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Addressing Barriers to College Completion for BIPOC First Generation Students: Recommendations to Improve Students' Sense of Belonging and College Persistence Outcomes

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Addressing Barriers to College Completion for BIPOC First Generation Students: Recommendations to Improve Students' Sense of Belonging and College Persistence Outcomes

Abstract

Abstract

Addressing Barriers to College Graduation for BIPOC First-Generation Students; Recommendations to Improve Students' Sense of Belonging and Persistence Outcomes

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DSW, LCSW

Background

The topic of college persistence outcomes for first-generation college students (FGCS) of color has garnered increased academic inquiry in recent years. While universities throughout the nation have professed a commitment to equity, often equating college admission to guaranteed social mobility, research indicates that access to university life does not translate to inclusion. Universities and colleges alike cite a history of engaging in concrete efforts to embrace and support BIPOC FGCS. Yet, poor college outcomes for this distinct population, along with student accounts of exclusionary practices on campus, indicate that universities must do more to combat inequality on their campuses in order to promote a sense of belonging for all students.

Methods

This exploratory study explores the voices of FGCS, channeling their recommendations into institutional changes at the university level. The study aims to develop a strengths-based approach that encourages universities to not only nurture their BIPOC FGCS, but to seek out and include their voices throughout all levels of the institution. The goal of this study is to support FGCS of color, along with administrators, faculty, and the greater university community to reform the exclusionary culture of academia and, in turn, ensure that university life mirrors the lives of all those in attendance, regardless of their racial or socio-economic background.

Qualitative interviews in the form of focus groups were conducted with a sample of 50 KIPP NYC, AF NYC, and HVA alumni who are currently between the ages of 18 to 25 and who enrolled in college within a year of high school graduation. Participants represented the variety of schools that this population attends i.e. community colleges, public universities, Ivy League universities and other private institutions. Focus groups of 6-8 participants were held in January of 2021. Groups were recorded, transcribed and the researcher conducted a thematic analysis.

Results

Student narratives can serve as an important resource for institutions throughout the country who are committed to fostering a culture of equity and belonging for all students. Seven prominent themes surfaced: *Sense of Belonging and Community*; *Effects of Imposter Syndrome and Code Switching*; *White Saviorism*; *Tokenism and Emotional Labor of Educating Others*; *Financial and Familial Stressors*; *Experiences with Racism and Microaggressions*; and *Access to Mental Health*. Student narratives illuminated the legacy of institutionalized oppression that continues to operate at the highest levels of education. Students recommend a number of changes to university life, including a strengths-based

approach to FGCS grounded in resiliency variables rather than risk factors; increased hiring of faculty of color and mental health practitioners of color at counseling centers; a designated center embedded on campus for FGCS of color w/ peer to peer supports; mandatory trainings for faculty and students on equity and inclusion; and increased accountability for both faculty and staff who engage in racist practices.

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**Addressing Barriers to College Completion for BIPOC First Generation Students:
Recommendations to Improve Students' Sense of Belonging
and
College Persistence Outcomes**

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When James Baldwin reflected on America, his home, he noted 'I love America more than any other country in this world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.' We must all exercise this essential right. For everyone who attends college, yesterday, today and tomorrow, remember that your college is your home...wherever you go, you have the right to be there, and you have the right to criticize it. You are its citizenry.

You may not feel this way at first. Feeling attached to such a rarified place is not easy for some students. Advocating for yourself may not be easy. Yet college is a time to develop and grow, and sometimes growth is uncomfortable. For those of who you entered college thinking you would never have a seat at the table, let alone the right to share your thoughts, opinions and feelings, use your time in college to discover and hone your voice. For those of you who entered college having already done so, know when to step up to be counted and when to step back so that others can do the same.

In the spirit of Baldwin, dare to demand as much of your college as your college demands of you. With your help, we can push our colleges and universities, as flawed as they are wonderful, to reach beyond access and toward inclusion. – Dr. Anthony Jack

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Statement of the Problem

As a current clinical consultant and former school social worker for KIPP NYC, a network of charter schools serving underserved students of color throughout New York City, I have seen firsthand the barriers that stand in the way of college completion for first-generation BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) students on college campuses. While universities throughout the nation have professed a commitment to equity in recent years, often equating college admission to “a mobility springboard” for FGCS (first-generation college students), research indicates that access to university life does not translate to inclusion. Universities and colleges alike cite a history of engaging in concrete efforts to embrace and support FGCS of color throughout the nation. Yet, poor college outcomes for this distinct population, along with first-person student accounts of racist and exclusionary practices on campus, indicate that universities must do more to combat inequality on their campuses. In order to do so, we must first acknowledge, name and address the entrenched inequities that pervade not only our primary and secondary education systems, but also our institutions of higher education.

Literature in higher education unequivocally illustrates that FGCS of color are at a profound disadvantage where college persistence is concerned (Ishitani, 2006). As scholarly discourse around the “first-generation student,” has grown in recent years, it has become increasingly apparent that this obscure term disregards the intersectionality of first-generation students (Nguyen, 2018). For the purpose of this study, “first-generation students of color” are defined as BIPOC students who are the first in their family to attend college in the United States. These students face unique challenges on campus that pervade their academic, interpersonal and psychological health (Chen, 2005), ultimately contributing to poorer graduation rates than their peers who are non-FGCS, along with their white FGCS peers. These trends begin quite early in

students' academic careers, as all FGCS are less likely to complete their four-year academic programs within the prescribed four-year period.

FGCS of color are tasked with a daunting transition as they enroll in college. They are charged with negotiating their marginalized and intersectional identities of class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and mental health status with their first-generation status (Harvey & Housel, 2011) placing their academic success, university integration, and college persistence at risk (Kuh, 2008). It is therefore essential that we elevate BIPOC student voices by providing students with a platform to shed light on their college experiences, channeling their voices to create policy changes that will support the increasingly diverse student bodies that academic institutions are actively recruiting.

An awareness of the systemic inequities that pervade our society and the ways in which these inequities translate to the first-generation student experience is an essential first step to improve outcomes of FGCS of color. It is essential to pause and reflect on the ways in which our society has measured inclusion and equity on college campuses. It has become clear in recent years that the trend of commending a university for their admissions statistics is problematic. If we are truly to assess for inclusion of all students, we must first examine the school's graduation rates, and not admissions rates, for historically marginalized students. We must also seek out BIPOC students' first-person testimonies detailing their experiences with campus life.

With the racial reckoning that we have experienced in recent months, universities across the country must engage in deep self-reflection. Administrations must review their policies in order to identify which procedures aid or hamper the ultimate success and sense of belonging of each student who arrives on campus. My work will aim to shed light on the authentic experiences of BIPOC FGCS. In doing so, my goal is to encourage universities to recognize how

they can improve their practices and deliver on the promises they have made to their ever evolving student body. We must remember that by focusing solely on the individual experience without attending to the forces of systemic oppression that persist at all levels of our institutions, we will miss the mark on fostering authentic, revolutionary change.

The topic of FGCS outcomes has garnered more academic inquiry in recent years (Davis, 2010). Increasingly, both qualitative and quantitative studies have been conducted to better understand the unique experiences of this population and their college persistence rates at universities throughout the country. That said, there is yet to be a study grounded in the voices of FGCS of color that operates from a strengths-based clinical perspective and acknowledges the transformations needed at the university level and beyond in order to systematically address the barriers to improved graduation rates for this unique population. Through my dissertation research, my hope was to cultivate the voices of first-generation students of color on college campuses, channeling their voices and recommendations into institutional changes on the university level. My research highlights the importance of developing trauma-informed, evidenced-based programming to better support BIPOC FGCS' on college campuses by addressing the unmet cognitive, affective, and social needs of these students upon arrival on campus.

This study aims to develop a strengths-based approach that encourages universities to not only nurture their BIPOC FGCS and cultivate their sense of belonging on campus, but to seek out and raise their voices throughout all levels of the institution. The goal of this study is to support FGCS, along with administrators, faculty, and the greater university community on the ground level. In doing so, the hope is that we will move one step closer to reforming the exclusionary culture of academia and, in turn, ensure that university life mirrors the lives of all

those in attendance, regardless of their racial or socioeconomic background. Ultimately, such reforms will enable administrations to deliver upon the promises they make to first-generation college students of color upon offering admission to their university's revered walls.

Review of Literature

In recent years, BIPOC FGCS have overcome enormous odds to gain acceptance to university life at an increasingly rapid rate. According to the US Department of Education, FGCS represent the fastest-growing population of students entering college, constituting approximately 50% of enrolled students in both 2 and 4 year institutions (The Pell Institute, 2015). Throughout several decades, Black, Latinx, Native American, and low-income students have completed high school and enrolled in college at consistently lower rates than their White and higher income peers (US Department of Education, 2008). In spite of a dramatic increase in the U.S. population of non-white citizens from 22% to 43% between 1972 and 2006 (Pitre & Pitre, 2009), the underrepresentation of such students, both in college and those who persist through graduation, continues to plague our education system. While there has been an increase in overall enrollment, representation of students from low-income families remains largely stagnant and is relatively unchanged from 20 years prior (Pell Institute, 2018).

In 2008, White students comprised 63% of students enrolling in college, an amount 4.5, 5.25, and 9 times greater than their Black, Latinx and Asian counterparts respectively (Somerfield & Bowen, 2013). While 40% of Latinx and Black college students graduate with a four-year degree, more than 55% of White and Asian students graduate nationally (Somerfield & Bowen, 2013). Of those entering college who identify as first-generation, the majority of students identify with a historically underrepresented and marginalized population within the higher education system, i.e., individuals from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds, women,

and individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds (Chen & Carrol, 2005; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007; Chen & Soldner, 2013). And, while lower-income students may be entering elite colleges in larger numbers than they were half a century ago, many elite college campuses still represent citadels of wealth, grounded in the customs and traditions of the privileged (Jack, 2019). Research shows that compared to European-American non FGCS, students with intersecting Latinx and FGCS identities report a lower sense of belonging in college and are more likely to experience race-related discrimination than their peers (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012).

Compounded with experiences of exclusion and discrimination, FGCS often arrive on campus with responsibilities that their wealthier peers know nothing of. FGCS most often come from families who identify as working class and those who struggle to maintain financial stability due to structural inequity (Stephen et. al, 2012). Statistics indicate that FGCS often allot more than 20 hours per week working to cover the cost of their education and to contribute to the finances of their families back home (Saenz et. al, 2007). Financial needs are just one of the many components of a FGCS' identity that impact their ability to fully participate in university life. In 2017, estimated bachelor's degree attainment rates by age 24 were 4.8 times higher (62%) for students in the highest income quartile than for those in the lowest income quartile (13%) (Pell Institute, 2018). And, in a country where a college degree is increasingly required by both professional and blue-collar jobs, borrowing rates for FGCS have sky-rocketed. Black bachelor's degree recipients have had the highest borrowing rate at 85% and the highest average amount borrowed, a striking \$34,000 on average. Such shifts were ushered in at a time when 37% of Black families and 33% of Latinx families reported negative wealth, i.e. owing more than they owned, compared with only 16% of their white counterparts.

In 2018, students who identified as both low-income and first-generation had a 21% chance of earning a bachelor's degree in six years, while their non-low-income or first-generation peers had a 57% chance of college completion. While this difference is staggering, one of the starkest contrasts between low-income and higher-income students is the disparity in access to elite universities. Research cites a number of confounding statistics that highlight how truly unequal and stratified post-secondary education remains. While we know that half of all U.S. undergraduates are the first in their family to enroll in college, FGCS are disproportionately consigned to less selective colleges, community colleges and for-profit colleges where resources are scant and college retention rates are poor (Jack, 2019). In fact, among 9th graders in 2009 who graduated from high school in 2013, those in the highest socio-economic quintile were 8 times as likely to attend a highly selective college as students from the lower quintile. This disparity is distressingly evident when examining the percent of college students with Pell or federal grants, with 42% of all college students carrying some amount of grants while only 16% of students at the most selective schools carry such grants (Pell Institute, 2014). This profound disparity has long-term consequences, as we are reminded of a 2001 study which found that graduates of elite universities had incomes 39% higher than those of their peers.

While there are more and more low-income students enrolling at elite universities than ever before, we must remember that Princeton, despite adopting a no loan financial aid policy, continues to be one of the 38 universities that enroll more students from the top 1% of the country than from the bottom 60% (Jack, 2019). Anthony Carnevale and Jeff Stohl of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce clearly documented this phenomenon in their research of 193 institutions between 1982 and 2006, demonstrating the disparities in both access and inclusion in higher education. Their findings indicate that solely

14% of undergraduates at the most competitive universities during this period came from the bottom half of the country's income distribution, and only 16% of students at the second most competitive tier, speaking to the dearth of lower-income students at more selective colleges. Juxtapose these numbers with the fact that in these same two tiers, 63% and 70% of students respectively came from the top quartile of income distribution, translating to the astounding fact that students from higher-income families comprised 2/3 of admissions at the best schools.

In 2000, William Bowen and Derek Bok's pioneering study of U.S. higher education entitled, *The Shape of the River*, determined that the majority of Black students at the 28 elite colleges and universities nationwide came from higher-income families. Seventeen years later, in 2017, after many reforms in primary, secondary, and higher education, Raj Chetty and his colleagues found that students from families in the top 1% nationwide (families with incomes of more than \$630,000 per year) are in fact 77 times more likely to attend an Ivy League college than are students from families that make less than \$30,000 per year. At Harvard University, one in eight students came from the top 1%. Chetty's report disturbingly illustrated that 40% of families in the top 1% attend elite universities, the same percentage of students from low-income families who enroll in any post-secondary schooling at all, either two or four-year.

Anthony Jack has facilitated an evolution of this dialogue in recent years, shining light on the fact that over 50% of lower-income black undergraduate students who attend elite colleges attended board, day or prep high schools (Jack, 2019). Jack's qualitative interviews with BIPOC FGCS at an unknown elite university, referred to cleverly by Jack as Renowned University, give a voice to the experience of FGCS of color, who were, as he asserts, falsely promised integration and belonging upon acceptance to an elite university. Jack speaks to the themes that they shared with him, stating:

Elite universities are now a bundle of confusing contradictions: they bend over backwards to admit disadvantaged students into their hallowed halls, but then, once the students are there, they maintain policies that not only remind those students of their disadvantage, but even serve to highlight it. . . . Students come to see college not as a land of unbridled opportunity, but rather as one littered with new lessons of social and economic constraint and new reminders of the vast gulf between the world they came from and this new world they don't fully belong to. On top of these social and cultural differences, they must also contend with the bleak reality of living with empty pockets in deep-pocketed institutions, as well as with the endless problems of poverty back home (Jack, p. 21).

While much of the focus in the field of education throughout the last quarter-century has been on reforms to our primary and secondary education systems, we must realize that those efforts are futile if we are unable to ensure college persistence for students once they complete high school. At KIPP NYC, there is a commitment to “proving the possible,” as students beat the national rates for high school graduation, college matriculation and college graduation. Yet, while 97% of students graduate from high school, an astounding achievement in the context of the many societal forces these students and families face, solely 46% of those graduates will go on to earn a bachelor's degrees within six years. Although this number must be lauded in stark contrast to the 11% of students to acquire a bachelor's degree from the bottom quartile of family incomes nation-wide, it is not enough to attain true equity. While 91% of KIPP NYC students matriculate to college, compared to 46% of low-income students nationwide, only 46% of these students will go on to graduate from college.

As articulated above, despite tremendous resiliency, FGCS of color face a number of risk variables, both stemming from a legacy of systemic inequality that pervades our nation, and a lack of adequate supports and protective factors once students arrive on campus. As a member of the KIPP NYC community and as an individual committed to promoting educational equity, I ardently agree with Anthony Jack's assertion:

“To understand students in the present, colleges first must understand their past. Scholars and university officials alike must be conscious of where students come from—and what they have been through to get to college—if they hope to make sense of why each student experiences the next four years as they do, and how they navigate—or fail to navigate—life inside the college gates” (Jack, p. 19).

Although many institutions of higher learning have adopted more expansive admissions and financial-aid policies, qualitative research grounded in students’ first-person narratives illustrate that providing robust financial aid and no-loan policies, while an important step in eradicating economic impediments to enrollment, is insufficient to foster inclusive college campuses. While commitment to no-loan financial aid policies in recent years has triggered a significant demographic shift at institutions of higher education, creating an environment where privileged and underserved individuals are coming together at a much higher rate than elsewhere in the country, this environmental proximity does not always lead to true integration.

It is therefore essential for scholars to recognize how the realities of urban poverty and the structural inequities that are ingrained in students’ schools and neighborhoods profoundly impact the many forces that they must contend with, not only on their journey to college, but during their time as college students. Rather than focusing solely on differences in familial resources once students arrive at the college gates, we must explore how, as Jack states, students’ experiences in high schools, or, as he puts it, “gateway institutions,” perpetuate inequality on college campuses (Jack, 2019). We must hear the testimonies of FGCS on the ground, as they speak to the complex collision they encounter between the distinctive worlds of privilege and poverty when stepping through the college gates (Jack, 2019). In doing so, we will deepen our theoretical understanding of the socializing forces that profoundly impact students’ academic and social identities.

Jack speaks to the importance of recognizing the legacy of power and privilege in public discourse around equity in higher education, stating:

Moving beyond a focus on the family enables us to detect the historical legacies of race, particularly the segregation and concentrated poverty that are endemic in the neighborhoods and schools of disadvantaged Black and Latino students, and the ways that these enduring manifestations of racism amplify social class differences (Jack, 2019, p. 12).

As Jack’s work illustrates, despite changes to university policy in recent years, many FGCS continue to report feeling like “second-class citizens in a first-class world,” reminding us all that, “citizenship in any community...means more than just being physically present in a certain place. It is about a feeling of belonging in that place, a feeling that shapes you sense of who you are” (Jack, 2019, p.12). First person testimonies of BIPOC FGCS speak to the painful reality that access does not equal inclusion. Rather than seeing college admissions as a “golden ticket” for students from underserved communities, we must challenge ourselves to recognize the myriad of ways that poverty and inequality in this country operate on the college campus.

Research illustrates the power of a student’s formative high school years when examining the vastly different experiences of low-income students who attended neighborhood public schools from those who attended elite private schools. It is clear that students from more elite academic institutions enter campus life with the knowledge they need to navigate university life, i.e., as Jack states, they have “learned the manual of dos and dont’s, when’s and how’s.” Students that do not have access to what is so often referred to in academia as this, “cultural capital,” either through an intergenerational passing of institutional knowledge, or through exposure to the ins and outs of elite private schools, are left facing barriers to full engagement in campus life, ultimately impairing their feelings of belonging and inclusion. In fact, research shows that the level to which a student engages with faculty members aligns with their class

backgrounds, as wealthier students feel more comfortable navigating a wealthy university environment, while low-income students report feeling out of place. Jack speaks to this disparity:

“Answer these questions: Who is at home in this environment, who is shocked by it, who hits the ground running, who stumbles? Those students who are not familiar with the unwritten rules are unaware of what they are being asked to do –unaware that crucial part of college is more than mastering the material that they encounter in the classroom... Students are also responsible for deciphering a hidden curriculum that tests not just their intellectual chops but their ability to navigate the social world of an elite academic institution (Jack, 2019).

Universities must reform their policies if they are truly committed to serving their historically underserved students. Jack so eloquently speaks to the tension university administrations experience between “proclamation and practice,” as university messaging continues to espouse a desire for equity and inclusion, while their day to day policies continue to fail underserved students. In fact, many university policies, as detailed in the writing below, exacerbate pre-existing inequalities and prevent the provision of a truly inclusive educational experience for low-income, BIPOC students. Universities will not be able to live up to their many proclamations of an ardent commitment to equity if they continue to refrain from examining and reckoning with the divisions that their policies sow between lower income students and the institution as a whole.

This is not a new concept. Bourdieu (1973) asserts, “it is the responsibility of educational institutions to create avenues that provide all students with opportunities to build the cultural capital that is necessary for academic success” (Heinz, 2005). While research that concretely targets the relationship between college persistence rates of BIPOC FGCS and campus culture remains quite limited, it is important to push the national dialogue to one that focuses on the relationship between students’ cultural integration into the university setting with college persistence outcomes. While places of higher education in recent years have been asking

themselves important questions, such as “how do we stop the revolving front door and retain students?” (Jack, 2019), the programs and initiatives focused on FGCS of color are often scant, and typically are offered as distinct programs that are detached from the larger university setting. Rather than solely facilitating initiatives that target FGCS discretely, we must encourage faculty and administrators at institutions of higher learning to adopt programs and policies that have a campus-wide impact, ultimately improving BIPOC FGCS’ student retention rates by fostering a sense of belonging for these students on campus from day one.

Background and Need for the Study

A review of the literature indicates that mental health issues are common on college campuses and are a leading impediment to academic success. Yet, studies show that college students are not seeking mental health supports due to concerns around stigma and access. A research study conducted in 2016 by the National Alliance of Mental Illness, indicated that more than 45% of young adults who stopped attending college because of mental health related reasons did not request accommodations, and 50% of them did not access mental health services and supports (NAMI, 2016). In fact, research conducted by the Jed Foundation illustrates that students of color are far less likely to ask for help when they’re stressed or facing other mental health concerns.

Numerous FGCS report experiencing severe disadvantages in a number of areas, such as economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital in comparison to their continuing-generation counterparts (Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012). Chronic poverty and exposure to stress leads to a higher likelihood of losing a loved one to violence while in college. As universities commit to serving this growing student population, it is essential that they work to de-stigmatize mental health services and provide equal access on campus. Watkins et al. (2012) state that

marginalized students, despite being in need of the most support once they arrive on campus, are the least likely to get their needs met through the psychological services offered on campus, services that are often developed with white, higher-income peers in mind (Watkins et. al, 2012). As BIPOC students navigate university life, they report exposure to racial trauma, role strain, identity threat, psychological adjustment distress, concerns around acculturation, depression, anxiety, imposter syndrome, and a lack of belonging. These stressors have a direct impact on students' academic performance, thereby reinforcing a negative self-concept that may encourage a student to leave school as they experience feelings of shame and/or discomfort (Stephens et. al, 2012). College counseling centers must be properly equipped to serve FGCS of color by sufficiently staffing their counseling centers and attaining counselors who not only operate from a culturally competent lens but are also BIPOC themselves.

When reflecting upon how best to support BIPOC FGCS, it is essential to first recognize the number of factors that impact the wellness of FGCS of color on campus. Additional research indicates that a number of factors impact the health, both mental and physical, of FGCS, including food-insecurity. FGCS' lack of financial resources leave students particularly vulnerable to policies that don't take class differences into account, such as the closing of cafeterias during breaks, which deeply impact lower-income students. Studies of universities throughout the nation indicate alarming rates of food insecurity, ranging from 20% to 36% of students nation-wide. In an overview of the practice of closing dining halls during holiday breaks, Jack discovered that solely one fourth of universities that boasted no-loan financial aid policies kept their cafeterias open for students during spring break (Jack, 2019). A 2015 report commissioned by California State University chancellor Timothy White determined that 20% of the 475,000 students in the state system were food insecure. Two-thirds of first-generation

students at George Washington University struggled to find food at least once per month, while 20% reported experiencing this deficit three or more times each week, further highlighting their class difference in relation to their peers.

Some scholars assert that it is moments like these which illustrate how the field of academia in fact perpetuates social class order by marginalizing lower income students (Engen, 2004). Wong and Hooks speak to this in their work, citing their own need to “erase” their class origins and other pieces of their identity i.e. race, gender, ethnicity in order to find a sense of belonging in academia. One’s class status, coupled with their race or ethnic minority background, puts students dually at risk for experiencing isolation on campus and ultimately their risk of drop-out increases.

Yet another factor that perpetuates these feelings of isolation and difference are found when noting that FGCS are more likely not only to work during their college years, but to work off campus. And, for those who do work, they work more hours than their non-first-generation peers. As FGCS are more reliant on financial aid and the accumulation of debt, one of the primary reasons for school-drop-out is the receipt of inadequate financial aid packages. Highly sensitive to financial aid, FGCS often reduce their course loads or in fact unenroll altogether when they or their family experience financial hardship. This stands in sharp contrast to their non-FG counterparts who have a tendency to rely on a more financially secure family network (Ishitani, 2006). While FGCS experience college as a financial risk as they accumulate debt, they often report a greater fear of failure than their peers who do not have to take on this risk (Bui, 2002). FGCS of color also report a responsibility to financially support their family, as not doing so would represent a lack of loyalty. This cultural force in many families of color has been bred out of necessity. Tseng (2004) contributes to research on this topic, finding that families who

highlight interdependence expect students to maintain their familial obligations while in school, leading some students to feel conflicted about their priorities and ultimately overwhelmed to a point that they choose to unenroll.

Lubrano (2004) has defined this experience of students living between two worlds as *straddling*. A straddler is defined as an individual living amidst two distinct worlds, “one occupied by his or her family, hometown and cultural past, the other occupied by his or her new aspirations, career and cultural status” (Lubrano, 2004, p.81). As students try to navigate their intersectional identities across different environments, research shows that they in fact experience marginality both at home and in their university setting (Orbe, 2004). Covarribias speaks to this, stating, “as a FGCS, I was prone to feeling guilty, and in particular I struggled with the sense that I had left my family behind. Quickly, I felt that I did not have a place to belong” (Covarribias & Fryberg, 2015, p. 62).

While students’ families are most often immensely proud of their child’s accomplishments, first-generation college students’ wish for social mobility in some families can be seen as a rejection of their family history and identity (Banks-Santilli, 2015). Although limited, Housel has conducted research on the way in which a student’s dual identity can facilitate familial tension as the student is faced with managing their own “identity dissonance” (Housel, 2012). Some students report their families’ belief that college is not ‘real work’ (Leyva, 2011). This becomes even more of a pain point for students and a source of vulnerability, as research continuously links familial support with ensuring both a successful college transition and college retention rates.

In a study from 2018, college students discussed the psychosocial effects of struggling with food insecurity, speaking to a number of themes:

The stress of food insecurity interfering with daily life; a fear of disappointing family; resentment of students in more stable food and financial situations; an inability to develop meaningful social relationships; sadness from reflecting on food insecurity; feeling hopeless or undeserving of help; and frustration directed at the academic institution for not providing enough support. Students also discussed how food insecurity affected their academic performance through physical manifestations of hunger (Meza et al., 2018, p.81).

It is clear that in order to attain true equity at campuses throughout the nation, university policies and programming must shift dramatically to facilitate a sense of belonging for FGCS of color and stymie the many factors that put students in a vulnerable position when it comes to their mental, physical, social and academic well-being.

Theoretical Underpinnings

A review of the literature on college persistence amongst FGCS of color indicates that there is no existing theory or model that holistically addresses the experience of BIPOC FGCS. Rather, existing theories tend to isolate students based upon one element of their identity and fail to incorporate the pre-existing elements of distinct theories into an optimal model for the development of student identity and success. This lack of a comprehensive theory or model for BIPOC FGCS' college persistence has left institutions of higher learning without an evidence-based approach to guide the development of policies and programs geared towards improving the graduation outcomes for the first-generation Black and Latinx students that they welcome into their esteemed halls.

While the significant research on FGCS does include theoretical concepts, which speak to distinct needs of students, these theories fall short, failing to address the intersectional elements of BIPOC FGCS' identities. My research aims to fill this cavity by building upon a variety of theories which together help us make sense of the lived experiences of FGCS' of color and the barriers they face on their journey to college graduation. The theories which I have grounded my research in are as follows: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954); Erikson's stages of

Psychosocial Development (1963, 1968); Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979); Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977); Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1993); Schlossberg's Theory of Marginality and Mattering (1989); Kuh's Theory of Student Engagement (2008); Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989); Strengths-Based Perspective (Saleeby, 1996) and Self-Concept Theory (1996).

Beginning with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs model (1954) and evolving through Kuh's Theory of Student Engagement (2008) we are reminded that a core theoretical tenant of student development is the relationship between a student's sense of belonging at an institution of higher learning and their ultimate persistence towards graduation (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Erikson's theory of psychosocial development emphasizes the importance of identity development during this crucial stage. As students embark on their college experience, they engage in key developmental tasks that confront their internal conflict of identity versus confusion and intimacy versus isolation. Schlossberg's Theory of Marginality and Mattering (1989) speaks to how this developmental stage can be further complicated for BIPOC college students by emphasizing the importance of encouraging students to develop a strong sense of cultural pride and identity while being in an environment that at times can feel marginalizing.

Crenshaw's theoretical framework of intersectionality (1989) speaks to the ways in which the unique identities of FGCS of color may lead them to feel marginalized at primarily white institutions. Intersectionality helps us understand how elements of an individual's social and political identities, namely their race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and additional identity markers may lead them to experience discrimination in a unique way, being disadvantaged by several modes of oppression. Guittierez and Muhs coined a term to speak to how their intersectionality as female, academics of color led them to be, what they labeled,

“presumed incompetent,” by their academic peers, their students, and at times, themselves (Guitierrez and Muhs, 2012).

Schlossberg posits that in any transition to a new environment individuals often report feeling marginalized and that they do not matter (Guitierrez and Muhs, 2012). Schlossberg’s theory builds upon Robert Park’s definition of a marginal person, defined as:

“One who is living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and transitions of two distinct peoples, never quite willing to break, even if permitted to do so, with past and traditions, and not quite accepted, because of prejudice, in the new society in which the individual seeks to find a place” (Park, 1928).

While all students may struggle with their transition to college, BIPOC FGCS’ identities are distinct from the majority of their peers on college campuses, as these campuses were historically designed to cater to the needs of primarily white, wealthy students. When identifying as a part of a marginalized group at an institution where faculty and students are primarily white, this transition can be all the more difficult. As a result, low-income students of color are particularly vulnerable to feeling out of place and ultimately, feeling like they do not matter. Rosenberg articulates the relationship between one’s sense of self-worth and ultimate performance, stating, “mattering is a motive: a feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego extension {which} exercises a powerful influence on our actions” (Rosenberg, 1981). Acknowledging Rosenberg’s words, Schlossberg reminds us that individuals are connected through both the need to matter and the need to belong (Schlossberg, 1989). Thus, Schlossberg asserts that increased student engagement and motivation on campus will stem from the creation of environments within institutions of higher learning that highlight the worth of each and every student. Saenx (2007) speaks to how a sense of mattering impacts BIPOC FGCS’ identity development in a new place, stating, “FGCS

benefit from combining individuality and diversity with inclusion and collectivist ideals” (Saenx et. Al, 2007).

Rogers’ Self-Concept Theory of Personality (1959) and Maddi’s Self-Concept Theory (1996) remind us of the way in which one’s belief about oneself profoundly impacts one’s engagement with the world around them. Maddi (1996) posits that an environment which provides unconditional positive regard emboldens an individual’s ability to self-actualize to their full potential (Maddi, 1996). Research indicates that FGCS across a variety of institutions report feeling as if they do not belong in the world of higher education and therefore do not have what it takes to succeed. Bandura (1986, 1997) refers to this sentiment as a lower sense of self-efficacy, one which FGCS report at higher rates than their non-first-generation peers at both the beginning and end of their first year of college (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). When looking to Bandura’s Social Learning Theory we can acknowledge that while self-efficacy and its’ impact on motivation is not the sole predictor of college persistence, this concept is an essential factor impacting FGCS’ ultimate college persistence or withdrawal (Wang & Castaneda-Sound, 2008). Therefore, institutions of higher learning must nurture a sense of self-efficacy and belonging in their FGCS as they navigate lower levels of academic preparedness, cultural capital, and social integration.

Terenzini et al.’s (1996) research indicates that it is during the first year of college that a student’s sense of belonging to an institution is most essential to their ultimate success. FGCS are nearly four times more likely than their non-first-generation counterparts to leave the world of higher education at the conclusion of their first year of college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In recent years, as a result of such statistics, research on BIPOC FGCS has been grounded in retention or attrition theory, particularly Tinto’s (1993) model of student departure.

Tinto's model is built upon twenty years of research and is highly regarded in the literature as the theoretical underpinnings from which to better understand student behavior and ultimately academic attrition or retention. In fact, eight of 11 multi-institutional studies have linked academic integration and college persistence, further reinforcing Tinto's theory. Tinto's theory starts with the understanding that students enter college with pre-existing attributes and experiences, such as family background, abilities, skills, and former experiences with schooling. These attributes impact the ways in which students are able to access and interact with the social and academic elements of the academic institution, acknowledging the role that social and cultural capital play in our nation's academic arena. Tinto asserts that, "the stronger the level of social and academic integration, the greater his or her subsequent commitment to the institution and to the goal of college graduation" (Pascarella et al., 1986).

According to Tinto, an individual's decision to withdraw from college stems from a complex interaction between a student's own characteristics and the extent to which the institution facilitated their academic, environmental and social integration. Tinto further develops this concept through his model of departure, asserting that a number of themes, "adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, isolation, finances, learning, and external obligations or commitments," contribute to a student's ultimate decision to withdraw from school. A number of researchers in the field of academia turn to Tinto's model to highlight the areas that institutions of higher education must address if they are truly committed to the education of *all* the students they serve, asserting that colleges and universities must deliberately integrate students in all areas of campus culture—academically, socially and intellectually, to promote student retention (Tinto, 1993).

When conducting this research and developing appropriate interventions, it is important to operate from Saleeby's (1996) strengths-based perspective. This is particularly important as

much of the research conducted on the BIPOC and FGCS populations historically have been grounded in a deficits-based perspective. Banks (2015) speaks to this, stating, “the limitation perspective is commonly based on a deficit view in which FGCS’ obstacles determine or explain a lack of success in college” (Banks, 2015).

It is within this context that narratives surrounding merit, or, what a number of scholars refer to as the “myth of meritocracy,” can in fact be problematic. This myth of meritocracy posits that all individuals have an equal chance to succeed, and that those who are “smart” and “determined” are deserving of the rewards they reap for their innate talents and robust work-ethic. As sociologist Frank (2016) states, “both the narratives of constraints and meritocracy are largely premised on and reinforce the larger, inaccurate myth of upward mobility in mainstream American/Western culture” (Frank, 2016). Showcasing the success of high-achieving FGCS of color despite the roadblocks they faced on their journey can in fact delegitimize and negate the very real social, institutional and structural barriers that BIPOC FGCS have to contend with not only in college, but also at home, in their schools, and in their communities.

Tara Yosso built upon the literature in recent years through the development of her (2005) Community Cultural Wealth theory. Community cultural wealth is conceptualized as a critical race theory (CRT) challenge to the notion of cultural capital. CRT challenges the deficit lens that often overshadows communities of color and instead celebrates the “cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged” (Yosso, 2005). Yosso asks us, “whose culture has capital?” and shifts our focus from the more traditional forms of “cultural capital” to the varied modes of capital that are fostered through cultural wealth. She posits that students of color contribute a number of forms of capital to the classroom – aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant

capital – all forms of capital that derive from their homes and communities. Yosso states that her groundbreaking CRT approach to education, “involves a commitment to develop schools that acknowledge the multiple strengths of Communities of Color in order to serve a larger purpose of struggle toward social and racial justice.”

Yosso traces her work back to the debate over the cultivation of knowledge within the context of social inequality, citing Pierre Bourdieu’s assertion (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) that the knowledge of the higher classes have historically been considered more valuable within a hierarchical society, and that it is only through formal schooling and the access to such knowledge that one can access social mobility. In short, Yosso posits that Bourdieu’s theory has been used to “assert that some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor” (Yosso, 2005). To break this theory down even further, Bourdieu’s belief is that the White, middle class culture in America should serve as the standard, dominant culture i.e. the ‘norm,’ against which all other cultures should be measured. Cultural capital, therefore, boils down to the skills and abilities that, as Yosso states, are “*valued* by privileged groups in society” (Yosso, 2005).

Yosso speaks to the problematic nature of this narrative, challenging Bourdieuan cultural capital theory by highlighting the assumption that it breeds: “People of Color ‘lack’ the social and cultural capital required for social mobility.” As a result, Yosso adds, “schools often work from this assumption in structuring ways to help ‘disadvantaged’ students whose race and class background has left them lacking necessary knowledge, social skills, abilities and cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). In short, Yosso’s theory offers a critique against the assumption that students of color arrive in the classroom deficient of knowledge, instead, offering an alternative perspective

that explores the under-recognized strengths that students of color bring with them to the academic arena.

Through Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth theory, she offers an alternative to deficits-based thinking, one of the most prevailing forms of racism in the U.S. today. Yosso defines deficits thinking as the belief that "minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and b) parents neither value nor support their child's education." Rather than subscribing to these racialized assumptions of BIPOC communities and viewing them as inherently deficient and/or deprived, Yosso recognizes that the cultures of students of color in fact "nurture and empower them." Yosso builds upon this narrative, asserting that Community Cultural Wealth represents an "array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (Yosso, 2005). Yosso lists these forms of capital, shared below in her words:

1. *Aspirational capital* refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. This resiliency is evidenced in those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals... These stories nurture a culture of possibility.
2. *Linguistic Capital* includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style. Linguistic capital reflects the idea that Students of Color arrive at school with multiple language and communication skills... bilingual children who are often called upon to translate for their parents or other adults gain multiple social tools of 'vocabulary, audience awareness, cross-cultural awareness, "real world" literacy skills, math skills, metalinguistic awareness, teaching and tutoring skills, civic and familial responsibility, [and] social maturity.
3. *Familial capital* refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition. This form of cultural wealth engages a commitment to community well-being and expands the concept of family to include a more broad understanding of kinship... From these kinship ties we

learn the importance of maintaining a healthy connection to our community and its resources.

4. *Social Capital* can be understood as networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions...Scholars note that historically, People of Color have utilized their social capital to attain education, legal justice, employment and health care. In turn, these Communities of Color gave the information and resources they gained through these institutions back to their social networks.
5. *Navigational Capital* refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions. Historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind. For example, strategies to navigate through racially-hostile university campuses draw on the concept of academic invulnerability, or students' ability to 'sustain high levels of achievement, despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly at school, and ultimately, dropping out of school' (Aurebach, 2001)...Resilience has been recognized as a 'set of inner resources, social competencies and cultural strategies that permit individuals to not only survive, recover, or even thrive after stressful events, but to draw from the experience to enhance subsequent function' (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000).
6. *Resistant Capital* refer to those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality. This form of cultural wealth is grounded in the legacy of resistance to subordination exhibited by Communities of Color (Deloria, 1969)...When informed by a Freirean critical consciousness (1970), or recognition of the structural nature of oppression and the motivation to work toward social and racial justice, resistance takes on a transformative form. Therefore, transformative resistant capital includes cultural knowledge of the structures of racism and motivation to transform such oppressive structures."

As we see above through Yosso's in-depth articulation of the many strengths that Communities of Color possess, universities throughout the country are doing all of their students a disservice by viewing communities of color through a deficit-lens. In doing so, the culture of academia disregards the profound ways in which first-generation students of color can in fact enhance the climate on campus for all students. Rather than viewing students of color through a deficit lens, there must be an acute shift on campuses throughout the country to recognize and celebrate the cultural wealth and strengths that first-generation students bring with them to campus. This shift would work to combat the mentality of white saviorism that pervades

academia today, challenging faculty and students alike to shift their attention from how they can bestow knowledge or “cultural capital” onto their peers of color to the ways in which they can look to their peers of color as resources who boast strengths and cultural assets that they can learn from themselves.

My research is grounded in the theoretical foundation outlined above, with a particular focus on Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth theory, with my clinical intervention grounded most strongly in Judith Jordan’s (2010) Relational Cultural Theory (RCT). RCT focuses on healing originating in a community context. Although grounded in the importance of relationships, RCT broadens our understanding of therapy by contending that the act of therapy itself has the potential to serve as a form of social justice. This perspective posits that it is through the development of a collective “we” that genuine healing begins (Jordan, 2010). It is this unique distinction that makes RCT applicable to the development of group support for BIPOC FGCS at institutions of higher learning.

One of the integral factors that impact the experience of FGCS of color are the cultural beliefs that dictate college life (Jack, 2019). The goals of higher institutions, in fact, are grounded in what Jordan refers to as mainstream Western psychological theories. These theories state that the sign of optimal human development is a trajectory from dependence to independence. In these models, the ultimate goal of parenting is to bring, what Jordan refers to as, “the dependent, helpless baby into a state of autonomous and independent adulthood” (Jordan, 2010). Institutions of higher learning signify this transition into adulthood, promoting the idea that independence, self-sufficiency, and autonomy are qualities that students should strive for. As a first-generation Black, Indigenous, or Latinx student on a college campus, however, such ideals may in fact impair one’s success, as they disregard the notion that being

able to ask for help, embrace community, advocate for oneself and lean on those around you may ultimately be the factors that help an individual to beat the odds and increase their chances of college completion.

RCT, in contrast to Western psychological ideals, espouses a belief that may in fact lend itself to the lived experiences of first-generation students of color on college campuses. Research indicates that this student population often reports feelings of alienation and a lack of belonging in what often feel like exclusive and disorienting campus environments (Jack, 2019). Students who ultimately succeed within this context are often more successful when they are able to channel the resources around them and embrace the support of the institution, their families, and members of their cultural groups to promote a sense of belonging and connection. Jordan speaks to this distinction, stating that in contrast to the mainstream psychological theories that dictate campus culture:

Relational cultural theory is built on the premise that, throughout the lifespan, human beings grow through and toward connection. It holds that we need connections to flourish, even to stay alive, and isolation is a major source of suffering for people, at both a personal and cultural level (Jordan, 2010, p. 16).

Based upon this premise, RCT espouses that rather than striving for independence, the pursuit of connection is the most integral organizer of humanity and where one's motivation derives from is therefore an integral task of parenting. This key developmental task of encouraging an individual to build a relational skill-set later falls on post-secondary institutions that preside over this key developmental stage. In turn, this skill-set will ensure students' ability to attain mutuality in one's relationships. In so doing, as Jordan so eloquently posits, "RCT challenges not only the prevailing developmental theories which frame independence as the hallmark of mature development, but also some of the basic tenets of 21st century western

culture, which celebrate autonomy, self-interest, competition, and strength in isolation” (Jordan, 2010).

While there is extensive writing on RCT, a review of the literature indicates a lack of first-person accounts of first-generation students of color on college campuses. The academic literature in many ways does our students a disservice by presenting assumptions throughout texts that low-income, marginalized student experiences are uniform. We need more first-person narratives to combat this misconception. As Housel states,

First person accounts can encourage other students and help them see that they are not the first to feel alone and intimidated in the land of higher education. Second, such stories can help poor and working class first-generation college students recognize that they can surmount the challenges they face, especially if they avail themselves of services designed to smooth their path (Housel, 2005, p.102).

Additionally, literature that concretely addresses the relationship between university culture and student persistence is limited, and much of the scholarship is out of date with few qualitative studies on the first-person experiences of BIPOC FGCS. It is essential to develop an up-to-date exploration of how FGCS experience university life through a narrative, qualitative approach, in an effort to fill a significant gap in the research. While programs do exist to support BIPOC first-generation students on college campuses, there continues to be a lack of literature, grounded in research and clinical theory, that offers concrete recommendations to university administrators and faculty members on how to best support BIPOC FGCS on their campuses. And yet, research indicates that the outcomes of FGCS are directly linked to the instructional resources available to faculty (Housel, 2011).

Even more striking is that much of the existing literature on BIPOC FGCS is often devoid of an exploration of the institutional and structural forces of oppression that these students must reckon with before they arrive on campus. And, there continues to be a lack of

focus in the literature on how one's class impacts one's ability to engage in the academy, when compared to other identity categories. While issues related to race, gender, and sexuality are often addressed by both instructors and within scholarly literature, class status is often disregarded. Gardner, Dean and McKaig's 1989 auto-ethnographic research discovered a disparity between the frequency of discussion and openness around topics of race, gender and sexuality in comparison to topics of class structures and differences. Dean writes about his own experience as a working-class student on a college campus,

It was within a traditional course on introductory sociology that I first heard my class background discussed. In the class, "the working class experience" was presented as an object to be studied rather than a possible experiential reality for students in the room. I felt not only invisible but dehumanized(Gardner, Dean, McKaig, 1989, p. 76).

Similarly, much of the existing research is grounded in perspectives that emphasize the ways in which FGCS of color must adapt in order to belong in academia. This literature, as Housel (2011) states so eloquently, "implicitly puts the responsibility to adapt and change on the first-generation student." However, this "assumption" is always that it is the working class individual who must adapt and change in order to fit into and participate in the unchanged higher educational institutional culture (Housel & Harvey, 2011).

Building upon the theories outlined above, my research focuses on the importance of facilitating relationships on university campuses to deepen students' sense of self-worth, belonging, and engagement, while cultivating their sense of agency and self-advocacy as we honor their intersecting identities (Baxter Magdola, 2014).

Background and Significance

In the following section, I will provide a comprehensive overview of my research question in the larger scientific context, illustrating the ways in which my research builds upon scholarly literature while offering unique implications for first-generation college students of

color, their non-first-generation peers, and the greater institution of academia as a whole. An exploration of the personal narratives and qualitative interviews with current and former FGCS of color provides an important perspective that has informed my research regarding how universities can better support the students whom they admit. Jack speaks to this in his work, stating that the qualitative interviews he conducts in his seminal work provide, “a unique vantage point for examining how university policies exacerbate class differences among students, often in ways that connect to historical legacies of race and exclusion.” Jack continues to discuss the implications of these policies, stating:

University policies and practices can exacerbate social difficulties that cause structural exclusion; pushing poor students to the margins, thereby reminding them of their difference—often in ways that connect to racial inequalities on college campuses and in the nation as a whole. The cumulative effect is that to disadvantaged students {colleges and universities} feel like a place that—both intentionally and unintentionally—works against affirming them as full members of the college community (Jack, 2019, p. 118).

Jack’s work deeply informs my own scholarship, as he explores a number of questions that have sparked a rich dialogue in the field of academia around how best to support FGCS of color on their path to college graduation. Jack asks, “What does it mean to be a poor student on a rich campus? Who is at ease investigating the social side of academic life, both with their peers and their professors, and who feels lost?” His research speaks to what it means for students to move between two worlds as they work to attain “citizenship” in a wealthy, white institution (Jack, 2019, p.120).

Jack sees this work through the lens of first-generation students embodying two distinct identities; what he refers to as the privileged poor (low-income students who arrive on campus from preparatory or boarding schools) and the doubly disadvantaged (low-income students who arrive from traditional public schools). He posits, “researchers and college officials all too often treat all lower-income students alike, as an undifferentiated group of students at risk, thus

flattening out the vast differences in social preparation for college among students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. One consequence of this flattening is a simplistic account of what it means to be a poor student in college” (Jack, 2019). This pattern erases the distinct elements of each student’s identity, disregarding their unique experiences and viewing them through a blanket lens.

What Jack’s research doesn’t address, however, is an-depth exploration of the experiences of first-generation college students of color who came of age within the charter school system. As Jack argues, we cannot view the experiences of all disadvantaged students of color through the same lens if we are truly intending to meet their affective and cognitive needs. Rather, universities must recognize and honor the unique experience, history, and identity of each student who comes through their gates and meet these distinct needs as they have promised to in their offer of admission. My research contributes to this dialogue, filling a gap in the field and building upon the legacy of success of the charter school movement.

Research on FGCS of color often focuses on the cultural and social capital that is translated from one generation to another in one’s family of origin. However, by solely centering the discourse on familial impact, scholars have disregarded the profoundly influential force with which a student’s school history (i.e. public; private; boarding; charter; funded; underserved) impacts their outcomes in the university setting. By focusing the conversation on family background, we embrace a merit-based dialogue, as we disregard the ways in which one’s primary and secondary educational experience drastically informs a students’ relationship with learning and in turn affects the way in which students navigate the world of academia.

While students within the charter school movement tend to thrive when connecting with their teachers, scholars often have found that FGCS of color report difficulties initiating

meaningful connections with faculty, and, as a result are at an academic disadvantage (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Research shows that the race, gender and the academic discipline of university faculty and staff impact lower income students' comfort level and likelihood to initiate engagement with them (Housel, 2018).

Although the promise of a college education implies the anticipation of a prosperous future, what is often left out of this narrative is the experience of marginalization that BIPOC FGCS' are too often exposed to when immersed in academia. Higher education is plagued by what scholars refer to as class consciousness and classism. Engen (2004) argues that universities in fact reinforce social class hierarchies by marginalizing students from underserved backgrounds (Engen, 2004). Wong and Hooks speak to this in their work, articulating a fervent sense of needing to "erase" their class origins and racial identities in an effort to "belong in the academy" (Housel, 98).

Pike and Kuh's research (2004) illustrates that FGCS of color must navigate "multiple boundaries" related to both race and social class on predominantly white college campuses. McCarron & Inkelas (2006) state that students' first-generation status, coupled with additional risk factors (i.e. low-income and minority status), can be seen as what they refer to as a "negative force multiplier" of poor academic outcomes (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Plainly, McCarron & Inkelas' research indicates that FGCS with racial minority status are at a much greater risk than FGCS without racial minority status.

Black and Latinx first-generation students often represent a statistical minority in their seminars, and report feelings of frustration and isolation, along with immense pressure to prove that they too belong (Smith et al., 2007). Black male FGCS have shared their desire to be seen as an individual, rather than through the stereotype of an overly aggressive black man, citing

concerns that their professors fail to take them seriously as students (Sawyer & Palmer, 2014).

Davis speaks to this experience as a student of color in academia, stating, “I felt like an imposter every day in my classes, and I lost the internal struggle with myself on the day I decided that my pre-determined narrative already had the ending written” (Davis, 2010).

Research shows that FGCS of color often experience microaggressions, defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue et. al 2007). These painful encounters with their peers and professors only further alienate students, negatively impacting their sense of belonging on campus. In contrast, a comparison study of non-first-generation college students and first-generation college students conducted by Terenzini et. al (1994) established that instructor support makes students feel qualified to learn and fosters a sense of an “obligation to succeed” (Terenzini et. al, 1994).

As Tinto’s model highlights, the academic and social integration that accompanies students’ relationships with their peers and university faculty plays an integral role in determining their ultimate college persistence (Tinto, 1993; Hard & Payne, 2008). Two studies exploring the best practices at the most successful community colleges in Texas conducted by the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education determined that FGCS who engaged in summer and/or pre-orientation programs are more likely to develop meaningful relationships with faculty than those who do not participate. However, the efforts to promote campus wide integration cannot stop there (Housel, 2005).

Gudeman’s research (2000) indicates that true racial integration not only impacts students of color on diverse college campuses but also has a profoundly positive impact on the college

experience for *all* students in the following areas: “overall college satisfaction, grade point average, and intellectual and social self-confidence” adding that:

Students from more diverse campuses also showed more growth in the areas of leadership, interpersonal skills, and problem solving than those from homogenous institutions...Students of all races indicated that the diversity of the campus added value to their education and helped them be more aware and accepting of people of different races and cultures (Gudeman, 2000, p. 142).

There is existing literature on the relationship between a student’s sense of belonging on campus and their ultimate likelihood of graduation. Lehman’s research sheds light on this relationship, illustrating that FGCS who drop-out of college often report being caught in a struggle to reconcile their opportunity for social mobility with the tensions they experience as a member of a marginalized group (Lehman, 2004). Jack speaks to this in his work, sharing how students’ experiences of attending primarily white, wealthy institutions highlighted the immense socioeconomic disparity that plagues this nation, leaving students feeling angry, drained of emotion, alienated, and socially isolated (Jack, 2019). This emphatic reckoning of the structural inequities in society at large, according to Jack, often encourages poor students of color to distance themselves from their peers and ultimately from the larger university community as a whole, leading students to, as he so poignantly writes, “feel like strangers in a place they could not fully call home” (Jack, 2019).

Although it is clear that believing you are a valued member of a university community is an essential predictor of a student’s ultimate success, a review of the literature shows that few scholars who study higher education have provided recommendations on how to foster this basic human, and student, need. David Onestak, the Director of Counseling and Student Development at James Madison University, offers a metaphor to further illustrate this experience. Onestak

equates being a first-generation student of color on a college campus to an athlete who is continuously playing an away game:

For a minor-league baseball player on a long road trip, the unfamiliar bed, lack of home cooking, unusual daily routine, absence of local supporters and unfamiliar ballpark surroundings can be a source of stress and an impediment to success on the field. After a while, the unfamiliar may become recognizable, but it never feels like home. First-generation students, especially those in their first year of college, may feel like they are on a road trip that never stops, that every day is full of potential barriers to success that are the price of being the first in their family to attend college. If that price feels too steep, or if there is no one in a student's family who can assure him or her that the eventual payoff is much greater than the price, the idea of even being in college may be overwhelming (Housel, p. 118).

The literature argues that one of the primary reasons middle and upper-class students experience a smoother transition to college than their lower-class peers is grounded in the concept of cultural capital, discussed above. Cultural capital is a concept first articulated by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, referring to the collection of taken for granted ways of being that are valued in a specific context. In the university setting, cultural capital represents, "the knowledge, skills, education and other advantages a person has that makes the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily" (Stephens, 2012). Stephens et. al (2012) speaks to the ways in which FGCS lack exposure to what he refers to as the "cultural norms and folklore" of university life, ensuring an easier transition for those students who are prepared to crack the code of the norms that reign over life on campus (Davis, 2010). These norms have been identified as deriving from the high socioeconomic values and white-dominated standards that govern academia, such as believing one is entitled to a faculty member's time, initiating relationships with individuals in authority, and recognizing the unwritten social norms that accompany college life.

Vargas has defined this unique form of cultural capital as 'college knowledge.' 'College Knowledge' is defined as the often intangible concepts and understandings, often transferred

from family members, that share insight into the opportunities and roadblocks that can interfere with a student's journey towards graduation. Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf and Yeung (2007) and Engle and Tinto (2008) speak to the advantage that college knowledge has on college persistence, confirming that a lack of this form of cultural capital can negatively impact students' college persistence. And, while there is no single measure of cultural capital, current research acknowledges the disparity in knowledge pertaining to college life between FGCS and their non-first-generation counterparts. Scholars maintain that this disparity has a profound impact on college persistence, leading to stressful encounters with professors and "broad failures to understand faculty's expectations about the basic features of student performance" (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Jack affirms the emotional toll this has on students' experiences:

Children from lower income families in contrast are regarded as having been scarred by poverty with all of its' familiar ills, including a lack of social and academic prep for college life. These students show up on campus, the narrative goes, and unfamiliar with the new codes and customs of college, they struggle to adjust and adapt. The struggle is especially acute for those attending elite institutions... These students must be helped to understand that they are entering a foreign culture, a place that can be quite forbidding. The problem is not that they cannot do the work, rather, it is their estrangement in their new surroundings. At college, they will meet people from families with advantages they can hardly imagine (Jack, 2019, p. 44).

On the contrary, students with financial resources are able to access what Jack refers to as "citizenship" within the university setting, easing their college transition, as they see that selective universities were "made for people like them; it feels like home." Jack argues that financial means continue to act as a requirement for an individual to fully access and engage in university life, in spite of higher institutions' avowals that this is no longer the case. Consequently, BIPOC FGCS find themselves at institutions of higher learning with a dream of social mobility while continuing to "live in poverty's long shadow" (Jack, 2019, p.45). Rather than university's adapting their culture to meet the needs of a more diverse student body,

colleges throughout the country expect their students to adapt and conform to the values and cultural capital that derive from a historically white-dominated and wealthy university setting.

Scholarship on this experience often points to the class disparities that plague university life. FGCS report throughout the scholarly literature that they often experience alienation due to classism, defined as prejudice or discrimination against individuals with lower class status (Martin, 2008). Feinstein, Langhout, and Rosselli (2007) have defined six distinct forms of classism, outlined here: stereotype citation, institutionalized classism, interpersonal classism via separation, interpersonal classism via devaluation, interpersonal classism via discounting, and interpersonal classism via exclusion (Langhout et al., 2007).

Stereotype citation is classism communicated through stories grounded in stereotypes regarding working-class individuals, such as students asserting that all low-income students speak with poor grammar. According to the literature, institutionalized classism, defined as being unable to enroll in a class due to supplementary fees or being unable to serve as a member of a student group because of conflicting work responsibilities, is widespread on university campuses. Interpersonal classism via separation arises when an individual is separated from their peers because of assumed class backgrounds translating into access, such as access to exclusive fraternities or sororities that require financial means for membership. Interpersonal classism via devaluation occurs when an individual is marginalized and treated with hostility or disregard as a result of their class status, whereas interpersonal classism via discounting represents disregarding the afflictions of a lower class. This occurs on university campuses when students are unable to engage in social activities that involve paying for food, a movie ticket, or even in their academic lives when concerns around purchasing books or other resources are dismissed. Students also report experiencing interpersonal classism via exclusion, such as not being invited to an event

because of assumptions around one's class and financial means. Langhout et. Al (2007) discovered that each of the six classism types listed above frequently operate within the university setting, both institutionally and from individual students and faculty.

A number of scholars point to the need for universities to reform their practices to prevent the perpetuation of institutionalized classism. Jack speaks fervently about this urgent need for universities to reform their policies if they do truly stand by their espoused desire to welcome and support all students:

Certain college policies and programs shape daily life in highly visible ways, especially for poor students. These practices are easy to overlook, easy to write off as manifestations of the humdrum, day to day happenings of various university offices. It is the university's policies that we see in many ways most plainly and painfully not only the disparities between the haves and have nots but also the gap between the lengths a university can go to make its education accessible and the blind spots that keep it from making that education truly inclusive. Our understanding of how poverty and inequality influence college students' experiences will remain incomplete if we do not document, examine and reckon with these practices and the boundaries they create—boundaries between lower income students and their peers, as well as between poor students and the university as a whole (Jack, 2019, p. 57).

Feelings of isolation and projected failure often are reported by FGCS, particularly those of color, through the lens of imposter syndrome. Salkulku and Alexander (2011) define imposter syndrome as the belief that one is a fraud and has been mistakenly put in an environment, rather than having truly earned their spot in that setting (Peteet et. Al, 2015). Students also cite experiencing stereotype threat, a phenomenon where FGCS of color perform at the level of the stereotype of their marginalized group, rather than to their true ability. While there is limited research on the imposter phenomenon and stereotype threat in FGCS of color, the literature on this topic sheds light on how difficulty mastering one's environment coupled with a diminished sense of affirmation on campus can correlate to the development of imposter syndrome amongst FGCS (Peteet et al., 2015).

An additional complicating factor for FGCS of color is the fact that they are burdened with navigating the demands of academia with conflicting environmental factors such as financial concerns and familial responsibilities. Glenn (2004) defines these opposing forces as institutional pull and environmental pull,

Institutional pull refers to aspects of college life that engage students and draw them into educationally purposeful activities, whereas environmental pull refers to other aspects of students' lives that draw them away from campus life and threaten their engagement. Forceful environmental pull negatively affects first generation students' ability to engage in campus life. It is often incumbent on colleges and universities, therefore, to provide alternative opportunities for engaging students outside the traditional model (Glenn, 2004).

Glenn reports that FGCS engage in fewer extracurricular organizations, cultural events, internships, and career-networking events than their fellow students from middle and upper class backgrounds (Glenn, 2004).

As we reflect upon the many pain points experienced by first generation students of color on college campuses, we recognize that universities are failing our most marginalized students. By employing policies and programs that perpetuate, and, at times, exacerbate inequity, university programming directly impacts college persistence rates for marginalized students. We must seek out the first-person narratives of BIPOC first-generation college students to better understand the barriers they face as they strive to belong at institutions that have historically excluded them. In addition to their testimonies of alienation and discomfort, we must also recognize and channel these students displays of strength, community cohesion, and empowerment. It is their voices that university administrators and faculty members must hear and reckon with in order to better understand how to truly develop into the equitable institutions of learning they claim to be. My hope is that by channeling student voices in this work, higher educational institutions will at once

act on their professed intention of reinforcing equity and belonging through their programs, policies, and supportive services.

Research Design and Methods

As articulated above, the topic of college persistence outcomes for first-generation college students (FGCS) of color has garnered increased academic inquiry in recent years. While universities throughout the nation have professed a commitment to equity, often equating college admission to guaranteed social mobility, research indicates that access to university life does not translate to inclusion. This exploratory study aims to combat such exclusion by developing a strengths-based approach to supporting first-generation students of color that encourages universities to not only nurture their BIPOC FGCS, but to seek out and elevate their voices throughout all levels of the institution.

The broader goal of this study is to support FGCS of color, along with administrators, faculty, and the greater university community to reform the exclusionary culture of academia and, in turn, ensure that university life mirrors the lives of all those in attendance, regardless of their racial or socio-economic background. Through an in-depth examination of the narratives of FGCS of color we can channel students' recommendations into institutional changes at the university level.

Qualitative interviews in the form of focus groups were conducted with a sample of 50 KIPP NYC, AF NYC, and HVA alumni who are currently between the ages of 18 to 25 and who enrolled in college within a year of high school graduation. Participants represented the variety of schools that this population attends i.e. community colleges, public universities, Ivy League universities and other private institutions. To acquire a robust sample, participants had different experiences with higher education. Participants either graduated from college within the past two

years; were currently enrolled in college; on medical leave or a leave of absence; or had been dismissed from college; while others had unenrolled from college completely on their own volition. There was no selection bias within the population, as the focus groups were advertised to all KIPP NYC, Achievement First, and HVA alumni through social media outlets and e-mail communication. Groups were recorded and transcribed and the researcher conducted line by line coding followed by a thematic analysis.

The qualitative interviews provide first-person narratives which will ultimately lead to the development of a paper of recommendations and guidelines for universities to follow in an effort to not only improve college persistence and graduation rates for FGCS of color, but also to enhance these students sense of belonging and self-efficacy within an inclusive campus culture.

Administrative Arrangements

As a mental health consultant for the KIPP Through College & Career team, I had access to the Director of KIPP Through College & Career and the team of College Success Fellows throughout my research. College Success Fellows are KIPP NYC and Achievement First Alumni who have successfully graduated from college and are now employed by KIPP NYC as mentors for college aged KIPP and Achievement First alumni. The close relationships that these fellows have with their mentees helped facilitate the recruitment process.

Additionally, as a mental health consultant for KIPP Through College & Career, I was provided access to the database of quantitative data regarding college persistence outcomes for KIPP NYC alumni. This data has informed the outcomes of my research. It is important to note that KIPP NYC has expressed a desire to be self-reflective and learn both about their areas of strength and their areas of growth when it comes to preparing students for the university setting. KIPP NYC prides itself on being a transparent organization that is eager to continue to grow,

learn and share new understandings of both their strengths and shortcomings with their peers in the charter school world to better inform practice within the arena of primary and secondary education. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that there was a commitment from the KIPP NYC administration to see this study through and attain recommendations for improvements to their own practice.

Human Subjects

Study participants were protected as all data remained anonymous, both in relation to the larger population and the staff of KIPP Through College & Career (KTCC). KIPP NYC is an organization that often conducts research to reflect on its practices and inform its' practice. Study participants signed consents which included clauses indicating that all data pertaining to individual identity will remain anonymous.

Confidentiality is emphasized as paramount within the KTCC setting. KIPP NYC follows the regulations around anonymity that all NYC public schools follow, and these guidelines were followed in relation to this study as well. All data was transcribed and stored on a password protected computer. It is important to note that the student body of KTCC alumni consists solely of students of color, and the individual who conducted the research herself is white. Any bias that could occur as the researcher is white and is a current KTCC consultant must be considered when analyzing the outcomes of this study.

Budget

To aid in recruitment of participants, KIPP NYC paid for \$20 Tango gift cards for all students who participated in a focus group. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the study is funded by KIPP NYC and therefore could result in bias. Fellows supported in the

recruitment process, sending out e-mails and group text messages to their student populations with information regarding how to sign-up for the focus groups.

Report on Focus Group Findings

Ten focus groups were conducted in January of 2021 and included 50 participants, all KIPP NYC, Achievement First, or Harlem Village Academy alumni. Upon review of the content of the focus groups, seven prominent themes surfaced: 1) Sense of Belonging and Community; 2) Effects of Imposter Syndrome and Code Switching; 3) White Saviorism; 4) Tokenism and Emotional Labor of Educating Others; 5) Financial and Familial Stressors; 6) Experiences with Racism and Microaggressions; and 7) Access to Mental Health. It is important to recognize that there is an overlap amongst these themes, as each student shares experiences that intersect across a number of areas. In particular, the complicated nature of students' relationships with faculty are intertwined throughout each theme. This only further highlights the ways in which the perspectives of faculty are so critical to student's experience, as students oscillate between affirming experiences with faculty who serve as their advocates, to experiences with faculty who are dismissive and deferential.

While all participant voices informed my recommendations for changes to university programming moving forward, what you will find below are a selection of first-person narratives that reflect the broader themes that many students spoke to. These narratives are powerful and substantive, and it is my belief that these longer narratives provide the reader with a better representation of the reality of the student experience. The narratives below are intended to further the voices of first-generation students of color and inform university practice moving forward.

Sense of Belonging + Community

One of the primary themes that arose in each focus group was the importance of community, and the profound impact that a lack of community had on students' well-being and sense of belonging on campus. Students reported being greeted by a palpable sense of community and belonging when they arrived on campus for summer programs geared towards BIPOC students. One student who recently graduated from an Ivy League University spoke to the palpable sense of belonging that she gained from her summer program before school began:

I completed a summer program and it was the first time that I was learning about what the university was about to be. I was introduced to other folks who looked like me and it was really important for me to have a space and some time where I wasn't immediately seeing all white people that were on campus. It was helpful for my transition to transition to campus with people who look like me. Even if they didn't have exactly the same experience that I had, or was about to have, I think it was still really helpful just being able to know that there were other people who looked like me there. We also met the upperclassmen and they had so much experience that I obviously didn't have. Their advice was integral to my success there.

Yet, many students reported that this feeling quickly dissipated once the primarily white student body arrived on campus. Students reported feeling even more alienated after experiencing the stark contrast between the campus they knew when they arrived for the summer program, and the primarily white campus that followed. Many students reported struggling to reckon with these two experiences, and some reported that the sense of community they experienced during the summer orientation program was erased once their primarily white peers arrived on campus. One student, a child of Caribbean immigrants, shared her experience:

I visited the university a lot before I began school, once for a diversity program called "Our Beloved Community." It was beautiful. It was just a sea of black and brown people from a variety of backgrounds. But, that was not the experience when I got on campus at all. I don't remember seeing nearly half of those students from the program on campus. It was confusing to have these people who were supposed to be my potential classmates and think, where are they? Where is the community that I felt here, and how come we no longer engaged in the dialogue that we engaged with over the summer about race and equity?

How come we were able to have important conversations there, but the people that we should be sharing and bouncing ideas off were not in the room? Of course, as people of color, we share this experience. We have this understanding of one another. But the larger campus, which was not represented in this room, is who we are supposed to engage with every day. So that was a disconnect for me, those conversations just stopped once the school year began, and it was very confusing.

She added,

When I got on campus, I just remember a lot of separation. There wasn't a lot of mixing of groups. You knew where you belonged. You might say hello, hi or bye, but that's it.. You knew where you were supposed to go, you knew the people that were supposed to embrace you. You may have conversations because you're in class with people, but there was no real encouragement or fostering of those relationships, especially when you got on campus early. That is the small window of opportunity you have before people fall back in their ways and stick with the things that they're used to. There was a missed opportunity for my college to foster relationships outside of orientation. After the summer program we had already gotten to the point where we were going to stick with who we knew and who shared our experiences.

A freshman at a large university setting in upstate New York echoed a similar sentiment, stating:

A lot of the initiatives where the school was trying to create a sense of community came from the black and brown students and staff, the white community members were not involved. These events came from the Black Student Union, the African Students Association. They were not university led throughout the school year, only the summer program, and that was it. I think more of the onus needs to be on the white staff in the larger campus community to engage in these initiatives.

A fellow student shared the stark contrast of his experience growing up in Harlem to his experience as a student at a small, liberal arts college in Pennsylvania:

I struggled finding a place to belong on my campus. My first year I was really depressed, I lost 30 pounds. I wasn't eating. I didn't do anything on campus for my first two years because I didn't feel like I belonged. Coming from New York City, they say the city is very diverse, but honestly, if you live in Harlem, The Bronx, or Brooklyn, you're not seeing a lot of white people. So, coming from a space where it's minority only, that's what I was used to and the only time I would see white people was when I would go to school and they were older people, teachers, deans. On campus it felt like there were maybe 20 of us, honestly, black, Hispanics. It was a culture shock me getting to know the white people. The vernacular, the slang, is completely different from what we say. So I had to understand white people and just be around them, and that was particularly hard being from a first-generation college student family. My mom couldn't talk to me about experiencing college. I know you guys see on Twitter about the poster black kid for the PWIs {primarily white institutions}. That's what I became. I was on the posters, the

calendars, the banners. And I was so frustrated because it was giving off an image to applicants that was not accurate. The school was not diverse.

When reflecting on the sense of community and belonging that students felt on campus, a number of students reported feeling alienated in their academic classes, reporting a lack of representation of professors of color in classes outside of the Africana Studies Departments:

The professors need to engage in trainings to have a better awareness of their students, they need to understand the students that they're dealing with. Most of the professors are not black. The professors that are black teach specific classes like African-American Studies. There's no black teacher teaching me Calculus or a black teacher teaching me History. I can personally remember only having black professors for Africana Studies classes. I had one person of color teach me physics, that was it in all four years, everyone else was white.

In an effort to combat the lack of diversity amongst professors on campus, which hindered a sense of community for students of color, students spoke of the need to engage in active recruitment, particularly by colleges located in primarily white, rural areas. One student shared:

"Professors of color aren't seeking jobs here. The same way that a student doesn't feel comfortable on campus, professors may not as well. BIPOC professors aren't going to seek out this community when the surrounding community isn't welcoming to Black people or believes that Black people are criminals – because that's what they believe. How do you expect professors to want to come here? You have to engage in active recruiting."

In a similar vein, students spoke to the need for a cultural shift on campus, one that elevates the importance of connecting with students of color. An alumni from a State University of New York school spoke to this:

When recruiting professors, what are the campuses saying about having students of color on their campuses? You know, the privilege that they are having us contribute to their campus? Those kinds of conversation need to originate with the board members, executives, the school president. It needs to come from authority so that professors also know that this is important to them. Recruitment of professors is so important. When it comes to professors or anybody that's working with a minority group, they need to be relatable. They need to connect with us as students and the school needs to say to

professors, this is how we're going to help you grow and this is how we are going to support you in working with all types of students.

An alumni who worked at the admissions office after graduation from a college in rural Pennsylvania shared the resistance she met when advocating for racial sensitivity trainings for professors on campus:

I worked for the school and I would recommend that we do a staff training on bias and racial sensitivity. I was told that we can't control the professors, that's just not how it works in academia. Professors are allowed to do things the way they want to do things and we can't tell them what to do. We can't force them to come to a training, it has to be optional. We can't force them to learn this stuff. How can you not require professional development so that your students are better off? Part of the issue is that those trainings aren't mandatory for professors, and you end up preaching to the choir. I don't care if you teach trigonometry. If you're not racially aware, if you don't know about racial justice, if you don't know about your own implicit bias, that's a problem that impacts the well-being of your students. It's going to come up, even in the classroom. It's going to impact how you treat your students.

That is the biggest suggestion I would make; these trainings have to be mandatory. It can't be optional. The same people who care are the ones who attend, professors in history, sociology, psychology. No other professors care. And then students who want to major in things like the sciences or business, none of those professors have had that training. So, now students don't feel comfortable in those majors. And then we wonder why most students of color major in history or sociology and they stay away from the business and science majors. That's why. Because those professionals are more educated about the issues that we're dealing with and they are treating their students better.

A number of students spoke to the power of having professors of color that they could connect with in a space that they could call their own, "We had professors whose offices we would go to. It's essential to have professors who are advocates. For us to know, 'this is my go-to' whenever there's an issue that arises, I know I have someone to talk to. It's important to have those people to help us get through." Many students reported finding these advocates and a sense of community through the EOP {Educational Opportunity} offices on their campus:

I go directly to the EOP office when I need support, because we have our own little building there and we sit down and talk. They created a "safe space" in their office area where people can go and talk about whatever was on their minds. It's a support system

with people that I already know. But that's it, there is nothing that came from the university itself. It's always from EOP.

While the EOP offices did serve the needs of many students, students expressed frustration that there were not more university led initiatives and programs committed to supporting them when they arrived on campus. Several students expressed frustration that there was not one specific department committed to their success as first-generation students of color that was university led and embedded throughout the school. A recent college graduate who is a current College Success Advisor for KIPP NYC and an Achievement First alumni spoke to this, stating:

It would be helpful if campuses actually have a department that focuses on students of color. All of these schools admit us and bring us to campus, and then we think, what now? Yes, we're here, but what happens after that? Schools are so adamant on saying they care about diversity, getting black kids on campus to play sports or whatever it is that you're getting students there for. But then afterwards there's no support for them. All schools should have a department with advisors, or a peer to peer model, just like the EOP program, where you meet with an advisor once or twice a month.

There needs to be a department that is embedded within the school because that's how you make things more equitable. It's not like you can just say, okay, all these black and brown kids are here, now run off and do whatever you want. No, we don't know how to navigate the campus like that and the campus isn't built for us. There are so many things that we're not equipped for yet, and that the campus isn't equipped for. But having our own space where we can just talk about anything, our experiences, with people who understand us and are committed to our success on campus, that would be so powerful.

She added additional context for the sense of community that such a space could create for her and her fellow students:

To be around students like us, whether we want to talk about a TV show, or what this professor said in class, or oh, he looked at me when he said, slavery and implied I'm supposed to talk for my entire race kind of thing. It doesn't have to be super heavy topics always, like Sally said the N word to me last week, but just you know having that space to connect with people that you're used to seeing. It should be something that schools have. And it's a shame that they don't. Or they try to put it on that one admissions officer that's, you know, a person of color, or that one professor that's a person of color. It can't just be like that. And we need to interact with professors in those spaces as well. Spaces

where we feel comfortable, where we feel supported and understood. Where we are known.

A fellow student shared a similar sentiment, speaking to the need for programs and departments specifically intended to support first-generation students of color, and how a lack of such institutionalized programming ultimately falls on faculty of color:

We didn't have any type of program or department that focused on the support of students of color. They didn't even have any one staff member specifically dedicated to support the community of color. But, there was an admissions counselor who was a Hispanic woman and very, very passionate about inclusion. So basically, for all other students on campus, she was the person that everyone had to go to. So on top of her regular job she was the open door for literally everyone on campus. There were very few staff of color that worked at the school. Having her was huge. It wasn't that I needed to be educated about what I was feeling or what I was going through when I went to her, but it was just the feeling of "you're not alone. It's okay, you belong here." You know what I mean? You need people to tell you that you belong here when you're questioning if you belong, when you are questioning what people think about you, if they are judging you. You need somebody to tell you, it's okay, it doesn't matter what anyone has to say about you, you belong here.

For me personally, always when I feel most important is when it feels like family. You know what I mean, she felt like a family member of mine who just like loved me and cared about me wanted to see me succeed and I always felt comfortable with her. If I needed to go down and talk about something and I busted out crying I never felt bad because I felt like she really had my back and she would give me the right advice. I could bring literally anything that I was going through to her and I never felt like I would be judged or that she would say that it was all in my head.

Whereas, I might go talk to a white Dean about a professor who said something that was inappropriate and their response would be, well, did other students of color feel that way? I don't care if they felt that way. They would just say write it down, report it, and nothing would happen. With her when I went to her there was just a different feeling to it, a feeling like she genuinely cared, and understood.

While this student did experience the benefit of such a nurturing relationship with a university staff member, it was not enough to cultivate a true sense of belonging for her on campus:

I never felt like I was fully a part of the college community because there were too many people, quite frankly, who are racist or who were okay with racism. There was a group of us who were anti-racist, including the president of the college and some professors, and I felt like I was a part of that community. But that was not the full college community. So,

no, I did not ever fully feel like I had a place. I could never really connect with people who were okay with racism.

Another student at a highly-selective university in New York shared a similar perspective, speaking to the stain that institutionalized racism within the university setting had on her ability to feel truly at home, and a part of, her school community:

As far as a spirit of welcoming and feeling welcome, I didn't feel welcome. I felt like I need to get my degree here and go. Because before I arrived, I already knew about institutionalized racism and I felt it when I arrived on campus. So, I wasn't really interested in any of this other stuff. I just wanted to come here, get my degree and go. I just needed to do what I needed to do. All these schools say they have diversity and community for students of color, but it's not integrated diversity. It's very separate.

There were no supports specific to students of color or students of first-generation status at my school. But my friend actually started her own group for first generation students. Still, institutional racism is operating, and I didn't feel that was a place where I was embraced. Anytime anybody asked me ever since I was a freshman how is school going, I'd say, well, it's still racist. I have nothing else to say. It was just so surprising to me - I really wish you guys could see this racism that happens on campus.

One student spoke to the ways in which this lack of community, and ultimately, sense of belonging, had on her mental health:

I just didn't feel a sense of community, it was clear that I didn't belong. Academically, it didn't impact me at all. I got straight A's because I was determined. I thought, I'm not going to come here and not do well academically, but, I had absolutely no friends, in terms of my mental health, I can't even explain how it felt to have no friends. I believed I was just going to be miserable for the next four years, but that's fine, because financially it was a good move for me. I didn't want to have a lot of loans, so I'm just going to be miserable, it is what it is. I'm just going to have to deal with it. I never left my room. I was just in my room, talking with friends from home. I put up a lot of barriers and I just felt like there was no way to get past the differences.

Everyone around me made me feel like it was me and like I was so different. There was no space where I could meet with other BIPOC students from low income neighborhoods and hear someone say, don't worry, everybody's struggling with this. I just felt like, what's wrong with me? At the time I didn't realize that I was depressed. But when I think about my actions at that time, my physical health is always a reflection of my mental health and I wasn't exercising, I wasn't really eating, I didn't feel well enough to do things that would make me feel better. I didn't want to feel better, I just thought, I am going to be miserable and there is nothing that I can do to make it better because I hate

this place and I am not welcome here. It took time for me to find my place, and a community on campus.

Students not only spoke about the importance of having their own space on campus to experience a sense of community, but many of them spoke of the power and sense of comfort that they found through their friendships with one another. One student shared her experience:

I have a degree in human development and an education minor and I often say that I really could have easily gotten a degree in Black Studies or Women and Gender Studies, a lot of my classes were about the black experience. I grew up in NYC and was around my own people. And so to hear some of the rhetoric and ideology from white folks in class, it was just jarring for me. That's where having black and brown friends was the most important because they know exactly where I'm coming from and why this is frustrating for me. They even know exactly what to say to help me feel better. So, the most important thing for me in college was having a sense of community, especially amongst my friends and some staff. The first semester was really hard because I didn't have that. But once I developed it, it became a lifeline, even to this day.

Another student endorsed a similar sentiment, stating: "Unless you have a strong support system on campus, a group of friends that you could really lean on and really help each other, then you're not going to make it. The people that made it didn't make it because of the university's support, it was the support we provided for one another." Many students found this sense of community by developing relationships with upperclassmen who were also BIPOC, first-generation students, with whom they connected through a collective experience. A graduate of an Ivy League university spoke to this:

The most helpful for me was really the older students. Even people with titles, having the role of the institution or having some type of influence or being the person that can make change happen, that was helpful and those were powerful relationships. But, it was really the older students who said, "you need to do this" that prompted me to seek out support. Even though my counselors were saying, "Go to the learning strategy center," I did it once my fraternity brother who *went* to the learning strategy center recommended that I go. That saved me from failing out. There's something about hearing it from a peer that you trust that's more convincing than from an administrator you're still skeptical of.

Imposter Syndrome + Code Switching

One of the more prevalent themes that arose throughout all ten focus groups was the impact of feelings of imposter syndrome on students' sense of belonging on campus. One student spoke to the feelings of alienation that accompanied his transition to university life, stating:

It was hard to adjust to school because it was an environment that I was not used to. I was not used to seeing a lot of white students in a classroom and participating and interacting with these classmates. It was different and difficult. When I was in high school, I was okay with being wrong. We were taught that it's okay if you don't have the right answer, you know, we'll fix it. We'll figure it out. In college, being around so many white students, I felt like I always had the wrong answer. I felt like the white students were always right. My EOP counselor helped me gain the confidence that it's okay when you're around those students to be wrong. She reminded me that not everybody's perfect and being able to allow myself to take that in and gain that confidence is what actually allowed me to start participating and interacting more.

When probed further, this student spoke to the ways in which his EOP advisor was able to help alleviate these feelings, empowering him to be confident in who he was and what he had to contribute:

I think what helped a lot was just being able to connect with her -- she was white, and yet she was very easy to talk to. I didn't feel pressure. I didn't feel nervous to talk to her. I think what she made me understand is that just because I'm leaving a certain environment and going into a new environment doesn't mean that I have to act different or put on this persona that is not who I am. She made me understand, alright, I can still be me and I can still be wrong. And, when I'm wrong, being able to ask for help is OK as well. Not worrying about people saying who is this guy, why isn't he seeing the answer, obviously that's not the answer. And, understanding that if that does happen, it's okay for me to feel upset. She made me feel comfortable that if that ever did happen, you know, I was always free to come to her office and we could talk about it. So again, just having that space where I can speak to her without being judged and feeling uncomfortable, I think that's what really helped me out in my first year in college.

A recent graduate of a prestigious east coast university spoke to the painful interactions he had with his fellow students upon arriving on campus, perpetuating his feelings of alienation:

I went to a primarily white academic institution. When I got there, I was really excited about it because I love meeting new people from different communities. But then there was definitely this sense of imposter syndrome that hit really hard. When you have kids saying, "oh yeah, I wasn't even going to take the AP Calculus exam, but I decided the day before and I got a five, so I have these many credits, how many credits do you have?" that's hard to hear. One of my roommates had said something about how he didn't think it was fair that

students from underserved communities got scholarships. Basically, communities like mine. He said to me, basically, I'm paying for your tuition. And that was at the beginning of the semester and then we had to live together.

A graduate of two Ivy League universities elaborated upon these damaging interactions, citing a culture of higher education that emphasizes a deficit-based approach to BIPOC, first-generation students:

Across university campuses we see that it is very deficits focused in terms of how you are perceived on campus. For me, the stigma of coming from a place like the Bronx, or being a person of color, or being of low-income status, you can't avoid the associations that come with those identities. Even if people are pleasant and don't look at you that way, you still very much might look at yourself that way. So, you interpret all these interactions as focusing on those "deficits."

This student also spoke to Yosso's theory of Community Cultural Wealth, referenced above, and the reframing that must occur to counter-act the sentiments of imposter syndrome that afflict BIPOC, first-generation students.

I think a lot of what needs to be done is reframing. And that's not something that you can just do overnight. That requires a cultural shift. I think about the theory of community cultural wealth, but with that theory you have to put it into practice. And people have to understand it, and subscribe to it, and incorporate it into their practice. It's all about appropriate framing and perspectives. And even if you're not familiar with the theory or all the jargon that comes with it, it's just the idea of let's not focus on all of the struggles we assume you have based on who you are, the way you look or where you come from. Let's learn more about you and find out what makes you special. How you got here despite all of the things that you've encountered. Let's focus on your strengths. I think people naturally want to do that, we're just so conditioned to judge in a deficits-based framework.

He continued to speak to the implications that a deficits model of thinking can have on a student's psyche and on the ways in which the university fails in its' attempts to support that student:

I think we go to problem-solving mode really fast. And so even though we know it's important to think about the student as an individual, and their life experience, and learn more about *them*, we still want to just make sure that we've got all the bases set. So, okay, they're low income, let's focus on financial aid. Let's make sure that they're getting all the financial support they can. Oh, they're a Black student or Latinx student,

let's get them connected with other Black students. It's an automatic response that that's what we want to do, and those things are important and helpful. But, let's learn more about the student too and their story - to motivate them. The more we know about our students and their stories, I think the more capable we are of actually shifting their perspectives on themselves. If we can say, the way you overcame this shows that you're capable of doing these types of things. We might be more encouraging, and they might be more likely to follow through on next steps if they can tell that we are coming from a place of care, and that we actually know who they are as an individual. Rather than just, "oh, you're just another low-income black student," so these are the resources that we will throw your way.

Participants reported the power that imposter syndrome had on their psyches, and the ways in which it perpetuated a need to code switch in order to belong. Code switching is defined as an adjustment of one's "style of speech, appearance, behavior, or expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities" (Durkee, 2019). According to Durkee, this behavioral adjustment has "long been a strategy for Black people to successfully navigate interracial interactions and has large implications for their well-being, economic advancement, and even physical survival." One student spoke to the emotional pull to code switch when on campus:

I felt a need to code switch, not only with my professors, but also with my peers. I don't want people to hear me and think, oh, where are you from? I want them to think, yes, you belong here. I hardly had any interactions with white people before I arrived on campus. Most of the messaging I got was from the media, and the media made it seem like they wouldn't understand me, they would think the way I talk is too "ghetto," They would think I should go back to my neighborhood, or this or that. It made me feel like the way I speak is bad, it made me feel a need to code switch.

Other students reported messaging from a young age about the importance of code switching and a desire to resist this urge in an effort to have conviction in who they are and where they come from:

As far as code switching. I feel like it got beat it into my head in school, they would call it time and place in elementary, middle and high school. But what they really meant was code switch and talk differently and act differently in certain environments. And when I first went to college, I was like, okay, I'll do that. But then I saw that I was code switching and people still didn't accept me because they just

didn't want to accept me. You don't like the way I talk, you think I'm uneducated because of the way I talk, but my GPA doesn't reflect that. I decided I'm just going to be myself because I realized that people still did not accept me, it didn't matter what I did or how I spoke. Obviously, the way that I talk to my friends is not the way that I speak at work. But that's not what I think the message behind time and place is. It's code switching. It's when I'm in an all-white room and I'm told to act differently or be someone else -- I refuse to do that. It's either that I'm going to be accepted for who I am or I don't belong here. That was the way that I went about it.

Another student echoed a similar sentiment, speaking to the disparity of white-dominated university life and the pressures it puts on students of color to adapt to a white-washed environment. She spoke to her resistance to these forces as an act of defiance, "White people aren't taught to switch up or change to make black people feel comfortable. So why should I do the same thing to make them feel comfortable? Obviously, I'm not doing anything to intentionally make them feel uncomfortable, but if me being me makes them uncomfortable, then that's their business, it's not mine to change."

White Saviorism

A prominent theme that arose throughout the focus groups was an attitude of white saviorism that students encountered both prior to college acceptance, and throughout their college experience. Students reported that this attitude colored their interactions with administrators, peers, professors, and those associated with their financial aid and scholarship opportunities. One student spoke to encountering an aura of white saviorism throughout her application to the Posse program, a revered national scholarship program that posits that, "diversity is the key to solving our country's biggest problems." The Posse Foundation, "identifies, recruits and trains individuals with extraordinary leadership potential" and provides full-tuition scholarships from Posse's partner colleges and universities. One student spoke to what felt like a dehumanizing experience when applying for the Posse program:

I applied for the Posse scholarship and hated it. I hated the process, because it felt like cunning, I felt like I was cunning for money. It made me feel like they believe I'm stupid. They literally made us run around a room for money. I thought, I'm just trying to go to Vassar just like a white student with means. They don't have to do this. I'm in business casual, I'm 17 years old, I'm in this room full of people who work on wall street and I'm running around so you can give me a full scholarship so I can go to college and receive an education. It made me feel like they thought we were monkeys. Do they really want me to jump over here at 17 years old with no pride? My parents did not raise me to beg for your money.

I didn't even pass the first round because I refused to run around like a circus monkey. I guess they are looking for a certain type of black kid to help, that's how I feel sometimes, I guess they are looking for student who was stuck in poverty. I don't have a sob-story, my daddy was not a gang banger who got shot on the corner and left me with my mom. You're not going to get those stories out of us. We were immigrants, okay? My parents came here from a plane, not a boat, they came here on a plane in the 80's. But they are looking for these sob-stories. They look for me to say, oh, because of systemic racism and poverty I never got above average and I would love you all to give me an opportunity to be the first one person I've ever met to go college. I know people who went to college. They want me to say, "I grew up underprivileged and I had to scrape for every meal and I've never met a college person except my white teachers. What are you trying to hear from me? I have good grades, I work hard. I deserve an education."

This mentality of white saviorism continued to dominate the experiences of BIPOC, first-generation students when they arrived on campus. Regardless of their numerous qualifications, students reported encountering an attitude amongst their peers and professors that they should feel grateful to be on campus. The message that they received time and time again was that the school administration was doing them a favor by granting them entrance to such a revered institution.

I think that the biggest thing that needs to change is this mindset of you are doing black people a favor, you are doing people of color a favor, to admit them into your schools. No, we are all better off because this community is diverse, you can learn from me and I can learn from you. You don't only have things to teach me. I feel like that mindset is the most harmful, whether it comes from a student or whether it comes from a professor who automatically assumes if you're a black student you don't really belong here; your GPA probably isn't as high as my white students. That's a problem. You can feel it in a classroom, you can feel it when you're constantly being asked, "do you understand, do you understand, do you understand?" You haven't asked one other student that in class today. Yes, I understand what you're saying, ma'am, I heard you the first time, that is what's going through my mind when I'm hearing these things.

There is this idea that we are the ones who are in need, that we're the charity case and you guys are saviors, it is so harmful. That white savior mentality is widespread at a lot of these schools amongst the staff -- the Presidents, the deans, the admissions office, they think of us as charity cases and believe that they are doing us a favor. That's not the case at all. We belong here just as much as the next person belongs here. Though we may not have had as many opportunities throughout our lives, that doesn't mean that we don't belong here. That is the biggest thing that needs to change.

Countless students spoke to a similar mentality when it came to seeking financial supports, as universities and scholarship programs required students to express gratitude for the chance to receive a college education. Several students spoke about how dehumanizing this felt as they pursued their education, feeling exploited as they sought financial aid. One student spoke to this experience:

The approach of the financial aid office made aid feel like a handout. I remember there was one semester where I couldn't pay for my school because my mom had lost her job. The school still had to raise my tuition. I asked if we could do something about it, if I could receive some supports. They gave me one scholarship and they tried to make me write a letter to thank donors for the scholarships. I thought, why should I have to write a letter to people I don't even know about giving me access to an education I shouldn't have to feel grateful for? They asked me to share a sob story about my life to make these wealthy white donors pat themselves on the back, all at my expense. It felt dehumanizing and I felt exploited.

Tokenism + Emotional Labor of Educating Others

A dominant theme reported in the qualitative interviews was that of tokenism and the emotional labor of educating others that accompanies a tokenized identity on campus. Students reported that the deficit mentality addressed above contributed to an experience of tokenism that pervaded their experiences in the classroom. One student spoke to this phenomenon, stating, "There is a lot of deficit verbiage when we talk and think about communities of color on campus. That is what's advertised and that is what's highlighted about us, this idea of the token black student, the token Latinx student, the token low-income student." A peer reiterated this same

experience, and the pressures that accompanied such an experience, including pressures to speak to a uniform black experience that does not exist:

I was a Psychology major and I was probably one of the few black kids in the class. A lot of the conversation would somehow turn towards race or socio-economic status. It was uncomfortable at times, because when certain things would be brought up people would look at me, expecting me to say something or have a comment, or just defend something. I didn't speak in any of these classes because I'm not going to sit here and try to explain or reason with you or create a reason why as black people we do this or why things are this way.

The worst part was that I felt like my professors held it against me. They would say to me, oh you're kind of quiet. I wish you would speak up more in class and share your unique perspective. It's not that I didn't want to speak up, it's just that by expecting me to speak up you put so much pressure on me to speak to a uniform experience that doesn't exist. I'm not going to give you the energy or satisfaction to start some type of conversation when these are things that should just generally be known.

One of his Latinx peers shared a similar experience, speaking to the emotional labor of being expected to educate his white counterparts about a uniform Latinx experience in America:

I felt like I was the token Latinx kid. People would look at me and think okay, that's the diversity kid, check. It felt like so much pressure to speak in class because on top of being one of the only people of color in most of my classes, I'm being asked to speak on the topic of race and identity. And, say that I have an experience that is very different from a peer's, and that student isn't in my class. My white peers are going to take what I share of my experience as the one and only experience of people of color. When they meet somebody else, they're going to reference me. I know it. They're going to say, I had this one friend who said this, so it has to be this way. It's a lot of pressure and it's emotionally draining.

Several students elaborated upon this theme throughout the qualitative interviews, speaking to the emotional toll of being expected to educate their white peers about their experiences as people of color.

It becomes frustrating when I think to myself, why should I be educating somebody else. I don't have that in me anymore to talk to people about why you should treat me like I'm a person. You can do research, there is google, it has to start with education. But it doesn't start with a black person telling a white person why they're wrong. That's not my job, to educate you on how to see me as an equal.

A fellow student added,

I feel like you have the right to say what you want in the classroom and a lot of things I didn't share because I didn't feel like I should have to be the person that educates everybody else in the classroom about the black experience. You can read books, there are so many other ways to learn and better understand. I don't feel like I should be the guinea pig in this classroom to tell you all about what it's like to live in, or what it's like to be around poverty, racism, or in my case, experiences with family members with mental illness.

One student spoke to how this pressure to educate their white peers about their experiences as people of color derives from an inequitable education system that prioritizes Anglo-Saxon history over that of communities of color:

White America has had the privilege to choose whether or not to learn about people of color, while black and Hispanic people are taught about white America - we're taught about white American history, we're tested on it, we're quizzed on it, we're required and expected to know these things about a demographic that's outside of us. But when it comes to our history, our culture and who we are as human beings, acquiring that knowledge is a choice, it's an elective. That's the problem, we have a demographic that can choose whether they ignore our issues and our problems, where we don't have that same privilege. We're taught a diluted version of history, a history that is tasteful to the masses.

Racism + Microaggressions on Campus

Of the 50 students who participated in the focus groups, countless students shared painful experiences of encounters with racism both on their campus and in the neighboring areas. A current student at a large university in upstate New York spoke of experiencing racism on campus as a freshman while simultaneously trying to find her place within a university setting that had promised her a sense of belonging upon her admission:

People were writing the N word everywhere, in resident halls, on people's doors. My freshman year there were lots of hate crimes and, of course, because I just got there a few months ago, I was already trying to figure out how to adjust to the new environment. But then, on top of adjusting, there was all of these racist incidents happening. I couldn't focus on my academics or find my place in an environment where I didn't feel safe.

Another student shared a similar experience of hearing someone refer to him and a friend with a racial slur as he was walking through his dorm one evening, a place that was meant to signify a

sense of home and belonging, “We were walking down my hallway and I heard someone from their room say, “is that one of the N* that just went downstairs?” And I approached them and said, “Why are you saying the N-word?” and they denied it.” A peer added, “Some students experience having racial slurs written on their doors, others have been told to go back to where they came from, others were harassed on the street. In that environment, you can’t feel included or welcomed. If you don’t have a good form of support, you’re not going to make it to graduation.”

Several students spoke to the profound impact encounters with racism had on their sense of belonging and inclusion, limiting their ability to feel like they truly did belong at the university itself. Students spoke of how racial incidents discouraged them from investing in the campus and alienated them from feeling like they had a place and were valued within the university setting. A College Success Fellow and recent college graduate shared her experience:

I’ve had students either followed, or one of my students had a gun drawn on him and his friend. He was doing nothing. He was just there. He was just existing. A black man, existing, just wanting to exist. It definitely did affect his feeling of inclusion, or lack thereof, on campus. After that he thought, I don’t feel safe on this campus. I don’t know how to perform now. I don’t know how to perform well anymore if I can’t exist in a space where I’m supposed to belong.

She added,

Who cares about chemistry when your life potentially flashes before your eyes? How do you learn in a place like that? He did end up leaving the school. It just makes you wonder, “how do I exist in a world that doesn’t really want me to exist?” I have had many students share that racism on campus affected their mental health.

A number of students expressed experiencing racism while attending schools in rural, white areas throughout the country, a shocking experience for many students who had grown up in primarily black and brown urban communities. One student shared that her experience was so shocking she compared it to what she had only read about, or witnessed in movies:

Me and my friends were coming out of the dining hall and there was this red truck that was known for waving around the confederate flag. This truck stopped at a red light and there were me and my friends. They were calling us that word, [spi*?]. It was such a shock. It's the stuff you see in documentaries or the movies. I thought, "wow," is this real? My whole life I didn't have to experience this. I had met white people but they were cool. I had never met people like that. And then when the light turned green they had the black smoke come all over me and my friends, a lot of this black dust. I thought, what is happening? It was so scary and it definitely affected me, it's something that stayed with me. But, I've never let it take over me because I am who I am and I'm proud of that. It was heavy. And the scary part is that it's still happening throughout the country.

Another student echoed her experience, "We were walking and somebody came out of the car and was screaming racial absurdities at us and throwing things at us. We were just trying to get to class."

In addition to feeling vulnerable to racist attacks in neighboring towns and the immediate area around campus, a number of students shared experiences they were subject to within the campus community itself. One student spoke about how her mental health and job security were threatened as a result of a hate crime on campus:

I had to quit my job because of a racial incident that happened on campus and a lack of understanding from my supervisors about the reality of my life as a person of color. I worked for the campus security department checking people's ID's in the residence halls. Recently, there was a manifesto sent out through email and air-dropped on every student's phone. The general message of the whole thing was that every black person on campus is about to die.

When I received it, I was at work, at the front desk, a very easy target. And you know, I don't know if that person was being serious or not. You can never tell. So I was sitting there waiting for an email letting us know what's going on from the administration. No email at all. I worked in a building that was majority white kids. It could be one of these kids for all I know. So, I called my boss and I said I need to go home because I don't feel safe here right now. I could hear on the other line that they were just sitting there laughing, making it seem like I'm making a big deal of it for no reason. I went home and I told them I'm not coming back to work; I'm not leaving my house for the rest of the week until this is dealt with.

In addition to these experiences with blatant racism, students reported similar experiences with microaggressions on campus, particularly within the academic environment. One student

shared an experience where her RA implied that she was acting like an “angry black woman,” while another spoke of the stares she received in her classroom when her name was called:

When it came to pronouncing my name, it was just the constant stares. Oh, the stares. People just staring at you, people not knowing to handle your presence. They just act like you’re an alien, just staring, staring, staring. And then just being in classes where topics of race will come up, and my classmates would attempt to dismiss the conversation. There was just one point where I had to say, “you guys sit here and have the privilege to not talk about these things and ignore them, while other people don’t have that option.” I remember having an incident in class where we were talking about racial pride. And I was saying that I’m proud to be a black person because of the history and the culture that comes with it, and I was told if a white person were to say that, then it’s racism.

I have no problem with a white person being proud of where they come from, because that’s a good thing. They should be proud of who they are. Nobody should be ashamed of who they are. But I told them that the issue is that white pride has been used to disrespect, to diminish, to erase and to kill people that look like me all over the world. So I don’t mind people being proud of their whiteness. But I have a problem when people use their whiteness to erase me.

Another student shared how comments from her professor impacted her ability to engage academically, ultimately leading her to change her major and select a new path:

It was election year, and I had a professor who was racist and ignorant. She would say things in class, like, I don't believe in the Black Lives Matter movement. I usually refuse to let anyone have that much control over me, but I feel like her class was the one place I just didn't have the energy, so I really didn't go to class. I went the minimum that I could while still passing the class. I didn't feel comfortable even sitting in her class. I couldn't even concentrate. I remember so many classes where she would bring something up in the beginning about Black Lives Matter or racial justice, and I would just be so upset for the rest of the class that I couldn't focus.

I ended up changing my major from an accounting major partly due to the experience that I had with her and with the accounting department in general. Granted, it all worked out for me because I don't think I was meant to be an accountant. I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be, but in the moment I had an internship lined up at a big four accounting firm. It all worked out because I’m where I’m supposed to be, but what if that was really what I wanted to do?

In conjunction with experiences with professors who shared explicit or implicit racist views in their classrooms, a number of students shared negative experiences with campus safety, and a lack of attention to the issue of how police brutality in America may impact a student of

color's comfort level when engaging with campus police, particularly those who are armed. One student shared her perspective on how the university administration has not attended to the complicated relationship students of color may have with the campus police:

I've been thinking about the relationship between students and the campus police. Campus police at certain universities are armed or if they are not armed, they are told to call the police if there are any issues that comes up. And not everybody has a good relationship with the police, but the school administration has not required trainings for the campus police or even acknowledged the experience that students of color may have when interacting with the campus police.

While countless students spoke about feeling empowered to combat the racism on their campuses, many of these same students lamented the fact that the school administration did not actively engage in condemning racial incidents, but instead relied on the students to do so. Students expressed a feeling of resentment towards the university itself for being offered admission to a community where they were told they would be welcomed, but instead faced racial incidents that plagued their experiences as students of color. One student spoke to these dynamics, particularly the way in which the university placed her in the role of needing to advocate for her own safety and that of her peers. She stated:

Racism on campus deeply affected me, and it has deeply affected so many of my peers. It has forced students to take on the roles that administrators will not. So, if you feel like there's a certain kind of education that needs to happen for your peers, for your community, you're the one organizing, you're the one staging protests, you're the one engaging in education outreach. In addition to doing your schoolwork, to being a young adult, to taking care of your family back home, you now have to advocate for your community on top of it because your institution will not fulfill its' role.

It's sad because there's also those students, the activists, who have to take a semester off or who are taking longer to graduate for X, Y and Z reason. The institution fails to recognize that there is a trend here and these students that I see being activists on the campus, trying to better the space that they live in, they are the ones that are also having problems. There's no way that you can do all of that and keep up with your education. No person should be under that kind of stress in general. It's a trend that I keep seeing.

And then you have burnout. You are not able to take care of yourself. I experienced this. I withdrew from my community. I was overworked, overburdened. I couldn't

communicate properly because eventually I became desensitized to all of the racism. And I see that happen over and over and over again with my peers. I saw it as a student. I saw it as an administrator in the school. And it's really sad, because there's nothing to really address other than having the school do the work so that the students don't need to. But we continue to think to ourselves, if we don't do it, who else will?

Other students relayed similar frustration with their school's history of failing to respond to racial incidents, both on campus and nationally, "How many of these racial problems need to keep happening until someone just decides that we need to do better. Now we see it on these schools' websites, putting up anti-racist resources, but where was that four years ago? Why did it take numerous shootings for you to actually care?" Another student shared his perspective, stating, "My university said they care about diversity, but it's really not diverse. I don't really want diversity even, I want equity."

A current freshman echoed a sense of exasperation with this disturbing pattern of inaction. She spoke of an interaction she had with a university administration that was widely silent during incidents of racial aggression, and spoke to the emotional labor that the school required of students when they were tasked with advocating for change on campus while no one else did:

White students were drawing swastikas in the snow, and we heard nothing from the administration. And then that's when I realized that the administration is really not doing anything to stop things like that from even happening. It's their job to create awareness and acknowledge that this isn't okay. You would hear people say, you know, well racism happens at primarily white institutions, it's normal. But it's not supposed to be normal. It's not okay. So that's when I started to become more active and vocal on my campus. I went to protests and spoke out; I e-mailed the chancellor to let him know how I felt personally. Even though he didn't respond to my message, at least I know I tried. There's only so much that I can do.

But, as a group on my campus we could do so much more. We started working together to get our voices heard so that people knew what was actually happening on campus. People wouldn't have even really known what was actually going on if we didn't use our voices. We ended up being heard, we were on the news. But if we weren't on the news, nobody would have even cared. There would have never been no emails sent out. Nothing like that.

And that's the problem -- a lot of students of color on campus feel that the administration is not really taking our concerns seriously. But when it's somebody who is not of color, like a white person, when something happens to them, the whole campus is shut down. I don't see why that isn't the same for students of color. I'm a student, they're a student too. We're no different. I don't see why their problems are more important than ours. We should all be valued as students at the university.

One student spoke about the importance of BIPOC students being elevated into leadership positions on campus so that they could serve as a liaison between students of color and the school administration. A Latinx student who served on the board as a student representative spoke of how his platform enabled him to advocate for changes on campus, such as declaring Martin Luther King Day a school holiday. This student also shared that when the N word was written on a campus elevator, he developed his sense of self-efficacy by being able to connect with school leaders and advocate for change:

Having that specific role and leadership opportunity enabled me to connect with school leaders and bring a different perspective to the table. I was also able to make other students' voices heard. If there was a concern and they didn't feel comfortable talking to the President of the university, or campus safety, they were able to come to me. And being able to hear their stories and being able to hear how certain experiences triggered them opened up my eyes to the impact that these racial incidents have on students' well-being.

Although he found this experience fulfilling, he also mentioned an internal struggle with feeling "used" by the university itself, being seen as the Latinx representative for a group of people with different backgrounds, needs, and perspectives.

Financial + Familial Stressors

Throughout the qualitative interviews, students reported a number of financial and familial stressors that impacted their mental and physical health, and ultimately, their ability to engage in the academic and social campus environment. Students reported feeling alienated from their peers who did not have to navigate the financial burdens that they carried with them, and

expressed struggling with the financial means needed to access the social components of university life. One student, a graduate of a prestigious university in the north-east, shared his experience:

If I wanted to do anything off campus, I didn't have any money for that, so I ended up getting two jobs. I was just looking for that college experience and just by being on campus that didn't feel like enough because I was surrounded by people saying, I can pay for this dinner, event, or activity, or let's go to Paris for the weekend. I couldn't do that.

A number of students reported food insecurity on campus, as the dining halls had limited hours and they could not afford to purchase food outside of their meal plan. Many students reported that the dining halls closed on their campuses during holiday breaks, breaks that they could not afford to go home for. These students reported being left on campus without access to food while seeing the athletes who stayed on campus with special dining opportunities that were not offered to them. One student spoke to this: "On my campus, the dining hall opened at 5 o'clock in the afternoon and it was closed on weekends and during breaks, so I struggled for meals. It wasn't something I felt comfortable talking about, but it impacted me in so many ways."

Students who worked on campus reported tensions that would arise as they served a classmate or peer. One student spoke to these harmful interactions, stating:

When I was working on campus it was particularly hard because of the way my fellow students would talk to us or the way they would expect us to work at a certain pace because they're in a rush to get to class or do something. Just the way they treated us, it was disgusting. So, working was a bit difficult while being in school, but it was just like a lot of stuff, I had to put it in the back of my mind because I knew I needed the money. I had classes and I had two to three jobs at a time. Job availability was horrible and the type of jobs that were available were horrible.

Although many students did share experiences with work-study opportunities on campus, the resounding message from these students was that the pay was too low on campus and that in

order to make a living wage they had to seek work opportunities off campus. A student at a prestigious big ten school spoke to this,

Through my work study job, I would make about seven dollars an hour and then you're capped on the number of hours you can work. I was working two on campus jobs but the pay was so bad, I just couldn't do it anymore. So, I started waitressing off campus. And then that was an added pressure of having to commute to your job. The serving job doesn't care that you're a student as well. It was so much pressure, not only being a student of color, but when you come from a low socioeconomic background, having to think about how you're going to pay for school and pay for your meal plan and for all these other things that these wealthier white students don't have to think about. It is draining and took away from my ability to engage in my academics.

Another student echoed this experience, stating:

When I did a work study job, it was extremely low pay, much worse than retail, so I had to work off-campus. How am I supposed to focus on my grades and keep up with school-work if I'm working at Subway for 8 hours a day. It was just hard because the hours were very bad and yes, I needed the money, but overall, I was at school to get good grades and make connections, finding that balance was hard.

Students also noted disparities in terms of the jobs that students of color were offered on their campuses, compared to their white peers. An AF alumni who now serves as a College Success Advisor for KIPP and AF alumni from New York City cited these differences:

You see the kind of jobs that students of color have to take compared to their white peers. The white students are working at the desk, at the library, where they can do their homework and, in addition, get paid for their jobs. I have students who are working overnight, compromising their sleep, working two jobs. Students are not getting paid a livable wage through work study and they can't make the money they need to survive off of one job, so they take two, they take three. They take whatever they need to get by. And I don't think that the reality of those circumstances are talked about enough on campus – they are institutional issues as well. They reflect some of the racism on these campuses. If we address these patterns, it will go a long way for students. I hate hearing students who have to work more than one job, or their work-study doesn't cover enough. It breaks my heart.

One student expressed similar concerns regarding the job she was asked to do as a woman of color:

I used to work concessions at the Campus Center. My manager would only put certain people in the skybox and most of the patrons that were in the Skybox were older, white, wealthier men. He would always send us girls of color to that section and it made me feel uncomfortable. But, I needed the money and the tips were good. He just put us in such an

awkward position. It was clear he wouldn't want somebody who may be seen as too rowdy, or maybe too "black" in those kind of sections, so he only put us girls, never the guys, even when they asked, and that's where the best tips were. We felt exploited, but we needed the money to keep up on campus.

Participants shared that when working off campus, particularly in universities located in white, rural towns, they found themselves fearing for their safety and were often exposed to incidents of racism or microaggressions at their work-place, only further exacerbating the stress that they were under as they tried to make ends meet. One student spoke to this experience:

When I went to school my mom lost her job and I had to work at Old Navy because the on campus jobs paid so little. I was so used to making more money in the city than I did in Pennsylvania because minimum wage in PA was \$7.25. At home, I was making \$15 an hour. I had to learn how to budget things a lot differently than I would do at home. My checks every two weeks were for about \$140. What can I do with \$140? If I'm working the same shifts in New York I would make \$400. That was something I had to learn as well and an added pressure. I quit once I saw a man wearing a Confederate flag sweater in the store.

Other students expressed similar sentiments, sharing their experiences working at Walmart and being harassed by customers and accosted with racially charged slurs, "I worked at Walmart off campus and the customers would be really aggressive and racially insensitive with me. I also had to manage a public bus schedule to get there, which only took more time away from my studies."

Students spoke about the emotional toll of working to support themselves and their families who had financial needs back home, while also finding time to devote to their academic pursuits. One student shared:

We are students, but people still need to work. People still need to take care of themselves and their families. It gets difficult when you have to make those decisions on whether or not you're just going to focus on school and be there fulltime and not make any money or kill yourself by trying to work full time, go to school full time and just be a human being.

A common theme that surfaced amongst a number of participants was the lack of empathy and understanding shown by their professors and peers when they found themselves struggling to juggle the many responsibilities bestowed upon them. One student noted:

I was a freshman and was working two jobs because I needed the money. It was an overnight job. I was staying up all night and the pay was horrible and then going to class in the morning. I just was trying to pass by the skin of my teeth, just trying to get through it. Having to try to earn money to take care of myself on top of also passing my classes to get a degree, it was a lot of work. I would sometimes arrive five minutes late to class or five minutes late to my job because I was juggling so much, and the professor or the work study supervisor wouldn't understand. As a first-generation student and a person of color, I had certain circumstances in my life that nobody was understanding of or even curious about.

Eventually, I had to quit. I couldn't do it anymore – professors and the work study folks didn't understand the struggles I was facing and they didn't take the time to try to understand what I had on my plate. And - it really doesn't help when nobody else is there to understand what you're going through when you are at school with mostly white, wealthier students. I needed the school to understand – my peers, the professors, the administration. My classmates from the Bronx, Brooklyn, Harlem, we already were accustomed to this life and this hustle. But nobody else on campus was understanding or seeing the realities of our lifestyle. No one understood that this should not be our lifestyle if we want to get anything out of our education. You know? There was no compassion or understanding.

Some students spoke about how their professors not only lacked empathy and understanding, but, instead, responded to students by implying that the student was being lazy or was dishonest, speaking to the implicit bias that professors and administrators may hold. One student spoke about her experience asking for an extension when her family fell ill with COVID-19:

My mother and I had coronavirus and she had it worse than I did so I had to take care of my family, my younger siblings, and I had to care for my mother. I asked my professor for a two-day extension and she rejected it. I didn't even ask to not complete the assignment, all I needed was a two-day extension. It was clear that she thought I was lying. I wish she had trusted me, or even had asked for some proof.

Numerous students shared similar experiences where their request for compassion from their professors was instead met with an unforgiving, accusatory tone. One student, an alumnus of a small, southern liberal arts college, spoke to the ways in which racial bias may play into this:

I just feel like there's just a lack of empathy from the administration. It was palpable. Being a person of color in America, you're expected to just be tough and to take it. Black women are dying at higher rates than white women in child-birth. It's because of the way

they look at us, they just don't view us the same way that they view a student who is white. It boils down to unconscious racism. That is something that the school needs to tackle when they're looking at who they're hiring, and when they're thinking of the training that their staff engage in.

A college success fellow and recent college alumni shared a similar observation based upon the experiences of her student mentees:

Sometimes when you're speaking to a professor, they don't believe you until you are feeling the brunt of the emotion that you're under. Unless they can physically see it on you, they question you. And, maybe you're someone who doesn't present emotion that way due to your cultural background. I hear so many stories about students who go into these offices and they have to cry and perform in order to get the basic understanding that they're asking for. I just don't think that that's fair. For one, it's a lot of emotional labor on the student's end to perform, and it's even emotional labor on the professors to withstand. Why do we have this standard where that's the kind of environment that is needed for there to be basic understanding.

If I'm speaking to you and telling you my pain, sharing what I'm going through and being vulnerable, why do I have to go into the details? Experiencing the details is hard enough, and now you want me to relive it. You get to the point sometimes where your pride gets involved. I don't need these people to see this side of me. So, what ends up happening is instead of reaching out and asking for help and advocating for myself, I have to put on a brave face and figure out how to make the grades up later. It gets to a point where you're just exhausted. I got to that point in my senior year. I thought, I'm not going to cry. I'm not going to sit here and let people see the weight of what I'm carrying around for them to give me the basic empathy that I'm asking for.

Access to Mental Health

Throughout the qualitative interviews, student after student spoke of the profound ways in which their experiences on campus impacted their mental health and overall well-being. Yet, despite these difficulties, it became clear that universities throughout the country are devoid of mental health resources that are tailored to the unique needs of first-generation students of color. A graduate of a public university in New York City spoke about being unaware of counseling as an option during her early days on campus: "I do wish counseling was something that was more emphasized on campus from day one. I wasn't aware that they had counselors that you can speak to about mental health issues, I thought you only had academic advisors." While many students

acknowledged that they were aware of mental health services, a number of programmatic concerns thwarted their ability to access consistent, high-quality care. Students reported long wait-lists to be seen by a counselor coupled by a lack of consistency once you were enrolled in counseling. The counseling centers also had a cap on how many times each student could be seen, so after five or so visits, students would be referred outside of the counseling center to begin therapy anew, often with a co-pay of \$40 or \$50 per session that they could not afford.

Students who did interact with the mental health system on their campus spoke of the experience of having to re-tell their story time and time again as they were assigned a new therapist each visit, an emotionally-draining practice that is not evidenced-based, nor trauma-informed. These students spoke to a lack of rapport building, as they were shuffled from one clinician to another, and were only seen once per month. A student at a large east-coast university spoke to this experience, stating:

I stopped going to the counseling center because it was not a good system. There was a long wait list and the therapist you see one day was not guaranteed to see you for your next appointment. I thought to myself, why am I talking to three, four, five different counselors? I have to reintroduce myself, get acquainted again, re-tell my story. That's not the point of counseling. It got me nowhere.

A peer reported a similar experience,

It was a three week wait to see a counselor at my university and it was a minimum of three weeks in-between appointments. Each time I came, I would have to see someone new, so it was a new process all over again. Every single time. At one point, I literally just gave up and said, "you know what, I'm good, I'm going to do it by myself." But that got the best of me because that's really when I started deteriorating. There was so much going on in my head and I didn't have the resources to care for my mental health. I couldn't even take in the fact that I was learning in class. Eventually, I had to withdraw. I wish the counseling center had been better equipped to support me when I sought support.

In conjunction with the systemic concerns that plagued the counseling / mental health centers at colleges nation-wide, students reported that they often did not trust the system, and

that the stigma around seeking out mental health services stymied their desire to access care. One student spoke to this, sharing:

Words are powerful. When you say mental health, people start thinking about bipolar, schizophrenia, personality disorders, and they have negative associations, particularly in communities of color. Instead of using the term “mental health center,” if it was called the counseling center or something that was a softer term, that could go a long way. There is so much stigma. If someone says, “hey, I’m going to the mental health center,” you would then immediately hear a peer say, “why do you need that? Are you crazy?”

A number of students spoke to the stigma they had internalized around mental health care from the messaging they received from their own families and communities, a trend that is often found in communities of color who have developed a distrust for systems that have historically oppressed them. One student spoke to this experience, sharing:

The stigma from my community is always in the back of my head. Last year when I was in counseling, my mother said, “you have no problems to be going to counseling, you have everything you want.” I said, “you can provide for me, but providing for me doesn’t make a person mentally happy” She got very upset and we didn’t talk for a little. It’s a Caribbean thing. You’re supposed to deal with those hardships, you don’t talk about your problems. No, you hard up, and keep it going, you push through. When you come to the US and you’re from the Caribbean and you hear the term mental health you think, what is that stuff? It’s not a thing, just keep pushing, put the band aid on and walk, that’s it.

A peer echoed this experience, stating: “So, I’m Caribbean-American. Growing up, all the rest of my mom’s friends and my friend’s parents were like, “don’t go to therapy you ain’t got nobody who can tell you how to think. You pray, and you go on.”

Student after student spoke about the profound power that the stigmatization of mental health had on their willingness to express vulnerability and seek out supports when they needed them most. Many students reported hearing white students on campus who had therapists from back home, or who had been in therapy for years. “Therapy is for white people,” one student shared with me. “We can’t afford it, and it wasn’t made for us. It wasn’t created with our needs

in mind.” One student acknowledged the acute impact of such stigmatization around her own willingness to accept care, sharing:

My mental health destroyed me, it crippled me in every way that you can think of. Coming from my family, they don't believe in therapy. They say, “so you want to let other people tell you what's wrong with you?” I told my mom multiple times when I first started experiencing anxiety and depression. At one point, I was suicidal. But they didn't believe in therapy and of course I absorbed that message. She would say to me, “Oh, you want people to think that you are crazy?” and I would start thinking that way as well. So, if therapy or counseling were introduced to me, I would immediately say, “no.”

I hoped that I would get over it, maybe it's just a temporary feeling that I'm having. But, once it got to the point where my mental health so impacted me that I got kicked out of school because my grades had gotten to the point of no return, I sat down and I thought, “how much longer are you going to keep allowing yourself to go through this?” That was a revelation for me, and I decided to get the help I needed. It made all the difference.

Regardless of the stigma around mental health care that students cited as a barrier to their access to treatment, the most prominent concern voiced throughout the focus groups was that of a lack of diversity amongst the mental health care practitioners within the counseling centers on campus. One participant, a current student at a large private university spoke to this concern, stating:

After I missed a month of school and my GPA was really low, I wanted to get therapy. I went to the office and I realized that they're all white and older. I didn't want to speak about my trauma and the violence that I've been through with someone who doesn't understand. I have my own trust issues and I don't think I can have a white therapist; I think that's something that I learned for myself, I can't, I'm not going to feel safe, I'm not going to trust them. That's one of our demands, for the school to hire more counselors of color. There are 22,000 students at the University and there are 20 therapists. How are they all white? I don't know, that doesn't make sense to me.

A recent graduate of another university shared a similar sentiment, speaking to the need to diversify the providers at college counseling centers:

I went to the Counseling Center on campus, but they only had white staff. As a black man, I couldn't speak to someone who wouldn't understand my issues. As a white woman, you're not going to understand my struggles, let alone the fact that I'm a black person at the end of the day. If you don't understand that struggle, then you're not going to be able to help me.

Other students followed suit. A student at a small liberal arts college shared, “All of the counselors are white and I'm not going to speak to somebody that's not going to understand anything about my lived experience. They can listen, but if they've never felt the pain that I've felt or experienced what it's like to be black in America, they can't understand me. They can't help me.” Another student spoke to his experience as a black, gay man on campus, speaking to the importance of providing mental health practitioners that can serve the intersectional needs of students on campus, “As a black, gay man, I didn't feel comfortable speaking to an older white woman about my mental health. To dig into the nitty gritty of a lot of my issues, they would never relate. So, there's no point in us talking.” Yet another student spoke to the internal conflict that arose when the counseling center on her campus did hire one black therapist for a campus of nearly 10,000 students:

Eventually, they hired one black counselor. So, everyone you know goes to the same black counselor on campus. It didn't feel like there could be privacy or confidentiality, and more importantly, it didn't feel good to see that the campus only hired one clinician of color. It would be good for the campus to care about you enough to get you more support on campus, support that matches the proportion of your community on campus.

Another student spoke to the power of having a therapist of color, an opportunity she had outside of her university, through her work with a virtual therapy platform called Ayana and their partnership with KIPP. The student shared:

Having a therapist of color, she just gets it. There is no extra step. I might explain to her the unique nuances of me as a person, but overall, she just gets it. She is able to tune in. She will remind me to remember these external parts of myself or will remind me that my family is living with a dual lens. She is able to articulate it in a way that is meaningful to me. She is young enough to speak to me in a language that I understand. She checks me on things that I need to be checked on and validates me on the things that I need to be validated on. And when it comes to just living life as a Black person in America, she gets it. I don't have to do the extra. But, I shouldn't have to go outside of my university to get that.”

Implications + Recommendations

The voices of our students are powerful and full of conviction; a tremendous resource for colleges and universities throughout the country that are committed to fostering a culture of equity and belonging for all students. The above sample of student narratives sheds light on the legacy of systemic racism and institutionalized oppression that continue to operate at the highest levels of education in this country, debunking the myth of meritocracy that we so often embrace. As the words of our students so painfully illustrate, college admission is a far cry from the equalizer that some believe it to be. In fact, the flawed promise that an offer of admission equals acceptance only alienates students further, as they are ultimately met with the reality of being treated as an outsider upon arrival on campus. If institutions of higher education are truly committed to serving as vehicles of opportunity in our highly stratified nation, they must reflect on the ways in which their policies exacerbate the pre-existing inequities that students bring to campus. We must recognize that in order to assess the effectiveness of equity and inclusion practices in higher education, we must look not to the admissions statistics of a particular university, but rather to the graduation rates of their marginalized students.

True progress will result from a structural reorientation of the ways in which we view equity and inclusion, with the voices of our first-generation students of color leading the way. Our students know what they need to flourish on campus, to be greeted and embraced with the same sense of home that our more privileged students too often take for granted. Although universities throughout the country espouse a commitment to diversity and inclusion, or, more recently, anti-racist practices, the experiences of our students indicate that they too often fall short on these assurances. Instead, they place the emotional labor of supporting their more marginalized students on the students themselves. It is clear from the narratives of our students that they are responsible in many ways for their own successes, and for those of their peers. They

lift one another up, build community, and empower each other to advocate for their needs. Yet, this responsibility is draining and burdensome, and has only been bestowed upon them due to a lack of a coordinated university response.

Our students have expressed their needs – a university community that embraces them and welcomes them to a campus that does not exude an ethos of saviorism, but instead, genuinely recognizes and appreciates the unique contributions that students of color offer to the larger community as a whole. Universities must cultivate a community of staff and faculty who reflect the students they admit. They must provide training on the profound implications of implicit bias, stereotype threat, and imposter syndrome operating in the classroom to combat the powerful forces of oppression that linger in academia and disempower students of color. These trainings must be mandatory, and it must be an expectation that all faculty committed to the goals of the university are also committed to efforts to promote a more inclusive campus culture, regardless of the professor's subject matter or level of expertise. Included in these trainings must be an overview of policies and procedures to promote understanding for university students who are working on campus and navigating the realities of poverty. And, strict policies must be created to respond to any incidents of racism or discrimination on campus, perpetuated by either students or faculty. There must be a committee that oversees these incidents, and a university representative who acts as a liaison to the community police, for those students who are uncomfortable engaging with the local police force.

While it is clear that summer programs committed to welcoming first-generation students of color on campus can be powerful and affirming, our students' testimonies indicate that these programs fail to generalize to the larger campus culture. Universities tend to offer such programs with little follow-through, leaving students with the uncomfortable feeling of being abruptly

released from a cocoon and left to fend for themselves on a campus that was not built with their needs in mind. These supports must generalize to the larger campus setting, and should be offered throughout the year, with a more systematic and graduated approach that reaches all levels of the institution.

First-generation students of color need a space to call their own on campus, a center committed to their well-being that is embedded within the university walls. The space should provide a sense of community and belonging for students and can serve as a safe haven for those who for so long have been disregarded within a campus culture that historically perpetuates marginalization. These departments must be staffed with individuals of color who can serve as advocates for students when needed and are able to cultivate the sense of home that so many first-generation students lack when they embark on their academic careers.

The interviews above illustrate the need for a manualized intervention, grounded in the voices of first-generation BIPOC students, that fosters a sense of belonging and community on campuses throughout the country. This manualized intervention would outline the content of a week-by-week support group to be led by peer mentors. It would conclude with a section detailing best practices, policies, and programming to support first-generation students of color on campus. While the manual will be grounded in the thoughts and observations of students and current research in the field, the narratives above illustrate the need for a manual aimed to foster community building; address history of exposure to chronic trauma, stress and adversity; and create a safe space for first-generation students of color to come together and build community as they speak about their unique experiences on college campuses---including their protective factors, resiliency factors, and the risk factors that they face. The goal for the manual is that it will foster institutional support and belonging for FGCS of color on college campuses.

The testimonies above indicate that preventive intervention in the form of a support group protocol offered outside of the college counseling center may reduce stigma around mental health concerns for first-generation students of color and encourage greater access to resources and supports. Such an intervention may enhance protective factors, such as community cohesion, and combat the risk factors that these students face as members of underserved and marginalized communities. An overview of best practices in the field indicates that a manual is needed to serve as a guide for centers on college campuses that are charged with the role of supporting first-generation students of color as they transition to and persist in college.

Much of the manual would be based upon the themes listed above and would provide psychoeducation to students to help them better understand, share and process their lived experiences on campus in community with one another. It would be relational, trauma-informed, and healing-centered, facilitated by both peer mentors and staff who are trained mental health practitioners. It would be offered within the walls of the center and would serve as an affirming opportunity for students who otherwise may feel pathologized seeking services from the mental health center on campus. This manual could be called upon as a resource by colleges and universities throughout the country, in an effort to standardize an approach that is grounded in theory and is evidence-based. This manual would be facilitated by peer mentors and a licensed clinician.

The student narratives above indicate that all first-generation students of color should be assigned a peer mentor, an upperclassman who reflects their identity and can help guide them through the unfamiliar terrain of higher education. These peer mentors should be compensated for their time and energy, providing a work study opportunity for students employed on campus. The center would train these students in facilitating the weekly supportive group space.

Faculty throughout the university should be invited to partake in meals and community events at the center, building connections and breaking down the barriers that too often prevent first-generation students of color from developing relationships with their professors, therefore leading them to evade internship and research opportunities. On a more programmatic level, universities must respond to the needs of our first-generation BIPOC students by eradicating the issues of access that plague their campus experience. They must respond to the food insecure by providing access to dining halls during weekends and holiday breaks. They must ensure access to all campus wide events for students who cannot afford to purchase a ticket, and they must be mindful of the job opportunities and wages that they offer to their students in order to promote a culture of equity on campus. University administrators and faculty must engage in efforts to destigmatize mental health on campus, offering a campus counseling center that is affirming and inclusive with counselors of color who reflect the intersectionality of the university's students.

It is evident from the testimonies above that first-generation students of color are profoundly resilient. Yet, they shouldn't have to be resilient in ways that other students aren't. It is time that universities both hear and respond to the needs of all students, channeling their stories into concrete policy changes and programming that will foster a culture of higher education that is both inclusive and equitable. Universities must deliver on the promises they make to each and every student when they extend an offer of admission to a university that they can all their own, turning the idea of meritocracy in this country from a myth to a reality for all students, regardless of their racial or socio-economic background. Our students have provided a road-map of the supports they need, and deserve, and it is now our responsibility to follow it.

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