When originally assigned this open-ended ethnography on Parkland students, my group, Colten, Ciara and I, decided to find a common denominator. What with our respectively busy schedules, sticking around school for an extended time was not really an option. In that case, what is something that all three of us have access to? What is something that we see all the time and will not have a difficult time acquiring information about? We decided that it was hard to not notice the student body as a whole, so we brought our focus on how the students dress. Students presumably dress before school, so we decided to ask questions surrounding that topic. We inquired how long it takes a student to get ready, how much focus is put on clothing/aesthetics, do they enjoy school, etc. I was designated as an interviewer, procuring information from our fellow students. I felt that approaching people and asking questions on this subject was quite simple for me to do. Having a background in theatre as well as anthropology allowed me to understand the importance of power relations during an interview. I was able to keep my voice steady, choose my words carefully, and come up with questions on the spot if the interviewee was prone to giving one- to two-word answers. I also found it interesting as I make very little effort nowadays to get ready for school. About the only thing that concerns me is if my clothing accounts for the weather and that it’s clean. I do not wear makeup; I do not take more than about two minutes deciding what to wear. This behavior, however, was not always the case. There was a time a few years ago when I would spend upwards of an hour getting ready to go to school. I would not leave the house without a full face of makeup—from foundation down to mascara, and
my outfit choice was always a lengthy ordeal. I eventually let my aesthetics become more important than my school work, and my grades suffered tremendously. I now overcompensate, forcing myself have little or no care at all with the way I look. My experiences made me feel prepared to take all and any type of answers from the people I would be interviewing. Having been on both ends of the preparation spectrum, I felt that conversation would not be an issue, nor would I come off as judging anyone harshly or being condescending toward the choices they make on a daily basis. I hope that the way I communicated with these students reflected that, and that they really were as comfortable talking to me as it seemed. They readily and shamelessly spoke of their morning rituals and helped our group determine their motivation and practical approach in getting ready for school.

I picked a range of people, males and females—some who roll out of bed and come to school with seemingly little preparations and others who dress well at school, some girls even getting a bit fancy with makeup or hair accessories. I went into the assignment with the feeling that those who dressed nicely cared more about their appearance as a student and likely had a higher opinion of school, that they would “dress for success” if you would. My group members agreed with this assumption, and also that image and consumerism would be a large factor as a means to display social class/status. As discussed in our anthropology class, clothing and aesthetics are inextricably linked to income. As noted in an article by Urla and Swedlund on Barbie dolls and body image: “Perhaps what makes Barbie such a perfect icon of late capitalist constructions of femininity is the way in which her persona pairs endless consumption with the achievement of femininity and the appearance of an appropriately gendered body. By buying for Barbie, girls practice how to be discriminating consumers knowledgeable about the cultural capital of different name brands, how to read packaging, and the overall importance of fashion
and taste for social status (2013: 124).” This was the model of thought we had adopted. We were very surprised to find out that, throughout the interviews held, no one particularly enjoyed going to school. They found it to be a means to an end, a way to achieve transfer credits or a certificate. Throughout their morning rituals, they discussed eating, showering, and no more than 15 minutes, and usually far less time, spent picking out clothes to wear. Pearl Katz states the following on the meaning behind ritualistic behavior: “Ritual has been defined as standardized ceremonies in which expressive symbolic, mystical, sacred, and nonrational behavior predominates over practical, technical, secular, rational, and scientific behavior, although anthropologists have acknowledged that rational, technical acts may occur as part of ritual behavior (2013: 68).” One young lady even mentioned how her morning ritual being disturbed would throw off her whole day. Note, however, the anthropological mention of practicality in routine. The interviewees did nothing but exemplify that aspect of pre-school preparations. All of them said that academics had little to nothing to do with how they dressed. They dressed for activities outside of school, usually for work. Two dressed down because work dictated that they be practical in terms of weather or being around equipment, and another dressed up only because her job after work required her to. Some students dress up for speeches, which is also a requirement, but none went out of their way to look spiffy just for the sake of looking nice. There was an absolutely pragmatic approach to their aesthetics and most mentioned that without work, they would care even less about how they looked at school. This brought up an interesting theory about how students at a community college do not struggle as fiercely with establishing identity as in high school or, perhaps, in a four-year institution. Because most only stay for two years, lasting ties are not meant to be made, so supporting oneself through work, for example, takes priority over impressing classmates with fancy clothes.
Through my understanding of the relationship of between the necessity for good grades and an occupation and the small amount of time left after satisfying those two duties, our findings made perfect sense. Students spent the majority of their time on their highest priorities, and clothes took second place unless it was absolutely necessary. It would be interesting to further research on the meaning of the balance of work and school among employed students, or the importance of school to students who are not currently employed. The difference in the motivations between the two groups could be quite enlightening. It may also be worth finding out about the importance of identity in a community college versus, say, the university in town. Perhaps a larger sample size than what we acquired would be appropriate, tackling a wider range of students with more extravagant tastes. Still, what we uncovered from our interviewees was sufficient in providing us with the conclusion that, in spite of preconceived notions of status-oriented preparation for school, we may have a more practical and responsible student body than what’s associated with sweatpants-sporting bums and consumerist weapons of mass consumption.
Works Cited
