expectancies is via the economic principle of cost-benefit analysis (Moore & Gullone, 1996). Individuals make decisions about drinking based on whether they believe the benefits, or positives of drinking, outweigh the costs, or negatives. They learn about the positives and negatives by acquiring information from parents, siblings, peers, the media, and their own experiences and/or observations. However, complicating this cognitive process is the reality that negative expectancies are not always viewed as such by all drinkers, and positive expectancies are not always positive insofar as leading to healthy outcomes (Capron & Schmidt, 2012; Mallett et al., 2008).

Within the body of research on drinking expectancies, much of the focus has been on exploring these differential outcomes for different expectancies. A clear and well supported result of much of the research has been that problematic drinking—consumption that leads to negative consequences—is associated with expectancies tied to stress, anxiety, and tension relief (Brown, 1985; Goldsmith et al., 2009; O’Hare, 1990). Students who drink to cope with these psychological concerns, which often manifest into physiological problems, do so because they believe drinking will ease the tension and give them an escape from the stress
and anxiety. Thus, the research shows that these students who drink to reduce stress and anxiety experience significantly more negative outcomes that those who drink for expectancies such as social enhancement.

The students in this study do report some stress and anxiety, and some expectancies that drinking will help them relax. An interesting discussion then becomes what types of stress and tension might be at play in problematic drinking. These students get their work done and do well in school, so their stress is unlikely to be related to worrying about when they are going to find time to catch up, or what they missed in the class they did not go to. The few participants in this study that articulated stress reported more stress around meeting their own expectations for success.

Another complicating factor in understanding why students drink via an expectancies lens is that research shows an imbalance and inconsistency in how college drinkers evaluate positive and negative expectancies in their decision making process. Generally, positive beliefs about alcohol outweigh negatives (Leigh & Stacy, 1993). The students in the present study all reported overwhelmingly positive expectations from drinking, and significantly downplayed negative expectations, particularly related to academics. The belief, emboldened by rationalization of drinking for personal and professional enhancement and a recalibration of academic goals, was largely that there are no negatives to drinking, for them. Although they were cognizant that negatives exist for drinking for some, this group generally viewed themselves as immune from those outcomes. This understanding of negatives without personal attribution could have some implications for their own outcomes in light of
Werner et al.’s (1995) research showing that heavy problematic drinkers have a much higher degree of positive expectancies than heavy non-problematic drinkers. That these students comprehend and have seen the negative outcomes for peers and friends could push them into a more realistic evaluation of expectancies.

An important outcome of this study is some additional support for the research that explores what college student’s view as negative. Research shows that academic failure is viewed and valued predominantly as negative by college students, while outcomes like throwing up are not necessarily viewed as such (Mallett et al., 2008). If the most salient negative expectancy is not only not personally experienced, as was the case for these students, but not seen even in peers, this would seem to reinforce a largely positive view of drinking.

Similarly, research shows that less pre-college drinking experience means less opportunity to form negative expectancies, meaning students arrive at college with a drinking expectancy colored predominantly by positives (Werner et al., 1995). If initial college drinking experiences are positive and match or exceed expectations, reinforcing an already held belief, this will influence future expectations and create what Sher et al. (1996) refer to as a positive feedback loop. These students reported some variance in pre-college drinking and possessed mixed outcomes, but generally drank with limited frequency and quantity and the worst outcomes were parents finding out or throwing up.

Perhaps the most salient body of research for the current study resides in the work of Colby et al. (2009), who looked at the positive social benefits and beliefs of drinking through
qualitative methods. Students reported a belief that drinking eased inhibitions and anxiety in social situations, helped them to relax, was prevalent across the college experience, and that college was a low-risk, high-freedom, time out from the realities of life after college when heavy drinking would not be feasible. Additionally, results showed that even within college, students believed that heavy class work and other valued obligations would constrain their drinking, much like a career or family might post-graduation.

These findings would resonate strongly with the participants in the current study. The suggestion here seems to be that absent personal experiences or observations of salient negative drinking outcomes, there is a powerful set of positive drinking expectations for college students that addresses many of their most pertinent concerns for social acceptance and enjoying their youth before the constraints of life set in.

The overarching influence of drinking expectancies for these students seems to be that their interest in drinking and ultimately their decisions to drink were informed by a few personal but negligible negative experiences, some perceptions of what negative outcomes could be if drinking got out of control, and a largely positive set of expectancies for what drinking would do for them that were reinforced by positive initial experiences.

Norms. As college students are forming their own beliefs about what drinking will do for them and evaluating their positive and negative expectations in the process of deciding to drink, a parallel process is taking place focused on their perception of their peers’ attitudes and behaviors and the environmental norms around alcohol. In assessing their own desire to drink and formulating what that drinking will look like, students—most of whom are strongly
influenced by perceptions of the external environment—are asking themselves, what do my peers think about drinking, and how much and how often do they drink? Central to the research on social norms of drinking and perceptions of the college environment around alcohol is the finding that there exists a pervasive discrepancy between what college students perceive to be the norm for drinking amongst their peers and on their campus, and the actual reality of consumption patterns. Overwhelmingly, research shows that college students, regardless of their own personal drinking behaviors, overestimate permissive attitudes of peers towards alcohol, how much their peers drink, and how often their peers drink (Baer & Carney, 1993; Baer et al., 1991; Kypri & Langley, 2003; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986; Perkins et al., 2005; Perkins et al., 1999; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996; Prentice & Miller, 1993).

An element of the key findings in the current study was the sense among all participants that heavy drinking on their campus was normal and pervasive, and that they were at best average in terms of their consumption among peers. Most of the students reported being light and infrequent drinkers in high school, and arrived on campus believing that they had a lot of catching up to do to fit in and match their perceptions of normal drinking. In looking at the declining national drinking rates for high school students but static drinking rates for college students, and the relatively low incidence of pre-college drinking for participants in this study which increased dramatically in college, an important consideration for norms research is an enhanced understanding of not just the discrepancy in perception versus reality but the timing at which the misperceptions are formed and the differential impact for some students. At what point do these misperceptions form, and why
are they so powerful given the reality of the environment where most students are light or moderate drinkers? How do stories and cultural narratives around heavy drinking get transmitted and why do only some students act on those perceptions? As the students in this study acknowledged, at some point in their college experience they realized that the circle of heavy drinkers in college, of which they were a part, was relatively small.

Several concepts and theories of how and why social drinking norms influence students that are found within the field of research are reinforced by this study and help provide context for why even light and infrequent per-college drinkers, who arrive in college with strong academic motivation, develop heavy drinking habits. For most participants in this study, their first concern on arrival to campus was fitting in. Their perception was that in order to fit in and take part in the social life of campus, students had to have a comfort level for drinking. In fact, most reported that they could not imagine the social experience in college without drinking, despite acknowledging individually that there are students who do not drink or drink as much as they do. This notion of pluralistic ignorance, promoted by the research of Prentice and Miller (1993), seemed particularly important at the entrance to college for these students, in that regardless of their pre-college drinking or social experiences, they all perceived heavy drinking to be a necessity for participation in the college experience.

Perceptions formed at the entrance to college are influenced by what is seen and what is not seen. Absent contrasting observations, students who arrive on campus and have a first experience of an alcohol-fueled, week-long party that is termed “orientation” will develop a
strong perception of what is normal about drinking in college via attribution error (Baer & Carney, 1993; Kypri & Langley, 2003). These students had such an experience, almost universally. These students, after several years of personal observations, all realized that being intoxicated for all of orientation week was not necessarily normal or representative of all students or the entire campus culture, and many altered drinking habits over time to reflect a less drunken norm. However, prior to data and personal observations contributing to some norms correction, the students in this study operated socially in a small, insular social environment which normalized heavy drinking and a work hard/play hard mentality, and they attributed any variance in behavior (less drinking, studying in the library on a Saturday night) to something being wrong or flawed and outside the norm.

One way participants in this study made meaning of and explained their drinking was by reporting that they were average drinkers and did not experience many negative consequences, in comparison to others in their peer group. Viewed through a lens of ego protection, one could argue that these perceptions served as a way to make themselves feel better about their drinking (Baer et al., 1991). Why would a student question their own drinking if they perceive others to be drinking more and incurring more negative consequences? In reality, amongst a small sub-culture of the heaviest drinkers, these students may have a relatively accurate perception, even if the reporting of such is effectively a self-serving rationalization and even if their perception of “average” is skewed because their understanding of the college population is limited to their immediate peer group. If these students lacked a contrasting observation early in college to an alcohol-centered party
culture, attributed any variance from the perceived drinking norm to a failure of an individual
to fit in to the social environment, and saw themselves as just average among a heavy
drinking and socially dominant sub-culture, it is not surprising to find that these students
drank heavily but did not perceive any problems or negatives with their drinking. These
perceptions would likely have continued to reinforce their drinking patterns until either a
negative consequence was experienced significant enough to disrupt their justification, or
enough contrasting observations were viewed such that their experience could no longer be
rationally seen as normal.

An extension of viewing a student who sits in the library studying on a Saturday night
as abnormal is that the opposite is not only the desired norm but really the only reality that
gets noticed. In order to fit into the perceived narrative of college, one must avoid being that
student in the library and instead be that student out drinking at the bar or party. These
students wanted to play their role in the college narrative, and wanted to be able to tell the
stories and have the memories of college that they perceived were necessary to match the
accepted custom. Cognitive retention theory supports these students’ experience, with the
notion that people will remember what stands out, and nothing is memorable about studying
into the wee hours of a weekend night (Baer et al., 1991).

A consistent finding in this study was that from their first days on campus, students
perceived not only their peers to be permissive of drinking, but the campus administration as
well. Perkins and Wechsler (1996) found in their research that these perceptions of a
permissive campus environment increased drinking. Interestingly, these students all
observed a shift in the attitude toward drinking from the administration during their time in college, with less tolerance for the open flaunting of drinking laws. The students reported that they believed this change in permissiveness made for more dangerous types of drinking, with students having to hide from the administration and push drinking off-campus. While more permissive attitudes may increase the number of students who drink and the frequency with which they drink, a question raised by the findings of this study may be what influence the perception of permissiveness has on how students drink and the relative safety of their drinking. Are students who drink safer in environments that are more focused on harm reduction rather than enforcement of policy? Is the goal of policy enforcement reducing the number of students who drink, or making the campus safer, and are those mutually exclusive aims?

The research on drinking norms tells us that the heaviest drinkers and those with the most permissive attitudes about drinking are the most impacted by misperceptions of their peers and the environment (Baer & Carney, 1993). Even a conservative assessment of these students’ drinking would, from a national perspective, put most of them among the heaviest collegiate drinkers. The findings from this study indicate that, particularly in the early stages of their college experience, these students perceived limited, if any, contrasting observations of the social environment absent heavy drinking. Although the research on norms does not tell us much alone about the impact of drinking, this study supports the cross-section of findings on the influence of norms on the ultimate decision to drink or not. In
order to be motivated to drink, one must see value in drinking, and perceive drinking behavior to be normal and a pathway to fitting in.

**Ritual and rites of passage.** Although beliefs and perceptions of drinking form the primary precursors to the motivation for drinking in college, research into understanding the role of alcohol in the college experience from a student perspective informs motivation and is specifically connected to the approach of the current study into the lived experiences of participants. Much of the conversation in this study focused on the function of drinking within a broader college narrative. Over and over, students reported that they did not drink for drinking’s sake, but rather to achieve a deeper end goal of social enhancement and personal fulfillment. Alcohol and drinking were not a part of the college social experience, but in many ways were the sole focus of that experience (Gilder et al., 2001). They could not imagine college without it. Drinking was imbued with meaning and purpose for these students, consistent with a ritual influence model of consumption (Crawford & Novak, 2006; Treise et al., 1999).

The notions of college ritual as defined by order, community, and transformation, informs a great deal about why these students drink (Driver, 1991). Order tells us when to eat, sleep, study and drink and establishes regimented patterns. This concept is especially salient for these students, who brought a level of structure and organization as academic skills with them to college, and were able to re-purpose that structure to protect their academic goals and infuse drinking as the perceived pathway to social goals. The order of ritual becomes, drinking always happens after school work is complete, and since drinking
happens on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights, I will organize my studies such that both can be accomplished without interference from the other.

Community tells us that drinking brings people together, and establishes a bond and sense of having a shared experience. For these students, chief among their social goals were making friends out of acquaintances, forming connections in a new environment, and finding experiences to bond over and stories to tell in the midst of an otherwise socially awkward experience.

Transformation is the escape from the mundane. These students do not operate from a solely work hard philosophy. Play hard is just as important; some experience has to be infused into the daily grind of going to class and studying. Drinking transforms an otherwise staid and boring existence. Interestingly, as these students began to reach the end of their college experience, they reported that their drinking experiences were becoming equally repetitious if not mundane. This could have relevance for why students seem to “age out” of college drinking and into more adult patterns of socializing where drinking is secondary to other more salient interpersonal interests.

However, during college and certainly during the first few semesters of college, these notions of ritual speak to the desire of students to fit into the script. Fitting in happens when students follow the rules and play their part. Just as going off script has risks for an actor, so too does going off script for students in a highly ritualized social environment. To moderate drinking, or not drink at all, is perceived as too great a cost in comparison to the benefits that come with being part of the college narrative (Wolburg, 2001).
In addition to the ritualistic aspect of drinking, the students also reported a concept of drinking as the central focus and defining characteristic of their collegiate social experience. This sense of drinking as a rite of passage—to go through college without drinking would miss the point of college entirely—is informed by Van Gennep’s (2004) stage theory of separation and reintegration that individuals within social systems go through. As many of the students in this study expressed, college is a transitory status, a “time out” from societal norms and expectations. College students are segregated from the rest of the adult population, even their same-age non-college going peers, and therefore the normal constraints of adult society lose relevance and regulatory control over behavior (Crawford & Novak, 2006). Drinking becomes the accepted rite of passage missing from most aspects of the modern maturation process, and the transitory state allows for a departure from socially accepted rules of decorum and responsibility. A return to society after college may not mean the elimination of drinking, but the way people drink and the expectations for drinking behavior change. Despite all of the personal characteristics around intelligence and academic motivation of the students in the present study that research might indicate would lower their propensity to drink heavily, is it apparent that these are poor predictors in light of deeply held beliefs and perceptions of drinking. Not surprisingly, those that view alcohol as central to the college experience—as these high achieving students do—tend to be heavy drinkers (Crawford & Novak, 2006).

**Motivation.** Alcohol expectancies, perceived norms for drinking among peers and in the social environment, and the ritual and rites of passage influence on drinking all inform an
understanding and prediction of whether students will drink. Students have expectations of
the affective changes that will accompany use, and proceed to drinking by engaging in a
decision making process that combines these expectancies with perceptions of their social
environment and the cues as to whether certain behaviors will be valued or rejected. The
final, common pathway to a decision to use alcohol and the prediction of related positive and
negative outcomes is through drinking motives (Cooper et al., 1995; Cox & Klinger, 1988;
Kuntsche et al., 2005).

Cox and Klinger’s (1988) theory of motivated alcohol use determined that people
ultimately decide to drink or not to drink based on whether positive affective consequences
that they expect to derive from drinking outweigh those that they expect to derive from not
drinking. Extensive research into the Motivational Model of Drinking resulted in an
incentive-based theory detailing several variables that contribute to the motivational process
as well as four distinct types of motives which differentially impact drinking patterns and
outcomes (Carey & Correia 1997; Cooper, 1994; Cooper et al., 1995; Cox & Klinger, 1998;
Kuntsche & Cooper, 2010; LaBrie et al., 2007; Perkins, 1999; Windle & Windle 1996).
Each of the historical variables identified within Cox and Klinger’s (1988) Motivational
Model—those variables that “helped to determine the nature of an individual's past
experiences with drinking, which in turn influence that person's current motivation to drink”
(p. 172)—biochemical reactivity, personality, and socio-cultural environments, as well as
each of the four types of motives—enhancement, social, coping, and conformity—emerged
as salient and important to understanding why these students drank in college, how they
experienced their drinking and differences among experiences, and how they may have avoided the negative outcomes so commonly associated with heavy alcohol consumption.

Biochemical reactivity is the extent to which a person is predisposed to different effects of alcohol. While there were slight variances in reactivity to alcohol across the participants, each of the students reported a high degree of positive physiological effects from drinking, including a sense of enjoyment and relaxation, and relatively weak negative effects such as hangovers. Generally students were willing to accept the mild and fleeting negative effects in exchange for the positive ones. Based on their descriptions of drinking patterns and an assessment of the amount of alcohol reportedly drank with associated effects, these students also possessed a reasonably high tolerance, particularly as they settled into college and established regular patterns of heavy drinking. Individuals with a low tolerance would expect to experience the inhibitory effects of alcohol to a greater degree and more frequently, and conversely these students’ motivation to drink was bolstered by few inhibitory effects. A suggestion of the findings of this study is that in a short term setting, like college, it may be difficult to appreciate the long-term effects of heavy drinking. In the short-term, as long as students are meeting their academic and social goals, and negative consequences are perceived as mild or accepted as a justifiable tradeoff, motivation to drink will remain high.

Each of the students in this study shared some key personality characteristics that may have influenced their similar decisions to drink and outcomes from drinking. Each was socially engaging and confident and interested in social approval, but also measured,
intentional, career focused and control oriented. Although the power and influence of expectations and perceptions towards drinking was apparent, and motivation to drink was supported by a desire for social enhancement, the personality characteristics of these students suggest a complex equation at play that could be encouraging use but moderating it concurrently. While typically difficult for students who engage in heavy drinking given the rapid speed at which rational decision making deteriorates during consumption, there is a sense that these students have a strong control mechanism for not letting drinking get out of hand.

Most of the students, with two exceptions, represented majority socio-cultural groups. While difficult to draw conclusions about the modeling and reward systems for drinking from this group, Tommy, the black male and student-athlete, and David, the international graduate student, both displayed socio-cultural factors that could have informed their drinking patterns and outcomes. With respect to Tommy, he seemed motivated to drink by a desire to represent a cultural embodiment of traditional masculinity and strength, but he was equally motivated to serve as a role-model to his peers and to honor his family through his achievement. David was motivated to drink from a young age by the cultural archetype of a son drinking with his father within his society and geographic region, but he was equally motivated to embody the social decorum expected of men in his country when drinking.

Enhancement motives represent the desire to heighten mood and well-being. They are internally generated and are a positive reinforcement for drinking. Enhancement motives for drinking are associated with heavy and socially located drinking but have low, indirect
association with problem drinking and negative outcomes via consumption. The participants in this study all discussed the interest in drinking to relax and wind down from a busy day or week. Everyone talked about enjoying the way drinking made them feel, and none of the students presented with a negative attitude or state of mind around their lives. Despite some low level expressions of pressure and stress, mostly internally generated, to meet academic or social expectations, these students seemed to be enjoying college and talked about drinking as being consistent with their desire to have fun and maintain an internal state of happiness.

Social motives represent the desire to attain positive social rewards. They are externally generated and are a positive reinforcement for drinking. Social motives for drinking are associated with both frequency and quantity of drinking but not with problems. Social motives represent the most salient factors for the students in the present study. These students drank to enjoy the social experience of college, to assist in making friends, to bond over stories and wild nights and to create fun for themselves and their peers in an otherwise mundane and work-intensive environment.

Coping motives represent the desire to regulate negative affect and reduce negative emotions, most often stress and anxiety. They are internally generated and are a negative reinforcement for drinking. Coping motives are positively associated with solitary drinking and negative consequences. Although some students talked about drinking as a stress reliever, there seems to be a distinction to be made between feeling a little overwhelmed and stressed and engaging in social drinking to escape from the work that might be driving the stress and to have some fun, and popping open a bottle of booze to deal with these negative
emotions. The field of research offers some insight into coping as it relates to achievement, perfectionism and drinking. Students who struggle with high standards due to a perception that they are falling short of expectations tend to drink to cope have much higher rates of alcohol related problems. Students with high standards but who are satisfied with their accomplishments relative to expectations report less stress, low instances of drinking to cope and low prevalence of alcohol related problems (Rice & Van Arsdale, 2010). Again, these students largely presented as well-adjusted, happy, and satisfied with their experiences. They seem to have either met their pre-college expectations for achievement, or have re-calibrated their expectations to match their outcomes. In either case, they say they are satisfied and this may have had a significant influence on why their drinking did not impede their academic success from psychological wellness perspective.

Finally, conformity motives represent the desire to avoid social rejection. They are externally generated and are a negative reinforcement for drinking. Conformity motives are negatively associated with frequency, quantity and heavy drinking, but positively associated with problems and drinking in environments where pressure to drink is most salient. Given equal consumption patterns, individuals who drink for conformity reasons are more likely to experience negative outcomes than those drinking for social reasons. In many ways the students in this study drank to conform in the sense that they desired to be socially engaged, and they perceived the social environment to be defined by drinking.

However, another distinction could be made between conformity from a position of wanting to fit in and have fun and seeing drinking as the pathway to that social state, and
conformity drinking to avoid rejection. The sense among most of the participants was that their college environment was made up of mostly people who were academically focused in high school, perhaps a little (or a lot) nerdy, and all arrived at college having spent the majority of their social existence up to that point on the periphery of the social hierarchy. Perhaps then the sense of social rejection is lowered among these students because they are all coming from a place of at least modest social rejection previously, and college represents a place of finally feeling like everyone is equally driven academically and interested in enhanced social experiences. None of the students in the study expressed a motivation to drink via fear of or desire to avoid rejection, but some did talk about drinking as a way to capture what they missed in high school.

These students predominantly discussed enhancement and social drinking motives. Most drink heavily but had avoided many of the emotional, academic, and physiological negative consequences of drinking. They do not drink to cope or feel the need to avoid social rejection so much as to attain social rewards and meet social goals. An interesting element of this study in relation to the research is the influence of culture and environment on how various motives are influenced. Would similarly achievement-oriented students, who possessed high standards for academic success and a desire for enhanced social opportunities, experience drinking motivation in the same vein at a larger institution with greater variance in academic inclination and ability and social stratifications? What if these intellectually inclined students went to a college with peers who had been the most popular in high school and placed less value on academic achievement? Research related to social
cognition and gifted students from Cross et al. (1993) would indicate that these students would perhaps engage in more conformity-oriented drinking in order to avoid social rejection in an environment where their academic talents were not universally shared.

It is also worth exploring the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation on these students’ drinking habits and outcomes. It is clear from the research that positive reinforcement, whether externally or internally generated, has less association with problems. These students are achievers by nature and have a strong identity around their academic success. They want to excel academically, not just get by or to appease others. They are also achievers socially and have a strong identity around enjoying friendships. They do not drink to avoid social rejection, but rather to maximize their social experience. In these ways, they possess powerful, positively generated intrinsic motivation to achieve. They also possess many extrinsic benefits to their academic and social achievement. They see admiration from their peers and professional career opportunities as stemming from their academic and social behaviors.

The previous section has presented various discussion areas within the findings of the current study in relation to the existing body of research on drinking and academics, academic achievement and self-determination, and cognitive decision making factors for drinking. The following section will continue the discussion of this study and implications for professional practice.
Implications for Practice

Within higher education, several opportunities exist between academic affairs and student affairs to support students’ attainment of intellectual potential and their achievement of academic success, as well as their health and wellbeing. In fact, one could argue that these opportunities are so intertwined that a student is unlikely to achieve their intellectual and academic potential unless their health and wellness, broadly defined, is tended to. This section is intended to frame a discussion around the findings of this study and the available research with implications for intervention opportunities in the college student support and services areas. Discussion will focus on three primary areas and opportunities for practice: support for goal setting and attainment, harm prevention and intervention, and support for social development.

Goal-setting and attainment. One of the ways the students in this study have articulated their success is through clear goals for both academic success and social attainment. Although they may not have known their exact career paths upon entry to college, they had made decisions, influenced by both their own personal expectations and external forces, about what they wanted to get out of the college experience. These students collectively demonstrated the power of beginning with the end in mind. Rather than letting the academic and social environment dictate their behaviors, their behaviors forged a path towards their goals.

These students also recognized many of the challenges and pitfalls that could impede their success. Some of these challenges were apparent from day one; some became more
salient over time. They saw students who waited and procrastinated to get work done. They watched their peers take drug and alcohol abuse too far. They observed friends who let the pressure and stress of college overwhelm them.

The implication for professional practice in higher education is the benefit in engaging all students early on, pre-matriculation if possible, and helping them develop a sense of what success looks like, what potential challenges could arise, and what it will take for them to achieve their goals. When functional areas such as Admissions, Orientation, and Academic Advising start students on their journey with more than a degree audit and curriculum roadmap, students are likely better able to better envision what they want to get out of college, what their personal definition of success looks like, and a realistic understanding of the various factors that could push them off course if they are not careful. When students have an opportunity to visit a prospective campus, or have current student ambassadors and teaching faculty of the campus visit and/or connect with them, before they commit, there are opportunities to acquire an informed perspective on the academic rigor and daily demands of college life. When students arrive on campus and are met with a structured transition program focused on building connections and are then guided through orientation and their first few weeks of classes by a trained peer mentor, there are opportunities to make friends in healthy environments and to ask questions and clarify assumptions about college life. When students have easy access to academic counseling staff, they learn early where to turn for assistance and resources.
Once students have established goals for success and identified the challenges that could get in the way, they need to determine what is needed to overcome or avoid the challenges and reach their goals. The students in the current study brought several strategies and skills with them to college, and then refined and adapted those strategies and skills once in college, to not only promote their academic achievement and allow for desired social experiences, but to also minimize the negative impact of those social experiences. Examples exist in many functional areas such as Student Success and Retention offices and Career Services to introduce students to success strategies and skills and effective study methods and to promote and develop these strategies and skills over the course of the student experience. Writing Centers, peer tutoring, and personal interest inventories are all examples of programming aimed at developing or enhancing the talents that students bring with them to college but may or may not know how to adapt to a different learning environment.

There is also a place here for a discussion with students about enjoyment of learning and meeting one’s potential. As seen with the students in this study, there is a sense that they all had found enjoyment for learning prior to college and eventually found the same in college. In addition, although all of the participants meet any reasonable and objective definition of achievement, some if not all could have fallen short of their full intellectual and academic potential. Staff and faculty in academic advising roles who engage students in a conversation about academic interests and how enjoyment of learning can lead to academic satisfaction, or how a certain grade attainment may or may not reflect their actual potential,
would seem to reflect the types of practices needed to promote intrinsic and self-directed academic motivation. Career services staff, when given opportunities to engage students early in college, are able to connect academic areas of interest to potential career options and chances to test these options through internships. Academic advisors, when given an opportunity to meet regularly with students—as opposed to once a semester at class registration time—can help a student that is making good grades but not feeling a full sense of satisfaction with their performance process what it is about their experience that is unfulfilling and encourage self-exploration of intellectual interests or ways to deepen their intellectual engagement in the coursework through research. This type of regular engagement and individualized attention also allows for an opportunity to discuss if or how some social behaviors could be marginally curtailed in favor of more time spent on other more gratifying pursuits.

There are also implications here for students who may be struggling academically. Staff and faculty who focus their work in academic retention and recovery, if student goals have already been established early on, can help students revisit these goals and discuss the various factors that have led to falling short of expectations. Students can then develop specific strategic plans to get back in good standing, and perhaps more impactful, get back to meeting their own goals. Bounce back programs and academic recovery programs honor the goals and motivation that students have and recognize that what may be lacking are skills and strategies for success.
For faculty and others who manage the curriculum and more importantly the learning environment where teaching takes place, there are clearly best practices to enhance academic challenge and promote self-directed learning for high-achieving students. There are opportunities to create stimulating learning environments with a focus in independent study, individualized education and smaller classes, mentoring, and heightened rigor (Clark, 2008). If instructors want to maximize potential, there needs to be support for competency, relatedness and autonomy including matching challenge to ability, providing feedback, and promoting peer acceptance of achievement (Deci et al, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

According to Clark (2008), faculty can develop self-exploratory projects in their courses, particularly in the transitional freshman year. For example, some writing projects in an English class could be autobiographical. A history class could ask students to envision the future they will live in based on historical trends and how they will impact their careers and family lives. A psychology class could address the adolescent-adult transition by requiring a self-analysis by students of their own current developmental status. Such self-reflection might also be stimulated by extracurricular activities within an honors program or by reflective learning portfolio strategies. (p. 84)

Honors programs seem to provide an example of the types of stimulating environments that can foster learning and support student achievement to a high level (Braid, 2008). These programs connect small groups of students around interdisciplinary subjects and thematic issues. They promote intellectual independence and self-directed learning
through selection of thesis and choice of classes. They expect collaboration with faculty and peers and encourage research. As Braid (2008) suggests,

> if evidence now suggests that students themselves appreciate those aspects of their education that are the most creative and intellectually liberating, we must acknowledge that honors education fundamentally nurtures exactly the sort of learning that students value as linking them to themselves and to the world. (p. 35)

If we can give students more control over their learning experience, choice with regard to educational environment, and a challenging and rigorous full-week curriculum, we are likely to see outcomes related to quality learning and perhaps less need for heavy drinking as an escape from the mundane or filler for desired stimulus.

**Harm prevention and intervention.** Although the participants in this study did not report much in the way of negative outcomes from their drinking, the information they did share indicates heavy drinking, frequent hangovers and occasional vomiting and blacking out, and a few more serious health impacts. There is also no way of knowing, at this point, what the future holds for these students and their drinking. Heavy drinking over time carries numerous health and safety risks, from raising the likelihood of immediate injuries to long-term health concerns such as dependency and liver disease. There is a significant concern and focus on alcohol dependency within high achieving professional fields such as medicine and law. There is clearly an interest in reducing alcohol consumption by college students if it will lower the potential for both short and long-term negative consequences.
Two factors that seemed to play a significant role in the heavy drinking patterns of these students were their expectations for drinking and their perceptions of their peers’ attitudes and behaviors around drinking and the college drinking environment more generally. Faculty and functional areas such as Orientation, Student Health and Wellness, Counseling, Fraternity and Sorority Life, Athletics, and Housing and Residential Life, are able to clarify and correct perceptions of peer use and environmental prevalence of alcohol, as well as help students talk and think though their expectations of drinking through web-based and in-person marketing campaigns, educational programs, group discussion forums and individual brief intervention sessions (Mayhew et al., 2008; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986; Wechsler et al., 2003). Putting data in students’ hands early and often reframes notions about who drinks and who does not, how many students drink and how much they drink, the impact of alcohol on the body and developing brain, cognitive implications for academic performance, and how much alcohol could lead to increased risk for negative consequences. Although students seem to know that drinking can lead to throwing up and hangovers, it is not clear that they understand the impact of even occasional drinking on sleep patterns, overall health and wellness, and potential legal problems when they arrive on campus.

The students in this study often discussed safe and smart drinking. They set limits, thought intentionally about their drinking and the academic implications it could have, and worked to maintain a sense of control. They drank with friends for social reasons, and seemed to let their social motivations influence their drinking patterns. Several discussed finding healthier outlets for the stressors of school, including playing sports, joining clubs,
and just hanging out with friends. Helping all students think purposefully about their social goals and whether heavy drinking will help them or hinder them in the attainment of those goals is advantageous and closely aligned with effective counseling-based substance use intervention strategies such as Motivational Interviewing (Rubak et al., 2005) and harm reduction approaches (Marlatt & Witkiewitz, 2002). If students have social goals, drink heavily, and are not achieving those goals or are seeing a significant negative impact of drinking, there are opportunities to talk about cutting back and assessing the difference. Staff in places like Campus Recreation, Student Activities and Counseling can assist students in finding healthier outlets for coping with stress, anxiety, and the everyday pressure that comes from participation in sometimes competitive college environments.

There are also opportunities to engage students who are attending school in work hard/play hard cultures in pro-active resolution of the inevitable tension, conflict and even ambivalence that can arise when trying to navigate these challenging and often unhealthy experiences (Peterson, 2006; Yoo & Moon, 2006). Some students, as these study participants demonstrated, find their own way, learn some lessons, and are able to generally survive college (quite literally). However, it would have been interesting to have had the chance to intercede at various points in these students’ college experience to talk about the competing choices they face, the idea that they could not imagine college without drinking, and the many examples of social opportunities that do not involve drinking, or within which drinking is secondary. Using motivations, both for academic achievement and social
enhancement, could be powerful intervention tools to steer students towards healthier, or less-risky, and more goal oriented behaviors.

**Social development.** There is a common saying in higher education that students arrive to college with two questions: “Can I do the work?” and “Will I make friends?”. The students in this study were fairly confident that they could do the work, even though a few had a rude awakening early on. They all came to college wanting to make friends. There was an overwhelming feeling expressed that while they each considered themselves social, if perhaps not necessarily extroverted, that social engagement in college was challenging without alcohol. Conversations were more awkward, shared experiences to bond over were harder to come by, and gathering the courage to just walk up to someone and say hello was outright impossible. There was also a pervasive sense that there were few, if any, social opportunities that did not revolve around alcohol. From the moment they stepped on campus, alcohol was everywhere.

It is important to acknowledge that some, if not most of these sentiments, are not new or analogous to the modern college culture. In fact, one could argue that in American culture generally, many people struggle to connect with others in deep meaningful ways and that many of our major social experiences—weddings, birthdays, sporting events, business functions—all revolve around drinking to a great degree. It is also helpful to consider whether more modern influences, such as the prevalence of organized and structured activities for youth and the proliferation of technology and social media, have exacerbated
the interpersonal challenges that college student’s face, and whether popular culture and marketing tactics have made social life even more synonymous with alcohol.

However, these theories and realities aside, there are opportunities in areas such as Orientation, Residence Life and other first-year programs, to aid students in the development of social skills and provide students more alcohol-free or less alcohol-focused social environments and experiences. If students are telling us that they struggle converting in-class acquaintances to out-of-class friendships, directing them towards living-learning and thematic residence hall environments could help bridge these relationships. If students are telling us that there is nothing to do on campus, there are many examples of Student Centers/Unions, Campus Recreation departments and Student Activities offices who have developed age-appropriate and time-relevant alternatives to drinking such as concerts, dance-parties, and late-night intramural leagues. The key seems to be involving students in the development of programming so that alternatives are actually meeting their social needs and interests. No students in this study expressed drinking for drinking’s sake. There were clear motives, and tapping into those motives creates on and off-campus social experiences that are well received and self-sustaining.

Student learning outcomes and the desired competencies that colleges and universities hope their students gain by attendance and participation in college life seem integral to these discussions. If a goal of higher education is to enhance critical thinking skills, oral and written communication, and team-based problem solving, it would make sense to roll student’s social interests into in and out of class teaching opportunities around these skills.
Allowing students to practice conversation and communication, healthy debate and
discussion, and intellectual inquiry in safe spaces free from the influence of alcohol could
reframe expectations of what is necessary to successfully engage with peers and build
positive, meaningful, and deep connections.

Service learning projects are one example of this type of opportunity, where students
might end up encountering people or environments that are new, different, and potentially
uncomfortable at first. Students can spend time in and out of class prior to engaging the
actual service discussing the underlying political, economic and cultural issues that might
inform the social problem they will be working on, talking about human differences and how
to understand and appreciate another person’s life experience without ever truly walking in
their shoes. Then, after engaging in a service project, students have the chance to reflect on
the experience, process any internal conflict or unease that may have come with the
experience, and prepare for another opportunity in the future. In this way we are teaching
students to recognize why the unease of a social interaction exists—perhaps it is because of a
significant economic disparity, and then how to learn to prepare for it, and how to learn from
those experiences, rather than seeking a quick coping mechanism and avoiding addressing
the interpersonal growth opportunity. If students are drinking because social situations with
peers are uncomfortable without intoxication, they are in fact avoiding the awkwardness but
they are not improving social skills. That will only come when they acknowledge the
awkwardness, try to understand why it exists, and practice moving past it.
The previous sections focused discussion on the implications of the current study and related research on professional practice in higher education. The remaining sections of this chapter will serve as a conclusion to the dissertation, beginning with an analysis of this study’s limitations and ending with directions for future research.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to describe and understand, through qualitative research methods and a phenomenological approach, the lived experience of high academic achieving and high-risk drinking, traditionally aged college students, at a highly selective research university. The concluding sections of this dissertation will detail the limitations of this project from both a methodological and theoretical standpoint, and directions for future research, again with a focus on both approach and concept. This section will end with a clear statement of original contribution to the field.

**Limitations.** The goal of this study, like most qualitative research, was not to test a hypothesis, determine a causal relationship, or develop a generalizable theory or position. The goal was to expand what we understand about, and how we understand, the lived experiences of college students. This study gave students an opportunity to share in their own words what it is like to experience a certain phenomenon that has been given little attention in the field of research into college student drinking. The outcome of this study is a description of those experiences, and through one lens of analysis, an interpretation of those experiences, in a way that allows readers of this study to draw their own conclusions and make their own connections to the findings based on their experiences and prior
understanding. Given those goals, opportunities and outcomes, there are some realities and limitations that are important to acknowledge and consider, first within the methods and approach that was employed.

While this study achieved a reasonable level of data saturation, the sample size of eight limits the scope of student experience and leaves out some voices that could contribute meaning to this phenomenon. The study did not include any female persons of color, anyone who identified as other than heterosexual, any veterans or military affiliated persons, or anyone who identified a disability, learning or otherwise. The sample size is also significant in that it limited the ability to find a definitive exemplar of the phenomenon. It could have theoretically taken a search of a hundred or more individuals to find the highest achieving, heaviest drinking student. These eight students represented eight examples of the phenomenon, but even in their own words they did not all feel like the highest achievers or the heaviest drinkers.

This study relied upon self-reported claims of academic and drinking measures. Given privacy considerations, I did not confirm grades through official transcripts or verify claims of alcohol consumption through empirical observation. While the measures selected were purposeful sampling criteria, it was the students’ conscious lived experience of the phenomenon that was most critical to this study.

Participants in this study knew that I had a role of some limited authority on another college campus, and this combined with other interpersonal influences unbeknownst to me may have affected the types of responses I received. I used incentives in the study to
encourage a quick response to the initial outreach and to offer a small thank you to those that participated. I gave the participants a $10 gift card after the initial interviews were completed, and it is possible, although unlikely given the nature of the information, that these respondents could have fabricated answers in order to receive the compensation. Only one student declined the incentive.

This study provided only a snapshot of a phenomenon that has long-term implications. All we are able to appreciate is what has happened in the past and up to a fixed point in time. How these students experience being a high-achieving, heavy-drinking person could, and likely will evolve as they reach and pass graduation and enter adult life. Even following students through their college experience from beginning to end could provide different insights and interpretations into their lived experiences.

As has been alluded to in previous sections, this study can only be understood and appreciated within its context and specific environment. This study explores only eight students, and only one campus. Just as any inferences or lessons learned from the students are limited to their experiences, we have to filter those experiences through the campus they attended and the other students they interact with and around. Looking at high-achieving, heavy-drinking students at a large, public institution with less strenuous admissions criteria and a less monolithic social environment could and likely would result in different lived experiences.

Finally, from a process oriented perspective, a limitation to this study may be my inexperinence as a researcher, and specifically one engaged in phenomenology. I had
conducted small qualitative studies prior to this, but the particular phenomenological approach was new for me. While I learned a great deal about the methodology during the study, there is nothing like experience to improve research.

From a theoretical perspective, this study also contains several limitations. First, there is exceptionally little available research on this particular phenomenon or even high-achieving college students. Gifted and talented children have been explored extensively, and there is a small sample of research on exceptional adults, but very few studies expand our understanding of the needs and challenges of high-ability college students, particularly outside an honors program environment. Therefore, this study lacks a thorough understanding of how high achieving college students are different from the average student in terms of needs, interests, and social adjustment, limiting a deeper view into the interplay between drinking and high cognitive ability.

Second, there are some limitations to a phenomenological lens. This study is, at its core, about the students’ perceptions on their lived experience and the researchers’ attempt to interpret and analyze a narrative. There are many factors that can color individual perspective, and in this study it is important to appreciate the extent to which the participants were being honest with themselves in evaluating their drinking and attainment of goals. I found the students to be authentic and real with me, but it is difficult to gauge their willingness or ability to realistically assess their experiences. Qualitative studies that employ observational data or which consult secondary sources can triangulate findings in somewhat
less subjective ways. The purpose of a phenomenological approach is to embrace the subjective experience of those who are living the phenomenon.

**Directions for future research.** One of the most impactful contributions a study can make is to set the stage and provide insight for future research. This section will discuss potential future research from first an approach or methods standpoint and then a conceptual standpoint.

As has been shown, the individual experience of a phenomenon, particularly drinking and intellectual achievement, can be influenced by socio-cultural influences and identities. One recommendation for a replicated or similar study would be to explore the lived experience of this phenomenon from various racial, gender, sexual orientation and other identities. Two students in this study provided some insight into the differential experiences for non-majority students on college campuses, and this could have interesting implications if explored to a greater degree.

The drinking and academic achievement measures used in this study could be raised and a different sampling approach could be used to identify a stronger exemplar of the phenomenon. A preliminary survey to a larger population of high-achieving students could be used to identify a pool of the highest achieving (in terms of grade point average) and heaviest drinking students, who could then be directly targeted for follow up interviews. There appears to be great potential value in a multi-stage or longitudinal study of high-achieving and heavy drinking people. Following students from high school to college, or within the entire college experience, or beyond college into adulthood, could provide
significant insight into the changing nature of expectations, perceptions, and motivation, as well as how increasing or decreasing alcohol use over time effects achievement and health outcomes. Additional outcomes such as career development and progression and life satisfaction could be compared to earlier expectations and could provide participants with opportunities to reflect on current and former consumption habits relative to goal attainment.

An exploration of this phenomenon on different types of campuses could yield significant insight into how students navigate their social and academic goals based on different campus environmental conditions such as large and small populations, private and public cultures, diverse social stratifications, and pockets of varying intellectual abilities. The influence of context and environment seems to provide opportunities for either/or participant observation or case study approaches, with a greater focus on the environment that this phenomenon exists within.

There are many opportunities to build off this research from a conceptual or theoretical perspective. Most apparent is the need and opportunity for extensive research from a variety of approaches into high-achieving college students. Understanding more about their challenges and needs, the resources and conditions that encourage success and intellectual growth, and the impact of stress, social pressures and interpersonal development on their achievement would contribute a great deal to understanding their lived experiences.

Academic potential presents a challenging and interesting field for future research. Looking into how academic potential is defined and evaluated via high school performance, cognitive brain functioning, and other pre-college variables, and then comparing that
information to the actual performance of students engaging in heavy drinking would be one theoretical lens through which to better understand success and achievement.

Related to the concepts of potential and achievement is the environmental influence on what constitutes academic high performance. Research into grade inflation generally, and specifically how highly selective institutions evaluate academic work versus less selective institutions could provide interesting insight into whether there is an artificial sense of success that may buoy the idea that students can have exceptional grades and drink heavily. If the students in the current study had not been making A’s, I had a strong sense that they would have curtailed their drinking significantly, and absent negative academic cues, they perceived there were few drawbacks to their drinking. It would be fascinating to explore the notion that colleges are either propping up their students’ academic self-concept through grade inflation, or the academic rigor cannot be that hard, or that high-ability students are not being challenged to their potential, if students are able to drink 3-5 nights per week and still excel.

Similarly related to potential is an emerging area for research into our understanding of drinking as it relates to cognitive functioning. Several students in this study discussed their perception that any negative effects on their cognitive functioning were negligible at best. Brain imaging has provided and will continue to illuminate the degrees and types of impacts that both short and long term alcohol consumption has on cognition. Future research will hopefully be able to see if there are differential impacts for high and low cognition individuals.
Finally, as research continues to explore the relationship between academics and alcohol, there appears to be an opportunity to focus more closely on academic motivation, self-concept and determination, and intrinsic and extrinsic motives as variables that influence outcomes. This study seems to provide a jumping off point for more research into whether highly motivated and positively influenced students are differentially protected from negative consequences of drinking as compared to less motivated and/or negatively influenced students.

Closing Thoughts

This study examined the lived experience of high academic achieving and heavy drinking college students. Primary research questions included: what is the essence or central theme or themes of the lived experience for college students who excel academically and engage in high-risk drinking behaviors, and how do high academic achieving college students come to understand and make meaning of their heavy drinking behaviors? Through in-depth interviews and comprehensive data analysis, this study has contributed new insight into a little understood phenomenon and has allowed participants to contribute their voice to a field largely dominated by numbers and statistics. By engaging in a qualitative and phenomenological study into a subject area with far reaching health and academic implications, researchers and practitioners now have an expanded understanding of this unique sub-set of college students and the various goals, challenges, and needs that inform their experience.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A

Interview Guide

Prior to Interview:

- Provide participant with information about the purpose of the study, how the interview will be conducted, and the interview questions via email.
- Tell participant about how the data will be used and the steps taken for confidentiality and anonymity.
- Contact participant by email and establish interview day, time, and location.

At the first interview, begin session by:

- Thanking participant and expressing interest in his/her story.
- Explain the purpose of the study.
- Share Consent Form: Tell the participant about their rights (participants can choose not to answer questions that they are uncomfortable and remain in study; participant can withdraw at any time).
- Ask for permission to record interview.
- Answer any questions.

Research Questions:

- What is the lived experience of college students who excel academically and engage in high-risk drinking behaviors? (central question)
- What is the essence, or central theme, of the lived experience of college students who excel academically and engage in high-risk drinking behaviors?
• How do high academic achieving college students come to understand and make meaning of their high-risk drinking behaviors?

Interview Question Guide:

I will use the following questions to help get us started. In the interest of creating conversational space, questions may evolve during the interview:

1. Take me back as far as you can remember and describe your educational experiences growing up through grade school/high school and into college. Are there some specific events that shaped who you are and how you think of yourself as a student?

2. Take me back as far as you can remember and describe your drinking experiences (experiences with alcohol) growing up through grade school/high school and into college. Are there some specific events that shaped who you are as a drinker?

3. How would you describe what it is like to be a successful student and a drinker in college? Tell me some stories that would help me understand what it has been like for you to be both a high achiever and heavy drinker.

4. Why do you drink? What expectations and motivations inform your drinking?

5. Talk to me about your drinking and how it relates to your academic success?

6. Who influences how you think about the relationship between your drinking and academics (close friends, peer groups, faculty, parents, etc.)?

7. What influences how you think about the relationship between your drinking and academics (experiences, things you’ve seen or heard, etc.)?
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form – Undergraduate Students

North Carolina State University

INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

This form is valid from January 7, 2013 through January 7, 2014

Title of Study: Being Smart and Social: The Lived Experiences of High Academic Achieving and Heavy Drinking College Students

Principal Investigator:
Aaron Bachenheimer
Doctoral Candidate, North Carolina State University
abhachen@ncsu.edu
828-773-0099

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of college students who excel academically and engage in heavy drinking behaviors. This study is being conducted by a doctoral student in partial fulfillment of a dissertation project.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in at least two interviews with a researcher. The interviews will take place at a site chosen by you and the researcher, will last approximately 45 minutes to an hour, and will involve your sharing your experiences as someone who is both academically successful and a heavy drinker. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed so that the researcher can accurately capture the stories shared. The findings of the study will be used for a dissertation research paper and will be shared with a dissertation committee at NCSU and will eventually be published to a dissertation database. Aspects of the study could be used for journal articles.
Risks
This project involves discussion of one’s academic and drinking experiences. These topics are personal and may cause some individuals to feel uneasy. If you feel uneasy discussing any of the questions asked in interviews, or if the topic is too emotionally challenging for you, you may opt to not answer the question(s) and still remain a participant in the study. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Benefits
You may benefit from this opportunity to reflect on your experiences. The reflective aspect of the study may contribute to your personal development.

Confidentiality and Anonymity
Here are some important details to keep in mind with regard to your confidentiality and anonymity as a participant in this study:

a. Transcripts will be generated from the digital recordings collected during interviews. Pseudonyms will replace any names or locations captured in the recordings. Identifying characteristics will be removed or altered as much as possible to minimize the ability of readers to draw inferences as to specific persons or places. Recordings will be destroyed one year after the end of the project.

b. The information in the study records will be kept confidential throughout the data collection, analysis, and writing stages. Data (e.g., transcripts, field notes) will be stored securely on the researcher’s password-protected computers.

c. The researcher may discuss the interview data dissertation committee meetings, but in these discussions the researcher will protect your anonymity by using a pseudonym.

Compensation
For participating in this study you will receive a $10 gift card to the restaurant or coffee shop of your choosing. If you end up withdrawing from the study after the interview, you will still receive the compensation.

What if you have questions about this study or your rights as a research participant?
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Aaron Bachenheimer, at the Department of Leadership, Policy, and Adult and Higher Education, North Carolina State University, ahbachen@ncsu.edu, 828-773-0099, or the researcher’s dissertation committee chairperson, Dr. Joy Gaston Gayles, joy_gayles@ncsu.edu.

Consent To Participate
“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Subject’s signature_______________________________________ Date _________________

Investigator’s signature____________________________________ Date _________________