Spring 2023

"I Don't Want to Produce Academic Results": Mapping the Daily and Costly Persistence of First-Generation and Low-Income College Students of Color

Aleina Dume , '23

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Mapping the Daily and Costly Persistence of

First-Generation and Low-Income College Students of Color

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May 10th, 2023

Undergraduate Thesis in Sociology & Anthropology

Swarthmore College

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Professors Lisa Smulyan and Edlin Veras for mentoring me and advising me during my Swarthmore experience and the thesis process. I also appreciate Professors Désirée Díaz and Edwin Mayorga for being the first faculty members whom I connected with and found mentors in. It was their confidence in me that helped me to cultivate my voice as a writer and see myself as a scholar. I want to acknowledge and thank the Eugene Lang Foundation and Lang Opportunity Scholarship at Swarthmore College, as well as the Mellon Foundation and Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship, for their funding and advising as I pursued my goals.

I am also grateful to my mom Aleisha, Patrick, and Bella for their care and support. They have shown me that I will always be more than a student and am not defined by my accomplishments, that I am loved, and that I can build a life that fulfills me and that I am proud of. I cannot acknowledge all of the mentors, supervisors and peers who have impacted me, but I must thank Seyward Darby for introducing me to what a thesis is, and for helping me find my way to Swarthmore College.

I am thankful for the time spent, meals shared, and memories made with my friends Gia, Yang, and Dorothy. These people and other peers have helped and encouraged me and inspired me to celebrate myself and ask more of the institutions and communities that I am a part of. I want to acknowledge them, and the many other first-generation and low-income students of color that I have worked with, learned from, and been changed by. This group of students showed me what I am and could be capable of, and has inspired me to seek out stories and use information in new ways that I did not know were possible before attending college. Finally, I want to share my appreciation for the Dining Services and EVS staff (shoutout to the folks at Essie Mae's!) for feeding me and keeping our campus clean; their work has helped me to be as healthy and comfortable as possible as I navigated college life, various challenges, and the pandemic.

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Introduction

Over the last decade, colleges and universities have recruited and enrolled more first-generation and low-income (FGLI) students of color than ever before. In fact, at the very site of this study, one in three students is first-generation and nearly one in five received a Pell Grant, which is a federal scholarship that is often used as a marker for low-income status in higher education. Given this trend, we must ask: on a day-to-day basis, what are the daily costs and practices experienced by this group of students? When we narrow this question to people of color who are low-income and/or the first-generation to attend college, are the institutional structures around them serving them effectively or fairly?

The field of college success, which includes programs, organizations, and research to help students reach graduation, often engages with the idea of persistence. In this field, persistence is generally used to describe the actual pursuit and achievement of graduation. This means that a student *persists* when they complete and earn a degree. In this thesis, I invite us to think more expansively about persistence. I argue that FGLI students of color demonstrate daily acts of persistence which help them to move through their institution, in line with traditional persistence, and also improve their school in the process. I aim to add a more holistic and short-term lens to persistence to respond to the systemic issues and urgent needs that first-generation and low-income students of color encounter. This approach can also enable us to incorporate students' insights from their ongoing efforts to meet their basic needs, pursue social mobility, and achieve their goals, so that we can make our environments more inclusive and equitable in real time.

The daily persistence practices, acts, or strategies that I have identified among my participants include sharing resources, building community, asking for help, and showing up

when they are uncomfortable, to specific events as well as each day by remaining enrolled. As students encounter the effects of structural inequalities in their individual lives, it is essential to remember that these situations and which strategies students respond with do not start nor end in college. The personal, academic, social, and professional situations that FGLI students of color navigate are evident in their lives prior to their college enrollment and will remain after their graduation or other departures from higher education. The strategies that I have identified became clear through students' experiences in campus life; academics; interactions with professors and wealthier and white peers; and their institution's processes and bureaucracy. These areas of college life also reflect the outline for my Findings sections and the topics of the practical recommendations that I provide in the Conclusion section.

Given my own experiences as a FGLI woman of color with several ties to the FGLI population on my campus, I wanted to figure out where and how we move from being a student group of shared identities to an intentional, mutually supportive community. Through the memories, critiques, and ideas of eight other FGLI students of color, I have located key moments, interactions, and processes of empowerment and pain alike. Their interviews became both parallel journeys unfolding on the same campus and deeply interwoven lives that challenged, in highly visible and quiet ways, the unfair reality of navigating an institution that was not designed for us.

Defining FGLI

If we are to understand their college experiences, we must first know who is included in the discussion of first-generation and low-income students. FGLI or FLI is an acronym used to refer to a group of students who self-identify as the first in their family to attend college

(first-generation) and/or low-income (Swarthmore College 2023; University of Pennsylvania 2023). Depending on the organization or institution, the student may be the first generation or person to attend college generally, or specifically in the United States. For example, the federal government, Pew Research, and Center for First-Generation Student Success consider a college student first-generation if neither of their parents holds a Bachelor's degree (Cataldi et al. 2018; Fry 2021; RTI International 2019a). This means that students whose parents hold an Associate's degree would be first-generation, but not those students whose parents hold a college degree from another country, even if the higher education system is different in the U.S. and they have gained no guidance or privilege from their parent's higher education. Low-income is also defined in different ways, though the federal government considers a student low-income if their "family income is at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty threshold" (Taylor and Turk 2019; Department of Health and Human Services 2023). For example, a family of four would be low-income if they earned about $38,000 (Department of Health and Human Services 2023) which means that being low-income depends on a spectrum of factors including family size and regional cost of living.

Higher Education Context

Higher education includes any formal education after high school and the system is generally separated into two parts. The first is undergraduate education, during which someone can earn an Associates or Bachelors degree in roughly two or four years, respectively. A person must hold a Bachelor's degree to proceed to the second part, graduate education, which would earn someone an advanced degree such as a Masters, PhD, EdD, etc. Bachelor's degrees are offered by colleges or universities, which differ primarily by their size. Colleges are generally

smaller, in part because universities may teach undergraduate and graduate students. For clarity, I will use the word "colleges" to mean all higher education institutions, including universities. Liberal arts colleges specifically are characterized by smaller class sizes, easier access to professors, and major offerings that are less geared towards a specific job function or career path. This thesis will focus on undergraduate education, and specifically that offered by a liberal arts college which only awards Bachelors degrees.

Higher education was originally designed to serve middle-class white men and often institutions were first created for religious or economic reasons (Museus et al. 2015; Labaree 2019; Thelin 2019). Some universities are made up of colleges whereas a small liberal arts college may exist on its own, like The College in this study does. There are also Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) which include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and Tribal Colleges. These institutions tend to serve a larger number of FGLI students of color. In fact, MSIs serve the largest number of students of color, and these kinds of institutions were at times supported for their potential to keep college education racially segregated (Museus et al. 2015). To provide funding for the establishment of dozens of colleges, the Morrill Act was created to take and sell or transfer ownership of land that belonged to Indigenous people (Lee and Ahtone 2020). Additionally, the high cost of college has created an inequitable distribution of student loan debt, particularly among Black women college graduates (Mustaffa and Dawson 2021; Miller 2017). Given this context and the lived experience of students, staff, and faculty of color, many researchers argue that higher education causes harm to the historically excluded people that institutions enroll and hire (Ahmed 2012; Whitaker and Grollman 2019; García Peña 2022; Vue 2021).

Demographics and Persistence of the FGLI Student Population

To provide more context on FGLI students of color, I will provide the relevant and recent demographic data available. Given that national data on college students only becomes available every several years, I start with two sets of information; the first is from around 2008 and the second includes data from 2016 and on.

In 2005, about sixteen percent of all first-year college students were first-generation compared to about thirty-nine percent in 1971 (Saenz et al. 2007). In 2008, twenty-four percent or 4.5 million students of the entire college population identified as both first-generation and low-income (Engle and Tinto 2008). FGLI students are more likely to be female, to have a disability, or to be a part of an underrepresented racial or ethnic group (Engle and Tinto 2008; Saenz et al. 2007) They are also more likely to be older when they attend college, to have dependents, to be financially independent, or to be a single parent (Engle and Tinto 2008). Among the students surveyed, the following groups included more first-generation college students than not: African American/Black, Asian American/Asian, Mexican American/Chicano, Puerto Rican American, Other Latino students (Saenz et al. 2007). FGLI students are more likely to be born outside of the U.S. and to not speak English as a first language, compared to students who are only first-generation, only low-income, or who are neither (Saenz et al. 2008). First-generation students are less likely to be citizens compared to students who are not first-generation (Saenz et al. 2008). Students who are both first-generation and low-income more commonly live closer to their home and do not live on-campus (Saenz et al. 2008). In addition, first-generation students are less likely to have parents who are both alive and living together (Saenz et al. 2008). It was more common for both parents to be alive and divorced or living apart, or for either to be deceased. The parental income for most first-generation students ranged

from $30,000 to $39,000; for non-first-generation students, this number was over three times higher (Saenz et al. 2008). Research shows us that students of color and low-income students have a higher chance of taking out loans than their white and wealthier counterparts yet have lower odds of earning a degree from elite institutions (Price, 2004).

There is a mismatch between where FGLI students pursue college and which institutions graduate the greatest number of FGLI students, which means that FGLI students often attend schools with lower graduation rates because they are more financially or geographically accessible. First-generation and low-income college students are four times more likely (27% versus 7%) to drop out of college after their first year than non-FGLI students are (Engle and Tinto 2008). Of the students who did not earn a Bachelor's degree or remain in college after six years, most dropped out during their first year. (Engle and Tinto 2008). Only 11% of FGLI students earn a Bachelor's degree within six years compared to 55% of students who are not FGLI (Engle and Tinto 2008). Most FGLI students who earn a Bachelor's degree do so at private four-year colleges (43%), compared to 34% at public four-year colleges, and 5% at public two-years (Engle and Tinto 2008). However, of these institution types, FGLI students enroll at private four-years at the lowest rate (6%) and public-two years at the highest rate (52%) (Engle and Tinto 2008). These statistics show that FGLI students do not have the same experience or route to graduate at each kind of institution and some have been more successful with supporting their FGLI students through to graduation.

In the second set of data, from 2016 and later, most information is available on first-generation students, who are defined here as students who have parents without a 4-year or Bachelors degree. In 2015-2016, 24% of undergraduates had parents who never went to college and 56% had parents without a 4-year or Bachelors degree (RTI International 2019a). It was

more common for first-generation students to be older and they were two times more likely than

continuing-generation students to be older than 30 (RTI International 2019a). Moreover,

first-generation students were more likely to have dependents, be a veteran, and identify as

female; they were less likely to enroll full-time in college (RTI International 2019a). Of the

Black, Latinx, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander college students

enrolled that year, more were first-generation college students than not (RTI International

2019a). Moving on, the family income for first-generation college students was about $41,000

versus $90,000 for non-first-generation students (RTI International 2019a). The trend continues

that first-generation students attend private non-profit 4-year institutions the least and for-profit

(4- and 2-year) schools the most (RTI International 2019a). More first-generation students also

persist at private non-profit 4-year colleges than they do at public 4-years or private, for-profit

4-year colleges (RTI International 2019b).

In 2015, about 43% of new undergraduates were first-generation (Startz 2022). In their

first year, fewer first-generation students reported using financial aid services but used health

services, academic advising, and academic support (ex: tutoring) than non-first-generation (RTI

International 2019). Neither groups used career related services a significant amount as

first-years (RTI International 2019). At "very selective' colleges, about 27% of students were

first-generation and at "moderately selective," 45% were (Startz 2022). More

non-first-generation students attend selective colleges (Startz 2022; Fry and Cilluffo 2019).

About three out of every four (76%) first-generation students at "very selective" colleges

graduate compared to 86% of non-first-generation students at the same type of institution; at

"moderately selective" schools, 59% of first-generation students graduate (Startz 2022). In one

dataset, the average parental income for first-generation college students was $58,000 and non-first-generation students was more than double, at $120,000 (Startz 2022).

According to the Pew Research Center, 13% of undergraduates at "very selective" schools are in poverty and there were more students of color at these institutions (44%) in 2016 than in 1996 (28%) (Fry and Cilluffo 2019). Over half of undergraduates in 2015-2016 were white, then 19% Latinx, 15% Black, 6% Asian, 3.3% more than one race, 2.8% international, and 0.8% Alaska Native (Fry and Cilluffo 2019; Taylor and Turk 2019). For The American Council on Education, Taylor and Turk additionally found that 43% of undergraduates are low-income, which they assessed in the same way the federal government does, if an individual's "family income is at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty threshold (2019; Department of Health and Human Services 2023). In 2016, 34.9% of undergraduates received a Pell grant, which is awarded to those with the most financial need; in 2020-2021, 32.1% of undergraduates did (National Center for Education Statistics 2023). According to the President's Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, there are 450,000 undocumented college students and about half, "216,000 are DACA-eligible (they either hold or would have been eligible for DACA)" (2020).

When income is equal, first-generation students are 16% less likely to graduate than non-first-generation students (Startz 2022). After being enrolled for six years, 20% of first-generation students earn a Bachelors degree compared to 49% of non-first-generation students (RTI International 2019b). As Startz recognizes, being first-generation is not the same as being low-income, and money alone does not explain the college trends among FGLI students. First-generation students are less likely to graduate as 70% of non-first-generation students do while only 26% of first-generation students do (Fry 2021). First-generation college graduates

have a lower average income and less wealth, which is "the value of all the assets owned by the household…minus outstanding debts owed…" (Fry 2021). More first-generation students, two out of three, owe debt for their higher education (Fry 2021).

It is clear that the FGLI students of color in college across the U.S. come from diverse backgrounds and have no singular life path, though they do share common characteristics and can have similar experiences once they enter higher education. FGLI students are more likely to be students of color, to have a disability, and to be women (RTI International 2019a; Engle and Tinto 2008; Saenz et al. 2007). Many are older than individuals who begin their higher education immediately upon high school graduation and many FGLI students attend community colleges, though some enroll in selective colleges, where there are less FGLI students and students of color (RTI International 2019a; Engle and Tinto 2008; Saenz et al. 2007). Compared to non-FGLI students, FGLI students leave college after their first year more frequently and have lower graduation rates (Engle and Tinto 2008). There is an important overlap between FGLI students and undocumented students, as some though not all FGLI students are also undocumented or DACA-recipients (Saenz et al. 2007; President's Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration 2020). Finally, FGLI are also more likely to have caregiving responsibilities and less likely to be dependent students than non-FGLI students (RTI International 2019a; Engle and Tinto 2008). It is clear that FGLI students of color have different kinds of responsibilities that they must fulfill as they navigate their personal circumstances, structural issues in society, and the nuances of their institution.

Research Questions

In order to better understand how FGLI students of color experience and respond to their campus environment, I sought out to explore the following questions:

- How do FGLI college students navigate The College, a selective liberal arts college?
- What strategies, if any, do FGLI students employ that exemplify resistance and community-building?
- How does a FGLI identity shape a college student's engagement in college life?

I prioritize taking an asset-based approach that uplifts the daily persistence strategies of FGLI students of color because this group is navigating an institution that was not designed for their inclusion or success. By looking at how they maneuver within as well as challenge and change their environments, we can gain more knowledge about what a structural and interpersonal support system for FGLI students of color would look like. Likewise, a deficit-based approach that blames students for the challenges they face in pursuit of traditional ideas of persistence would fail to critically engage with the historical and sociopolitical realities that FGLI students of color face and feel the effects of each day, whether they are enrolled in college or not.

As I will elaborate in the Methods section, I approached these questions through in-depth interviews with 8 to 10 respondents who are in their sophomore to senior years at The College and pursuing an undergraduate Bachelors degree.

The Research Site: The College

The College is a small liberal arts college in the Northeast that is private, non-profit, and a 4-year institution. It offers a student-faculty ratio of less than 10:1 and enrolls less than 2,000 students overall. Overall, one in four students at The College are first-generation and one in five receive a Pell Grant. In the most recently accepted class of students, one in three students are first-generation. Each year, the College charges students about $80,000 to attend, and accepts under 10% of all applicants. About half of all students receive some financial aid each year, ranging from $1,000 to enough for the entire year's bill. It is important to know that The College follows one of the most generous financial aid policies, which means that any student with "demonstrated financial need" will receive financial aid to meet their need without loans. This informs whether students apply and if they decide to enroll, including for the participants in this study. Likewise, undocumented student applicants are evaluated for admission without consideration of their income or ability to afford college which prevents bias and can improve their access to higher education.

Nearly all of The College's students live on campus and most engage in some volunteering. About one-third of students worked with a community-based organization during high school and two thirds attended public or charter schools. One third of students are white. International, Latinx, and Asian students each separately make up between 13% to 20% of the student body. Less than 10% are Black students, and the same is true of students who identify with two or more races. Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander students each represent under 1% of the enrolled population at The College. While I study my questions using interviews with a specific and small group in this context, the persistence of FGLI students

of color is a national topic and part of a larger conversation about how to increase access to college and success once there.

Positionality

In the same way that this research focuses on a particular set of experiences, I bring a distinct lens to this project. I am a FGLI student of color and woman, and both of these aspects of my identity shape how I have experienced college and our society. Also, my perspectives and the insights that I've gained from my peers, professors, family, and coursework inspired my topic and why I decided to focus on how FGLI students of color experience campus life and move through the institution, rather than solely focus on just academics. As students, we bring so much more to any college than our capacity to formally learn in a classroom setting, and I am excited to share the stories of eight individuals who exist as and see themselves as multidimensional and evolving people in the same way that I have come to make sense of my own ongoing higher education journey. I strongly believe that we can celebrate our strengths and what we have overcome without celebrating the circumstances, in our lives or society, that we navigated or are navigating through. That said, I aim to bring an asset-based and critical perspective to my research to understand how our personal experiences are grounded in an unequal and unfair reality, so that we can begin to untangle where we have control and can work towards improvements that see one another's humanity and needs, and can meet them with compassion, care, dignity, and resources.

By entering the conversation on FGLI students of color, I am learning from the contributions of other researchers as much as their missteps. As Kundu points out, much of the existing research often misrepresents this group's experiences by "not addressing social and

cultural contexts of students" whom they study (2019: 694). Kundu continues, "This may lead researchers to unintentionally advance societal beliefs around individualism as sufficient for college success, without attention to the disparate levels of social support and cultural understanding that some students have greater access to, but that all students need to thrive at the postsecondary level" (2019: 694). In this project, I intentionally focus on recognizing and addressing the multiple environments that participants live, study, and build community in so that I can more fairly and fully represent the knowledge that they allow me to document.

The Argument

In this thesis, I argue that first-generation and low-income students of color show daily acts of persistence which help them to move through the institution and make it better in the process. While these actions help the participants to achieve their goals, they also come at a cost. We must widen our understanding of persistence as it relates to the college success of first-generation and low-income students of color to think beyond whether or not they finish and earn a degree. As I will explain, FGLI students of color are already persisting and creating avenues to what they need and want, and they will also be called upon to enact their strategies in new ways or different contexts after they leave higher education.

Outline

The thesis is divided into four major parts: Methods and Theories, Literature Review, Findings, and conclusion, in addition to an appendix. The Methods chapter will discuss how I conducted my research and what protocols I followed to ensure that I protected my participants' privacy and confidentiality. In the Theories section, I outline the main concepts and frameworks

that shaped my research design, data collection, and analysis. Next, the Findings section is further separated into five sections, where I explore the participants' experiences in, ideas about, and strategies for the following parts of their education and life at college: K-12 Education, Academics at The College, Relationships, Wellbeing and Belonging, and Navigating the Institution. I close the thesis with a Conclusion where I summarize the main daily acts of persistence, implications and recommendations for colleges, and ideas for the direction of future research.

Methods

Research Approach and Requirements

I conducted qualitative human subjects research with 8 FGLI students of color. I chose to complete semi-structured in-depth interviews in order to collect information about students' backgrounds, experiences, ideas, and perspectives through their own words and understandings (Laureau 2021; Magnusson and Marecek 2015; Merriam 2009). I submitted my research plan to Swarthmore College's Sociology and Anthropology Departmental Review Committee to ensure it met ethical and procedural standards (Saldaña 2016). After revising based on comments and feedback, I received approval in November 2022.

I established five qualifications for interested students to become participants. This information was provided in my recruitment outreach, which I describe below. The requirements were that:

(1) The participant must be enrolled in a Bachelors degree program at The College;

(2) They must be in their sophomore, junior, or senior year of college;

(3) They must identify as first-generation to college and/or low-income (FGLI/FLI);

(4) They must be at least 18 years old; and

(5) They must identify as a student of color.

The timing and location of every participant's interview was decided by them. Each interview required about sixty minutes of a participant's time and was conducted at a date determined by our schedules either in a private room in an on-campus building of the College or

virtually via Zoom. All nine participants were compensated with a $15 Amazon gift card for their time provided by Swarthmore College's Educational Studies Department. The Educational Studies Department funded this because I am completing a major in their department as well and because of the interdisciplinary nature of my project.

I limited my study to students of color because research has documented the challenges that students of color who attend predominantly white institutions experience due to structural racism, prejudice, white supremacy, and discrimination (Benson and Lee 2020; Lee and Harris 2020; Museus et al. 2015; Stuber 2011; Wilder 2013). Extant literature on FGLI students also often focuses on FGLI students of color to conduct intersectional analyses of the ways in which people with a historically disenfranchised race and class background navigate their institution which either reflects or maintains middle class white norms (Adams and McBrayer 2020; Garriott et al. 2021; Jack 2019). Given this historical perspective and recent research, I wanted to continue to focus on the experiences of students who are less represented demographically and who may experience marginalization due to their positionality in this context.

Recruitment

I leveraged my existing networks of FGLI college students of color to recruit participants for interviews between November 2022 and February 2023. Upon approval to conduct research, I sent an email on the email listserv for the only student organization for first-generation and/or low-income students at the College. In this email, I introduced myself and my research project, and asked folks to reach out if they were interested in participating.

10 students responded to my email outreach via email or text. I responded to all 10

potential participants to confirm if they met the qualifications and to schedule an interview if so,

however some did not respond at both stages. Ultimately, I interviewed eight of the folks who

initially reached out. I previously knew four folks who expressed interest and three interview

participants (there is overlap between the groups).

Risks and Benefits

The only benefit to participating in interviews is the completion of my senior project,

which is required for my major. Participants may have experienced discomfort when they

reflected on previous or current circumstances/experiences that have shaped their life and

education experiences or goals. Given that all data will be confidential and anonymous and

interviews were conducted in public spaces or with privacy over Zoom, there was only a small

risk of occasional discomfort that does not exceed what may be expected in a casual

conversation.

Data Collection and Analysis

For in-person interviews, I followed my interview guide which included a series of 10

questions with possible follow-up prompts and then demographic questions (Magnusson and

Marecek 2015). I audio recorded the interviews on my personal cell phone or tablet and uploaded

them to my Swarthmore College Google Drive. I deleted all recordings from my devices after I

uploaded them to Google Drive. For virtual interviews conducted over Zoom, I audio and video

recorded the interviews directly onto my laptop and immediately uploaded them to my

Swarthmore College Google Drive. I deleted all recordings from my laptop after I uploaded them

to Google Drive. During virtual interviews, audio cannot be separately recorded from video so I informed my participants of this and that they could turn off their video before we started. The two virtual participants granted me their consent to collect both audio and video recordings, and kept their camera on. I did not use the video recordings for any purpose nor did I ever open those files.

Once the research was concluded, I renamed the audio for each participants' interview with the one they provided or, in the case of one participant who declined to choose, that I created. I sent these files to a transcription service and changed all text where participants state their name to the pseudonym then reviewed each transcript to ensure it accurately reflected the corresponding audio recording. The transcripts were stored in my password-protected Swarthmore College Google Drive. I coded the transcripts or reviewed them for specific themes, patterns, or unique instances which relate to my research questions (Freise 2012; Laureau 2021; Merriam 2009; Saldaña 2016). These codes provided the foundation for my analysis and the ideas I will argue or explore in later chapters. In my thesis, I changed (ex: generalized) some information that may otherwise identify specific participant(s).

All of my physical data such as printed transcripts or notes were stored in my locked college dorm room where I live alone, until I analyzed, transcribed or scanned and destroyed it. I only accessed the electronic data through my personal devices which are password protected and which I did not share with anyone. No one else had access to the research data.

Participants' Rights and Privacy

I have established guidelines to communicate my participants' rights and protect their privacy (Laureau 2021; Merriam 2009). As previously mentioned, during recruitment I let

readers know that their participation was voluntary and confidential. When we met to conduct the interview, I reviewed an Informed Consent and verbally reminded them that they can communicate any concerns or questions at any time in-person or via text/email. I also let them know that they have the right not to answer any questions and can end the interview or withdraw from it during or after the interview is completed with no penalty. Before we began an interview, I confirmed if the participant had any questions then, if not, I asked them to sign the Informed Consent form and/or verbally give their consent to participate. In addition, I shared that I will anonymize the data, or change any identifying details, including their name. Each participant had the option to choose their own pseudonym at the end of the interview and 7 did so. I chose a random name for the eighth participant who did not respond about their preferred pseudonym.

Upon completion of my thesis and prior to my graduation from Swarthmore College in May 2023, I will delete all data including audio and video recordings, transcripts, and paper and digital notes.

Demographics

In total, I conducted eight interviews. Six were in-person and two were virtual. On the next page, I have outlined the main demographics which I collected from all participants.

Pseudonym	First-Generation and/or Low-Income	Class year	Age	Hometown Region	Discipline of Major (Humanities, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences)	Racial and/or Ethnic Identities	Gender
Kane	Low-Income	Junior	21	West Coast	Humanities	Asian	Female
Isabelle	First-Gen	Junior	21	South	Social Sciences	Latina, Mexican	Female
Jasmine	Both	Sophomore	19	West Coast	Humanities and Social Sciences	Asian	Female
Moot	Low-Income	Senior	22	East Coast	Natural Sciences and Social Sciences	Southeast/ East Asian	Not disclosed
Elizabeth	Both	Senior	21	West Coast	Social Sciences	Alaska Native	Female
Miguel	Both	Sophomore	19	East Coast	Natural Sciences	Latino, Mexican American	Male
Lily	Both	Junior	20	Midwest and China	Social Sciences	Chinese American	Female

*Unfortunately, due to technical difficulties, I was unable to record a verification of all of

Fallon's demographics to include in the table above. Based on the information that we did

confirm, she is both first-generation and low-income, a sophomore, 19 years old, and identifies

as Chinese-Indonesian as well as Asian American. Prior to publication, I could not formally

verify her hometown region, major discipline, or gender (which we discussed at the end of her

interview) however, she may speak to some of these demographics in quotes that I will include

later.

Theories

Theories, concepts and frameworks are ideas about how to understand a specific topic or thing, such as an identity, interaction, or event. Across sociology, educational studies, and feminist studies, there are ideas regarding the relationships that people have with other people, to institutions and systems in society, and to society more broadly. The five ideas outlined below shape this study of FGLI college students of color. My theoretical goal is to explore how we internalize and collectively respond to the reality that higher education institutions are not built for FGLI students of color, yet the system relies on our labor in intellectual, physical, and emotional ways. The frameworks that I outline help me to question what sense of responsibility and gratitude we might have to our institutions and how to negotiate this alongside our practical needs, as well as how to resist and avoid complicity (Morton 2019) in our pursuits to provide equitable and accessible opportunities, achieve our goals, and graduate or exit this system on our terms.

This entire thesis aims to name and explore the structural issues at play through deep analysis of how these issues surface on individual and interpersonal levels. Therefore, my personal experiences as a FGLI college student of color helps me to move between discussions of my participants' experiences and the institutional nuances and social structures within which they live and work. The following theories prepare us for this analysis.

Having a "Sociological Imagination"

The first is C. Wright Mills' sociological imagination, which encourages us to consider how our personal experiences are not simply a reflection of our individual circumstances or abilities and to recognize how these experiences relate to how society is structured, including the

systemic inequalities we face (2000). Simply put, "Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both" (Mills 2000: 3). With a sociological imagination, faculty and administrators can work towards systemic improvements for how their college or university operates by listening to the experiences of former and current FGLI students as well as evaluating how they've facilitated or prevented diversity, equity, and inclusion. In this thesis, I will apply a sociological imagination to analyze students' experiences not solely as results of their sheer determination, capabilities, or efforts, but also consider the privileges they may hold and the barriers they have encountered within the larger circumstances of their lives and society.

Looking for "Community Cultural Wealth"

Another concept that informs this work is Tara J. Yosso's framework for community cultural wealth, which helps us to understand the assets that students of color bring to their education and, in this case, college campus (2005). We can extend Yossos' work to FGLI students of color specifically because there is an overlap in the student populations but also because first-generation and low-income students are two additional groups that navigate inequities and discrimination within higher education, like students of color broadly do (Museus et al. 2015; Warnock and Hurst 2016). Yosso identifies six forms of wealth that communities of color hold including the following (2005: 77-81):

- Aspirational capital, or an individual's ability to envision a future where their wishes come true and they goals are met

- Navigational capital, or how an individual figures out what they need to move through an institution

- Resistant capital, or an individual's ability to take actions that advocate for equality and fairness including educating others to demand respect and work towards social justice

- Linguistic capital, or the ability to communicate in multiple languages, dialects, etc. to engage people from different cultural backgrounds

- Familial capital, or the ideas, abilities, and insights an individual learns from their family and support system

- Social capital, or the relationships and support systems an individual can rely on

All six wealths will be looked for in the behaviors and ideas of the participants to explore when and how these wealths are evident. This can provide insight into how it is not FGLI students who are lacking but instead that institutions are not making space to work with FGLI students' strengths and the wealth which they bring to campus (Jack 2019). Importantly, as Yosso explains, "[These forms of capital] are not conceptualized for the purpose of finding new ways to co-opt or exploit the strengths of Communities of Color. Instead, community cultural wealth involves a commitment to conduct research, teach and develop schools that serve a larger purpose of struggling toward social and racial justice" (2005: 82). Yosso's framework contributes to the asset-based approach of this research project that seeks to celebrate students of color and their communities' abilities, successes, and persistence without a celebration or minimization of the complex and harmful circumstances they must navigate. Additionally, González et al.'s study (2009) documented how students of color and low-income students have "funds of knowledge," or how their background, strengths, and insights help them to build meaningful lives and can be incorporated into educational spaces for the benefit and enrichment of all. They elaborate that this rich set of ideas, skills, capacities, and experiences is regularly not being used nor are

relevant things being added to these students' funds by educational institutions (González et al. 2009). Both concepts offered by Yosso and González complement each other and offer us a shared language to recognize and empower FGLI students of color in practice.

The goal here is to understand how students take care of themselves and build strength while calling attention to ways that they can be better supported and treated, according to students themselves. In this small way, my research has an intentional mission to not take away from communities of color and a practical purpose to add to ongoing efforts to create a fair society where life is nurtured in stable, healthy, and joyful ways.

Exploring the "Intersectionality" of Students' Experiences

Next, intersectionality was established by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw to explain that marginalized people experience a layered oppression based on their various identities and social positions (Crenshaw 1991). In other words, an intersectional understanding of Black women in higher education would take at minimum the following into consideration: the history and ongoing reality of racism, white supremacy, patriarchy, sexism, and colonization (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1986). As we consider other dimensions of identity, including but not limited to age, disability, citizenship status, and more, we gain a deeper and more intersectional perspective. A valuable note that Crenshaw makes is that intersectionality is a tool to reflect on "...the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others… This is not to deny that the process of categorization is itself an exercise of power, but the story is much more complicated and nuanced than that…Subordinated people can and do participate, sometimes even subverting the naming process in empowering ways" (1991: 1297). This is helpful because there is power in having a label to recognize others who share your position in

society, or higher education specifically, but there can also be harm in being forced to recognize yourself or being recognized without your permission.

In this context, FGLI is one name for a group that students may self-identify with or be categorized into based on shifting definitions for first-generation and low-income and beliefs about this group rooted in deficits or assets (Atwood et al. 2020; Capannola and Johnson 2022; Gray et al. 2018; Lee and Harris 2020; Petty 2014; Sharpe 2017). As I will also explore in this research project, the FGLI label can be strategically used to access needed resources and be the catalyst for community-building.

Moving Along the "Borderlands" of Higher Education

Moving on, a fourth framework is Gloria Anzaldua's discussion of borderlands, which explores how people live on the margins or edge of a specific community or society because of identities that are chosen or placed on them which makes someone both an insider and outsider (1987). While this social location may be distressing or traumatizing, it can also lead to meaningful insights and strength, as well as an ability to move between cultures more fluidly (1987). Through her perspective as a Chicana mixed race woman, Anzaldua stresses that, "She has discovered that she can't hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within. Rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically" (1987: 101). I find this excerpt to resonate with the journey of FGLI students of color as documented in the literature (Jack 2019; Morton 2019; Lee 2020; Warnock and Hurst 2016) because it is a journey that requires you to move between different spaces and traditions, to expose yourself to ideas and

people that may be difficult to digest, and to remain flexible and open to new ways of living in order to gain new perspectives and knowledge.

I first discovered the application of Anzaldua's borderlands concept to marginalized students through Professor Cynthia Diana Villarreal, who studies and teaches this application of Anzaldua's writing (2021). It has also been applied in the *Chicana/o/x Dream* by Gilberto Q. Conchas and Nancy Acevedo (2020). Following Anzaldua, Villarreal, Concha and Acevedo, I consider FGLI students of color to exist on the margins of higher education due to their perceived and actual racial and ethnic identity as well as social class position.

In sociology, Patricia Hill Collins talks about how a similar "outsider within status" reflects the journey of Black women in higher education but also can extend to how other "less powerful outsiders" move through spaces not designed for them (1986: S29). Therefore, FGLI students of color may also be marginalized and have an outsider perspective based on other dimensions of their identity which they must navigate as they move through their institution.

Using Our "Double Consciousness"

W. E. B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness brings together the previously discussed theories to provide a way of articulating not only how we understand and recognize inequality but also come to know who we are and our inherent value in an unfair, oppressive society. Du Bois explains how Black people understand themselves according to how they think and feel about themselves as well as from the perspectives and judgment of others (1903). This is directly applicable to the experiences of Black people who experience this dynamic in society as well as in higher education as FGLI students. It is also relevant to other FGLI students of color and how they make sense of their position and power in a higher education system designed for

white people of a middle-class, who still often are peers or authority figures (Jack 2019; Wilder 2013). As Du Bois says, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (1903; 2007: 3). In some ways, higher education and the people within this system (students, professors, administrators, etc.) cannot see FGLI students for more than their identities, needs, challenges, or strengths (Gray et al. 2018; LeBouef and Dworkin 2021). Appropriately, each experience and day within higher education's orbit provides information to FGLI students of color which they can engage to develop more critical perspectives, build communities and partnerships through shared goals for social justice, and make informed decisions about how to protect themselves. By incorporating double consciousness, this research explores how FGLI students see themselves based on how people in higher education with other or more privileges see FGLI students, and how they persist to exercise their agency and creativity with others for a vision of what is possible that is far grander than college graduation alone.

Double consciousness is also an important tool to help us think through how FGLI students of color can be affirmed and empowered to know their value and deservingness despite any prejudice or lack of belief others may have. Du Bois famously discusses how ignorant white people treat Black people, asking, "How does it feel to be a problem?" (1903: 2). Despite what past research has claimed or what individuals may say, the presence of FGLI students of color in higher education, like Black people in the U.S., is not the problem nor was it ever.

The problem is that colleges and universities, like society for Black people and other people of color, are not designed for FGLI students of color. We must remember that this student group entering academic spaces, asking for the support they need, and expecting respect and

dignity, are among the daily acts that lead to students' persistence. These acts, then, become the solution that will make higher education more inclusive and fair. As you will see, the theories outlined above help researchers to understand power dynamics and inequality in society but also have value in everyday life as they contribute to the ways that individuals can make sense of and improve their experiences, including when that means we must hold other people or institutions accountable for their role in these improvements.

Literature Review

In my review of the literature, I sought to find out how the historical roots of higher education explain its current practices and approaches, or lack thereof, to retain and graduate FGLI students of color. Primarily, I aimed to identify studies that were either major contributions to the field of college success and student development or that provided a recent and intersectional perspective on this group's experience. I was eager to incorporate literature beyond this group's academic pursuits and role in the classroom, to hold space for how FGLI students of color have full lives as people. In addition, I believed that a broader lens would illuminate how other areas of their college experience and background shape one another throughout their years in college. My theoretical frames encouraged me to identify how other researchers and practitioners center student voice and agency as well as who empowers FGLI students and their families. Rather than aim for an exhaustive review of literature on these groups, I have reviewed articles and books about first-generation, low-income, and/or students of color with regard to their campus life, mental health and wellbeing, family dynamics and home communities, academics, professors, and technology, among other relevant topics. Although many articles do not study FGLI students who are also people of color in elite, white, and wealthy higher education contexts, there are many thought-provoking and insightful contributions from one or a handful of these dynamics that help to shape and explain my findings.

Before we review the literature on FGLI college students, I will first describe the experiences of students of color and FGLI students of color. This will be helpful to keep in mind as we explore the larger FGLI group's experience.

Identity Development in College

It is well documented that an individual's identity develops or "...becomes increasingly complex" throughout their life and new experiences, including when they attend college (Patton et al. 2016:5). In *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice* (2016) Patton et al. establish that a person's identity is shaped by their relations to others, their formal and organized involvement in activities, their privilege, and the oppression they face as well as the power available to or exerted on them. Moreover, the labels and identities that a college student has, whether they are assigned or chosen, develop their identity (Patton et al. 2016). While this includes socially constructed labels like race, Patton et al. state that more research is needed on how college students of color build their identity in general and with intersectional attention to other axes of inequality such as gender (2016; Crenshaw 1991). When an individual has a strong sense of identity, research has shown that they are more confident and successful in their schooling, capable of considering ethical dilemmas, and engaged in diverse communities (Hurtado et al. 2015). Hurtado et al.'s (2015) study found that about half of the students in historically marginalized groups such as those who are Arab Americans, Asians, Latinx, Indigenous, and Black "...report the highest levels of often/very often thinking about their background" and race. Likewise, being introduced to and taught about their race in schooling prior to and during college helps develop a student's identity (Hurtado et al. 2015).

The messages exchanged by people within college environments also contribute to student identity development. When Latinx college students, including those who are FGLI, have their personal and cultural values of collective efforts and interdependence affirmed by their support system and coursework, their activism and social justice goals are fostered (Norma López 2023). This development of their "critical consciousness" (Freire 1974) can in turn fuel

their academic identity and sense of purpose to, through partnerships with others and for everyone's benefit, better understand and address social issues, including those present in their own lives (Norma López 2023). Finally, peers serve an important role in college student identity development because "peer culture," ranging from campus clubs and organizations to discussions and social media or events, influence how students consider, decide, and share what their identities are (Renn 2020: 239; Shell et al. 2020). This cyclical process is what Gray et al. (2018) call "identity work," since it requires students to be open and dedicate effort to their growth. Given how identity exploration, commitment, and development impact students' mental health, one implication of this research is that colleges should foster peer relationships that provide healthy and intentional spaces for this journey during and beyond a student's first year of college.

Race and College Experience

Academic research identifies several ways that a student's racial and ethnic identity shapes their college experience. First and foremost, students of color are treated unfairly and experience violence such as profiling, verbal or physical assault, and even murder (Museus et al. 2015; Trolian and Locke 2018; Adams and McBrayer 2020). These instances contribute to worries from students and faculty of color about how safe their campus is for them (Adams and McBrayer 2020; García Peña 2022). Likewise, people stereotype students of color as lower income and question their abilities, qualifications, or deservingness to succeed or attend college (Warnock 2019; Lee and Harris 2016). Of course students of color can be low-income, but being a person of color does not automatically make someone low-income.

In addition to direct experiences with others, students of color may feel invisible or hyper-visible because there are not many other students who share their racial or ethnic identity or because of how segregated campus life is (Warnock and Hurst 2016; Warnock 2019). Importantly, non-white college students may experience "cultural dissonance" or when their cultures, perspectives, and ways of navigating society do not align with that of other students on campus (Museus et al. 2015). Throughout *Intersectionality and Higher Education* (2019) edited by Byrd et al., authors argue that multiple dimensions or axes of an individual's identity (Crenshaw 1991) must be considered as context for their higher education experience. In particular, Warnock suggests that race and class must also be recognized as separate identities, even though they intersect, to avoid further isolating students who do not identify as middle-class white men or with the demographics of the majority student group on their campus (2019: 61, 63).

Colleges do not always make a successful effort to make their students of color feel included. While institutions may host events or fund programming "...to celebrate diversity on campus and encourage students to be proud and grateful..." students may still feel "unsupported" regardless of their participation (Warnock 2019: 66). At the same time, the fact that people of color who are FGLI students are attending college in the first place makes some students proud (Adams and McBrayer 2020) and they want spaces to appreciate various dimensions of their identities. College may also be the first time that students come to identify with a specific class or discuss their financial status (Warnock 2019). To counter racism in ways that are specific to students, Trolian and Locke suggest that a "microprogression" can be an intentional action to share more proactive information about how to navigate college with newer students, as well as welcome students and their families into discussions about how to improve

their college experience (2018: 71). Indeed, other scholars argue that FGLI students' families are excluded from their journey and should be more incorporated for everyone's wellbeing and students' success (Kiyama et al. 2018). Every FGLI student of color experiences college in a unique way with their own system of support, and yet the trends and power dynamics that cause this group harm or unnecessary pain must be uplifted and addressed.

Experiences of FGLI Students of Color

There is a need for more literature on the experiences of first-generation and low-income students of color, especially at a small liberal arts college and within this kind of institution on the East Coast. Here, I will outline the main findings from one study by Warnock and Hurst (2016) that has specifically focused on the experiences of the group I am studying, FGLI students who are also people of color, particularly at a college where students are mainly wealthy or white. In a group for FGLI students by FGLI students, of whom half identified as people of color, the students discussed how their first-generation and working-class or low-income identities are "invisible yet stigmatized" and not talked about as much as other social identities (Warnock and Hurst 2016: 266). Although the group had varying levels of experience and interest to take on an activist role, they collectively decided to pursue activism which made those who wanted to participate feel less lonely and more like they belonged as well as strengthened their belief in themselves/their capacities (Warnock and Hurst 2016). When students seek to organize around class, they do not necessarily intend to "celebrate" it given that, as Warnock and Hurst summarize, FGLI students "...were actively seeking upward mobility through education, a process that could effectively change their social class position in larger society" (2016: 268; Warnock 2019:66). Similarly, FGLI students of color often share goals to increase the stability of

their life as well as opportunities and resources available to them (Adams and McBrayer 2020).

Warnock and Hurst recommend one way to provide more resources for students who want to

gather to find and build community as well as make sense of their shared identities and to take

action together is to provide them with a physical meeting space for these commonly positive,

affirming interactions (2016). This is consistent with Lee and Harris' (2020) notion of

"counterspaces" and my participants' visions for higher education which I will describe later.

FGLI Student Experience

       The remainder of this literature review will focus on the experience of first-generation

and low-income students regardless of their race. However, when available, I will incorporate

research on FGLI students of color.

Priorities of First-Year Students

       Understanding the mindset of incoming FGLI students can provide more insight into how

they approach their college experience. Most incoming students report that securing a financially

stable career are strong motivations for why they will attend college (Saenz et al. 2007). A higher

percentage of FGLI students compared to non-FGLI students selected their college for its

proximity to their neighborhood, financial reasons, or career prospects (Saenz et al. 2007).

First-year students must leave their community and its norms which results in a separation that's

both physical and emotional (Morton 2019). The impacts of deciding to attend college for FGLI

students have been named the "ethical costs," as it can be challenging for students to maintain

ties with their support system and with the folks for whom they are a support system (Morton

2019: 60). There are many transitions beyond their physical location that FGLI students must balance once at college, which I will begin to review in the coming pages.

FGLI Students Compared to Non-FGLI Students

Self Perception

A greater number of both FGLI and non-FGLI students expected to earn up to a Master's degree in 2005 than 1971. Fewer FGLI students predicted that they will feel positively about their college choice, change their professional goals, and engage in non-academic activities than non-FGLI students (Saenz et al. 2007). FGLI students were more likely to report that they would work while in college, work full-time, and look for "personal counseling" (Saenz et al. 2007). FGLI students' most common priority was to have financial stability whereas for non-FGLI students' was to start a family (Saenz et al. 2007). The popular objectives for FGLI students related to personal- and community- development as opposed to external recognition (Saenz et al. 2007).

Past Experiences

In *The Privileged Poor*, Jack argues that students who attend elite prep high schools and programs, who he calls "the privileged poor," have a smoother transition to college than those who did not attend such schools or programs, or the "doubly disadvantaged" (2019). This distinction is important because the American education system prioritizes middle class norms and proactive students who independently express what they need or want (Anyon 1980; Calarco 2011) so all FGLI students will not have the same experience or encounter the same challenges. Though Jack's two conceptualized groups for FGLI students do not exclusively determine

whether a student experiences culture shock, most often doubly disadvantaged students do because they have little to no experience in a college-like environment, or at least less than their privileged poor and middle-class peers (2019).

Even with a growing familiarity, current college students can feel uncomfortable with what academic settings value and face a moral dilemma to succeed on their own, sometimes at the expense of others, when this is in opposition to the collaborative, supportive networks that their home communities often value and foster. (Jack 2016, 2019; Schademan and Thompson 2016). In other words, FGLI students can become disconnected from their home because the college environment is so different (Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2018). This indicates that FGLI students who struggle are not necessarily unprepared or incapable of success but rather that institutional norms do not reflect their assets and FGLI students can benefit from opportunities to become aware of and make informed decisions about how to navigate such systems (Schademan and Thompson 2016; Yosso 2005).

Class and Student Approaches

Low-income students may start college with expectations or experiences that do not align to that of their college which makes their success harder to achieve. Middle class students develop relationships with their professors that go beyond academics and involve a high level of frequent self-advocacy (Jack 2016, 2019). Students, particularly the "privileged poor," report a higher level of comfort and previous exposure to this vulnerability with faculty than the "doubly disadvantaged" (Jack 2016). When "doubly disadvantaged" students enter college, they often had little opportunities to practice and therefore are often not accustomed to college rituals such as regularly participating in class, attending office hours, speaking with a teaching assistant (TA)

about grades, or developing rapport for networking purposes (Demetriou et al. 2017; Jack 2019; Schademan and Thompson 2016).

The interrelatedness of college systems, including the student-faculty relationship. is not immediately obvious for students. I will talk more in-depth on the role of professors in FGLI students' journeys, but first want to discuss how the high stakes of the potential gains that students can have from their relationships with professors can initially cause them to avoid such interactions (Jack 2019; Demetriou et al. 2017). This is not the case for all FGLI students, especially over time or when they are connected to professors through structured activities outside of class, including mentored research which acn benefit their social-emotional wellbeing and career readiness (Demetriou et al. 2017; Haeger and Fresquez 2016; Mendoza and Louis 2018). FGLI students have reported that initiating communication with faculty is more approachable when their reason involves a personal interest or appealing opportunities, rather than doing it for the sake of good grades in a class or to generally get ahead (Demetriou et al. 2017; Schademan and Thompson 2016). It is essential that FGLI students know the value of cultivating relationships with their professors, and that they not only know how to do this but also feel empowered to, but also that professors are receptive to their approaches.

Wellbeing and Belonging

Mental and Physical Health

The mental health of FGLI college students of color is a serious topic that is dependent on factors within and beyond their control. In general, more college students and young adults are struggling with anxiety, depression, and their mental health overall (Kreniske et al. 2022, National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine 2021). Moreover, about one in three

college students experiences generalized anxiety disorder and nearly two out of every five live with major depressive disorder (Soria and Horgos 2021; The Healthy Minds Network and American College Health Association 2020). A college student's mental health is broadly affected by societal, institutional, environmental, familial, financial, social/interpersonal, and personal factors (Kreniske et al. 2022; Soria and Horgos 2021). For example, the pandemic and ongoing COVID-19 health crisis impacted where some FGLI students completed courses, how they related to their peers, the stability of their basic needs being met, as well as the stress, responsibilities, and resources that they had (Kiebler and Stewart 2021; Soria et al. 2020; Soria and Horgos 2021). FGLI college students also experience food and housing insecurity, particularly during breaks when their institution is closed or operations are limited as well as when the pandemic started (Jack 2019; Soria et al. 2020). There are endless other environmental and individual circumstances, such as racism and the effects of limited financial means, that may influence how FGLI students of color feel and function.

With a higher socioeconomic status, an individual has greater access to services and options to take preventative measures for their health and take care of themselves (Kreniske et al. 2022) whether through their lifestyle and quality of life or formal healthcare. In other words, FGLI students of color are already at a disadvantage because of their socioeconomic status and the racism and high costs within the U.S. healthcare system. FGLI students have also been found to experience post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD more than non-FGLI students (Jenkins et al. 2013). Simultaneously, FGLI students face barriers to mental health counseling at their schools such as lack of time, not enough awareness of services, convenience, and stigma which leads them to use these psychological services less (Stebleton et al. 2014; Garriott et al. 2017; Wang and Castañeda-Sound 2008; Kreniske 2022). Aside from financial and academic support,

in order to meaningfully change the lower graduation rates of FGLI students, resources to professionally support students' mental health and sense of worthiness to be a college student must be implemented (Stephens et al. 2014) which is the responsibility of institutions and faculty members.

The daily experiences and social interactions of FGLI students are two dynamic things that affect their mental health. When FGLI students had more concerns about money, this corresponded to more academic concerns, general stress, and poorer grades (Cadaret and Bennett 2019). Though Cadaret and Bennett's 2019 study, "College Students' Reported Financial Stress and Its Relationship to Psychological Distress," was in the context of a large midwestern university, the foundation of college life is consistent across institution type and region. As a result, their findings about financial stability are relevant to this discussion on low-income college students. Likewise, a lack of academic literature on small east coast liberal arts does not mean that FGLI students at places like The College do not experience similar multi-layered stress. One academic dimension of this population's mental health is that, for FGLI students of color with less experience interacting with authority figures, speaking to and building relationships with professors can be stressful (Jack 2016). In addition, FGLI students and students who were first-generation or low-income felt more unsupported by their parents than non-FGLI students (Kreniske et al. 2022; Jenkins et al. 2013). To add on, the FGLI students in this study had poorer sleep hygiene, as far as amount and quality of sleep, and worked more than non-FGLI students (Kreniske et al. 2022). Interestingly, Kreniske (2022) found that FGLI students and students who were low-income but not first-generation were "less likely to report hazardous alcohol consumption." Though this may be a trend that supports student health, drinking is a common part of college culture and not participating can interfere with a student's

sense of belonging (Hefner and Eisenberg 2009). There was less consensus about whether administrators, faculty, and staff or "institutional stakeholders" as Kreinske calls them, "were concerned about [FGLI students'] welbeing compared to non-FGLI" (2022). When gender was factored into Jenkins et al.'s analysis of data from students who attended an institution that serves a large number of first-generation students, "...first-generation women were doing significantly worse and first-generation men significantly better than their non-first-generation counterparts" (2013: 138). This finding does not mean that this pattern would map onto all first-generation populations or individual students, but rather that it is helpful for researchers to attend to race as well as other elements of identity such as gender and sexuality. For example, more research is needed on what the wellbeing of two-spirit and gender non-conforming FGLI students is like, as well as queer FGLI students.

To look inward, the ways that FGLI students think and feel about themselves also shapes their mental and physical health. College students' self esteem was higher when one or both of their parents attended college (McGregor et al. 1991) whereas Hertel (2002) did not find a notable disparity between self esteem levels of FGLI and non-FGLI students. Another aspect, academic self-efficacy, or a "belief in one's ability to perform the tasks necessary for school," leads to better grades and completion (Multon et al. 1991; Wang and Castañeda-Sound 2008) and FGLI students were found to rate themselves as having lower levels of academic self-efficacy (Wang and Castañeda-Sound 2008). Wang and Castañeda-Sound (2008) additionally affirm that self esteem as well as perceptions of peer and family support contribute to FGLI students' wellbeing, and that this group experiences more physical manifestations of their mental health than non-FGLI students. This parallels other studies that document how FGLI students of color

can become physically and mentally unwell as they navigate their institution and negotiate the "ethical costs" of their higher education journey (Dover et al. 2020; Morton 2019).

Belonging

While college life has common parts or shared experiences regardless of the institution, each campus has its own unique ecosystem and environment for students to join and there are common circumstances that FGLI students share which can be used to anticipate specific challenges that they may encounter (Stuber 2011). Therefore, the social experiences of FGLI students and FGLI students of color can strengthen or prevent their sense of belonging in college and to their specific institution. Students who considered themselves to have a lower socioeconomic status, or low-income students, experienced more imposter syndrome (or doubts about whether they belong) than students with higher socioeconomic statuses and interacted with their campus less often (MacInnis et al. 2019). Likewise, low-income students may experience social or financial class barriers that make it hard for them to relate to non-FGLI peers (Jack 2016, 2019). Lee and Harris offer the ideas of "counterspaces" to document how FGLI students of color "manage and resist microaggressions within particular institutional spaces" instead of "simply coping," which they do through efforts to help themselves, interactions with one another, and their collective advocacy efforts (2020). They also use the phrase "counterstructures" to capture how students collaboratively create systems to support other FGLI students of color, effectively "allowing [these] students to access services otherwise unavailable or too uncomfortable to use" and doing the work that administrators, staff and faculty should be responsible for (Lee and Harris 2020: 1141).

Counterspaces include dedicated physical space or clubs for affinity groups; counterstructures would be peer-led work making it possible for FGLI students to receive mentoring, advising, food, and money as well as to network or attend educational events with people who understand their context and treat them with dignity (Lee and Harris 2020). The participants in Lee and Harris' study confirmed that this organizing and planning helps address inequities and ensure that students basic needs are met, that they're preparing for careers earlier than usual (and more along timelines similar to non-FGLI peers), and that they're empowered to seek out help (2020). In the process, though, some students found ways to collaborate with or get support from their college's offices and departments while others faced "conflict" and disrespect (Lee and Harris 2020). This intentional remaking of what college is like, to be centered on students' interests and driven by their underappreciated labor, is a testament to FGLI students' daily acts of persistence as well as a glaring alarm of how colleges are unprepared to care for this student population.

Kundu asserts that for students of color who previously showed high academic achievement, "The struggle to persist in college could lead many to experience symptoms of looming burnout, especially in cases when students are unable to locate and integrate into student support resources on campus" (2019: 677). In order to fulfill the goals that these "strivers" think others have for them, they may not lean on their support system and relationships and extend themselves beyond their capacity (Kundu 2019). As a result, FGLI students of color experience low energy and pessimism about the future or "burnout… hopelessness… as well as a loss of purpose…" (Kundu 2019: 690). These are all individual experiences of a systemic issue: colleges are not designed for FGLI students of color and they must deal, both internally and through their activities at The College, with this reality everyday. As such, it is only right that we look to their

daily actions and habits to better understand how they persist and to learn about how we can build on their efforts to make higher education more equitable. To add on, the students in Kundu's study also showed that "guided self-reflection" with people whom they're close to (ex: professors or relatives) grounded them in their goals and strengths. Yet, the professional support to engage in this activity may be hard to access since research also shows that on-campus mental health services are not widely accessible for this population (Stebleton et al. 2014; Garriott et al. 2017; Wang and Castañeda-Sound 2008; Kreniske et al. 2022). Other research confirms that some of FGLI students' most valuable relationships are to professors, family members, and peers as well as friends who they engage with in coursework, through campus life, or during activities like research and study abroad (Demetriou et al. 2017; Means and Pyne 2017). Like in the participants' stories, academics are shaped by and simultaneously shape FGLI students' social and professional lives as well as their wellbeing.

While some FGLI students engage in campus life and even make it possible, many struggle to connect with others in a fulfilling way. This experience is often called belonging or as Nunn clearly defines it, "A feeling that you matter to the group, that you are valued for who you are and what you bring" (2021: 15). One way that institutions try to promote belonging is by advertising diverse student clubs and hosting programs or events for all students, and FGLI students specifically (Nunn 2021; Stuber 2011). Nunn's study revealed that continuing-generation students felt a sense of belonging more often than their first-generation peers except at the start of their first semester and at the private college included, as this pattern was reversed in this study for both scenarios (2021). In *Geographies of Campus Inequality* (2020) Benson and Lee also found that FGLI students can struggle to "find a niche" doing things they like with people whom they like even though they are interested and may blame themselves

for this struggle. In fact, first-generation students were less likely to participate in other outlets like Greek life and organized sports, and when they did these experiences were commonly uncomfortable (Benson and Lee 2020). An important distinction is that FGLI students or students of color may be "feeling well anchored to groups that offer social belonging, yet feeling adrift, out of place, or "alone" when navigating wider campus life" (Nunn 2021: 26) because professors don't explicitly acknowledge the inequities students face, their financial aid is insufficient, or their peers and institution have conflicting values or norms (Nunn 2021; Jack 2016, 2019; Morton 2019).

Family

Given that FGLI students' relationships to their family were an important element of their wellbeing, I want to separately discuss this body of literature here. During college, FGLI students must navigate changing family dynamics against the backdrop of higher education's culture. FGLI students of color often fulfill certain needs for their family, including providing socio-emotional and financial support, help navigating systems, and taking care of relatives (Covarrubias et al. 2019). In addition, college provides FGLI students of color an opportunity to further establish their identity and practice what Covarrubias et al. calls "soft independence" such as maturing and expressing themselves and "hard independence" or managing responsibilities in the new territory of higher education (2015: 395-398). Covarrubias et al. named "family achievement guilt" to describe how, in attending college, FGLI Latinx and Asian students simultaneously figure out how to manage giving up some responsibility at home, gaining new possibilities, figuring out how to afford college and, simply, changing (2021: 696). In moving between these two spaces, FGLI students can find it hard to share what they have

learned at college or relate to the people in their life who did not also enter The College's environment (Lee and Kramer 2013).

At the same time, some FGLI students receive support from their families which can contribute to their success (Covarrubias et al. 2019). One form of this support is "parental validation" or how parents who champion their FGLI child's higher education and goals can empower them to have more positive social and academic experiences which increase the student's sense of belonging (Roska and Kinsley 2019; Roksa et al. 2021). Likewise, this recognizes parents' contribution to a students' familial wealth (Yosso 2005) and enables parents to be included as valuable participants in FGLI students' college experiences, including orientation programming (Kiyama et al. 2018; Roksa et al. 2021). These insights add new dimensions or deepen previous ones for how the communities and networks which FGLI students play a vital role in can be incorporated in and perhaps strengthened through higher education.

Academics

As with all dimensions of college, FGLI students approached their academics in different ways. The existing literature documents how they have had different understandings, which ultimately were misunderstandings of what professors expected, due to their lack of familiarity with how college and higher education courses work including subject-specific language or assignments (Collier and Morgan 2008). Collier and Morgan call this "mastery of the 'college student' role" which requires first having an understanding of the hidden curriculum or often unspoken rules and norms within educational spaces (2008). For first-generation students, this lack of insight into hidden curriculum led them to extend themselves beyond their capacity,

which has negative implications for class prep time, and to be unsure of how to navigate common assignments such as whether to read fully or to skim a text (Collier and Morgan 2008). First-generation students try to use visual cues, such as professors' styles, notable keywords, and more physical interactions rather than rely on the syllabus, for example, to clarify what's important and when (Collier and Morgan 2008).

Regarding professors, FGLI students recognize the value of having relationships with them but do not automatically know how to build them. FGLI students saw that they should proactively try to build relationships with professors and professors expected students to ask for help as needed (Collier and Morgan 2008; Jack 2016; Nunn 2021) which is harder without pre-established trust and students feeling comfortable. It is a reinforcing cycle so if students do not engage, for whatever reason, it is harder to have movement to start. Unintentionally, first-generation and non-first-generation students did not always understand what professors said or wanted, or simply had differing opinions. (Collier and Morgan 2008). For example, students reported dedicating the time they had to courses versus identifying how much time a course would need (Collier and Morgan 2008) which means FGLI students with more responsibilities or challenges may have less time to prepare, and as a result dedicate less time academics outside of classes. How FGLI students approach this subject depends on their experience in a college-like environment; whereas privileged poor students have more experience and are accustomed to proactive interactions with faculty and staff or others with authority, doubly disadvantaged students find it more challenging to understand college norms or disagree with them and do not are hesitant to try when these relationships seem to be an important factor for their success (Jack 2016, 2019).

There is also diversity in how professors teach their first-generation and low-income students. While faculty felt they directly communicated the time and value students needed to dedicate to their courses, students reported wanting more direction and detail and trying to use the same or similar strategies from one course in another (Collier and Morgan 2008). This means that when professors recognize FGLI students' lack of academic preparedness, they often do not take responsibility for addressing this in class (Schademan and Thompson 2016). Especially at larger universities where students do not interact with professors in class, because of a reliance on lecturing rather than discussing, it is harder for professors and students to understand the other's perspective (Schademan and Thompson 2016). In previous research, professors also acknowledged how they believe students know certain academic practices, such as citations, without verifying whether that was true (Collier and Morgan 2008). Given that some faculty have a deficit-based understanding of FGLI students and do incorporate this population's wealth or knowledge, more professional development and accountability are needed to ensure that professors effectively educate their FGLI students of color in culturally-relevant ways (Demetriou et al. 2017; Schademan and Thompson 2016). As Collier and Morgan (2008) point out, when professors make themselves accessible to students, not only in setting aside time but also by avoiding highly formal vocabulary and jargon, students better understand what is being taught and feel more comfortable to engage with them in other contexts. Likewise, professors who work with more FGLI students and for longer periods of time can forge relationships where they care about a student's success and can connect with them in a way that is comfortable and effective (Demetriou et al. 2017; Schademan and Thompson 2016).

Ultimately, FGLI students are the most knowledgeable about their college journey and commitment to earn a degree and professors should learn about their individual students, as

learners and people, directly. When considering their contributions to the college environment, FGLI students recognize their ability to succeed academically and positively interact with others in worthwhile ways (Schademan and Thompson 2016; Lee and Harris 2020). As previously stated, this assuredness is not always as high compared to non-FGLI students (Wang and Castañeda-Sound 2008). A repetitive concern, though, is that FGLI students are faced with a "you don't know what you don't know" conundrum (Schademan and Thompson 2016; Jack 2019; Morton 2019; Collier and Morgan 2009) in which they face obstacles but do not have enough perspective to articulate how they need help nor to request it. Despite internal goals and dedication, students don't start with an expertise that is developed over time or held by "gatekeepers," including faculty (Demetriou et al. 2017; Schademan and Thompson 2016). Additionally, external pressures or those related to the other responsibilities that FGLI students hold, such as socially or financially supporting their family, can make a student's ability to view themselves as prepared to succeed at college more complex (Morton 2019; Schademan and Thompson 2016; Covarrubias et al. 2019, 2021). For FGLI students, it appears that a balance between having faith in themselves and others intentionally as well as clearly communicating confidence in them is the key to positively perceiving their college experience in and outside of the classroom.

Technology and Social Media

One element of academics and a student's overall college experience that remains salient is the use of technology and social media to learn and communicate with others. Most use social media and the internet to stay connected to peers (Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2018; Martínez Alemán and Wartman 2009) which also facilitates the exchange of resources and information. Digital

technologies are often central to how professors teach, so students can be empowered through their permitted and guided use to appeal to more learning styles and interests, and facilitate more collaboration (Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2018). Ties to their college campus, as discussed, including digital ones to peers, faculty, and mentors, can help FGLI students to stay enrolled (Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2018) since students often casually use technology for social engagement, community building and self expression. It is time for colleges to capitalize on students' existing familiarity with technology to incorporate their academic applications and relevance, and to advance students' "campus capital" or what Rowan-Kenyon et al. define as "those forms of explicit and implicit social capital specific to a particular campus" (2018: 27). Considering that this relationship is also shaped by a student's past access to and familiarity with technology and the Internet, colleges and universities must ensure that FGLI students of color have equitable technology access in their transition to college (Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2018). In fact, devices provided by colleges to their students may be a student's primary device because they do not own their own and, when the pandemic started, FGLI students reported having the most challenges staying digitally connected (Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2018; Herder 2021; Soria et al. 2020). This academic challenge can cause students to fall behind or become disconnected from important people in their lives, become stressed, and relatedly, struggle with their mental health, especially during the pandemic when students' college experience was altered and their responsibilities often increased (Davis et al. 2021) Clearly, there are negative social, health, and academic implications to not ensuring that FGLI students of color have the necessary digital literacy, tools, and devices for their success.

Potential Areas for Systemic Change

Positive Mentoring Relationships

Student-faculty relationships are significant not only to the individual student but also to shifting norms about mutual responsibility and collaboration within higher education institutions. When students developed comfortable, mutually-fulfilling relationships with faculty, there were gains beyond an individual grade or class (Demetriou et al. 2017; Jack 2016, 2019; Schademan and Thompson 2016). Students fondly acknowledge moments when professors check-in with them, make themselves available outside of class and for things beyond academics, and help them to increase their understanding of "how to do college" (Demetriou et al. 2017; Jack 2019; Schademan and Thompson 2016). Beyond stronger feelings of belonging and an enjoyable experience, FGLI students develop their confidence and access more concrete opportunities such as research, study abroad, and other structured programs (Demetriou et al. 2017; Jack 2019; Schademan and Thompson 2016).

Factors That Prevent FGLI Students' Success

To summarize, once in college, various systems shape a FGLI student's college career. The dominant cultural expectations of colleges are rooted in middle-class norms, which emphasize proactive self-reliance as opposed to communal support, which FGLI students tend to be accustomed to (Anyon 1980; Calarco 2011; Covarrubias et al. 2019; Jack 2016, 2019; Means and Pyne 2017). This can prevent students from cultivating mentor-mentee relationships with faculty and peers, especially if they cannot relate through identity markers, which has benefits beyond being successful in their classes (Plaskett et al. 2018; Schademan and Thompson 2016). These larger systems within which colleges operate, such as the workforce and professional

networks, may not be clear to or comfortable for FGLI students (Engle and Tinto 2008; Jack 2019). These factors contribute to feelings of self-doubt and imposter syndrome or the belief that you do not belong (Lee and Harris 2020). Students' lack of familiarity with college leads to negative experiences that burden their academic and personal responsibilities (Soria and Stebleton 2012). There are two major consequences of this. First, students may question their sense of self, accrue "ethical costs," and face mental and physical health concerns (Dover et al. 2020; Morton 2019). Second, students earn lower grades and all do not access resources that prepare them for future academic or professional success (Soria and Stebleton 2012; Stephens et al. 2014).

Through my review of the literature on FGLI college students of color, I identified a need for more qualitative studies on this group's experiences beyond their academic pursuits and interactions with peers or professors. More specifically, there is an opportunity for research to engage how students express and develop their multidimensional identities in all three major areas of the small liberal arts college experience, including academics, organized campus life, and relationships with other individuals including but not limited to peers, family members, professors, and staff or administrators. Likewise, while a great deal of literature highlights trends and outliers in their experiences or seeks to explain their circumstances, there is not a wide range of literature that focuses on how FGLI students who are people of color navigate college on a daily basis. To contribute to this increasingly asset-based area of research, I focused on a particular group and one institution type to highlight how FGLI students of color who attend a selective small liberal arts college move forward through internal reflections, collaborative choices, and external demonstrations of their values, beliefs, needs, and desires. Ultimately, and

as you will see, the interdependence of this student group facilitates their individual strengths and enables them to bear the cost of their efforts together.

Findings

In this chapter, I identify the participants' daily persistence practices and analyze their thoughts and actions towards the different parts of their life where they demonstrate these practices. They include sharing resources, asking for help, building community, and showing up when they are uncomfortable, to specific events and by staying enrolled. These practices, which I also refer to as strategies and actions, answer my primary research questions:

- How do FGLI college students navigate The College, a selective liberal arts college?

- What strategies, if any, do FGLI students employ that exemplify resistance and community-building?

- How does a FGLI identity shape a college student's engagement in college life?

I argue that FGLI college students of color navigate The College by applying their insights from earlier and similar circumstances, which is a strategy in and of itself, as well as by developing their persistence strategies alongside other FGLI students. Within campus life in particular, the FGLI identity shapes what resources and social spaces the participants engage with, as well as how they respond to wealthier and white peers on campus. Whereas some participants fostered community and personal relationships through shared perspectives or across differences, others focused on their motivations and needs to show up as their authentic selves each day. To review where and how these strategies are evident and strengthened, this section is divided into the following sections: K-12 Education, Academics at The College, Relationships, Wellbeing and Belonging, and Navigating the Institution. All of the quotes from participants that I include either reflect a daily persistence strategy or speak to how these practices are enacted or received, when, and why.

In the upcoming sections, the theories that I previously outlined will inform and guide my analysis. First, I employ a "sociological imagination" (Mills 2000) to consider how the individual experiences of the participants reflect the structural issues at-hand, such as poverty, classism, racism, or the historical impacts of higher education being established through colonization for a majority middle-class, white, and male population. By navigating these issues, we observe how FGLI students of color can actively be marginalized in and exist on the borderlands of higher education (Anzaldua 1987). Similarly, I aim to recognize when the students follow Mill's and Anzaldua's lead as they connect the challenges which they face on this system's margins to these larger systems of power, inequality, and oppression that exist across our society. Next, I regularly point out moments where students' community cultural wealth, or their inherited and built strengths, guide them to advocate for themselves and succeed in vastly different contexts. As a reminder, Yosso outlines six wealths: aspirational, navigational, resistant, linguistic, familial, and social (2005: 77-81). In practice, the participants act as cultural translators, both taking in sensory information about higher education as well as processing their insights to help themselves and those around them understand this system. With their "double consciousness" (Du Bois 1903) and growing confidence that they belong, the students in this study pursue their goals, advocate for themselves through bureaucratic processes, fight for equity, and authentically express themselves in the most comfortable ways, all while drawing on their loved ones' wisdoms and their network's resources. As I review their daily practices in different aspects of higher education, which I will outline next, I apply an intersectional lens (Crenshaw 1991) to uplift the other identities that FGLI students of color hold and how their social position influences when they receive support and dignified treatment. Taken together,

these theories ground how I analyzed my data and centered students' voices to answer my questions.

My goal in K-12 Education is to provide context on the participants' goals and challenges as well as how they approached their earlier educational institutions and systems. This section also illuminates what strategic actions they continue to pull on or adapt to The College's environment.

With Academics at The College, the participants discussed their path to The College and how the expectations there affect their perspectives, coursework, and relationships to professors. Section 2 helps frame how the classroom is only one space where the participants gain knowledge and grow, which informs how they choose to invest in their relationships and extracurricular activities.

Relationships is a shorter section which serves to establish how the participants think about and engage with others. Given that building long-term relationships that allow the participants to be a community member were so important to their success and motivation, I dedicated space to the related benefits and challenges they experienced in college, as well as how they tried to maintain their connections. These actions affect and provide context to how the participants relate to and interact with others whom they were less inclined to build a relationship with, including wealthier and more privileged students as well as hostile and misunderstanding staff.

Next, Wellbeing and Belonging explores how the participants spend their time on campus outside of class, including in clubs, jobs, and friendships that require their active engagement. These interactions incorporate the main daily acts of persistence and give us insight into the goals and obstacles that FGLI students make sense of in college.

The last section is Navigating the Institution which dives into specific offices, resources, and processes that are most apparently not designed to facilitate the success of FGLI students of color. While these elements may be essential to their long-term and sustainable success, the ways in which the participants struggle and collaborate to access them speaks to why they have developed these everyday acts of persistence in the first place.

Collectively, this chapter's sections raise important concerns from the participants about how their institution has not grown to reflect their presence nor to match how tirelessly they have worked to be seen and known. Moreover, the participants point to where there are opportunities to make immediate positive changes in their lives by having their institution take on and scale up their daily practices, so that the people they enroll can persist and thrive with dignity.

Section 1: K-12 Education

The participants' unique K-12 educational journeys inform who they are and, as a result, how they experience The College's environment. This first section provides contextual information about where participants lived and studied prior to starting college, which gives us insight into how they've navigated other educational institutions. Through their memories about their family's influence, diversity at school, and the resources available in their earlier education, the participants' share moments where education and difference (among students' identities, levels of access, and expectations) existed and what that was like. These details shape how they approach and understand, as well as cope with, their experiences as FGLI college students of color.

This section uniquely highlights how and why some of the participants' daily persistence practices were developed prior to college. Although the participants were not necessarily thinking through this lens at the time, there are many moments where their "community cultural wealth" (Yosso 2005) is used to learn and live among people with more privilege and different perspectives. In these earlier educational settings, the participants began to develop a "double consciousness" (Du Bois 1903) which was painful. These first experiences on the "borderlands" of formal education systems and even their geographic or cultural communities (Anzaldua 1987) later became a source of knowledge for how they invest their energy, or not, into being accepted or understood. While other daily strategies of asking for help, building community, and sharing resources were present, the most commonly used practice was showing up when uncomfortable. This primary practice enabled students to gain the credentials and experience needed to apply for and enroll in college, where they applied their daily practices in response to familiar challenges and triumphs in more ways and on a greater scale.

While most participants attended public schools, their experiences diverge based on the location, pressure to perform, and resources provided to them. All eight attended public schools at one point, though only six graduated from public high schools. By not being accepted into the gifted program at her competitive and predominantly white and Asian school, Kane walked on the "traditional path," to have a "traditional life." She describes how this division among students was tangible, as "There was a strange air. Because of the separation, there was a sense of stratification as well... That caused a bit of tension." Isabelle also experienced "cultural dissonance" (Museus et al. 2015) from her peers because of the white norms that students were expected to follow at her residential high school, similar to the norms at predominantly white higher education institutions (Jack 2019; Warnock and Hurst 2016). Moot and Fallon observed disparities between their school, and the local environment or students' classroom behavior, respectively. Where Fallon describes having "that model minority pressure to do well in school," and how she chose to follow instructions rather than be "cool" by disrespecting her teachers, Moot explains how their physical school conditions disrupted their learning. They shared, "My high school, we literally were in a flood zone. And every time that it rained too much, we just left school. We would just have all these half days whenever there was too much rain because our school would flood. And we used to be ranked third of the state, and that eventually failed because the ranking algorithm was bogus." Their recall of how the unreliable and dangerous built environment influenced their education despite their school's high status reflects a parallel between how highly ranked or elite higher education institutions still have inequalities and injustices. To apply Jack's recognition of the privileges that FGLI students may have, Miguel, Lily, and Isabelle had more experience in a college-like environment and can be considered "privileged poor" students (Jack 2016, 2019).

During their K-12 education, every participant made decisions that shaped the opportunities available to them. Due to frequent travel with her parent, Elizabeth was a student at a total of six schools. For high school, she intentionally chose one that offered advanced courses even though it required a further commute. Whereas Isabelle faced an "ethical cost" (Morton 2019) by moving to a boarding school, Elizabeth took on a repeating physical cost to have the most rigorous education possible. Considering that Fallon's education had insufficient funding and resources, she similarly took on more responsibilities to develop academically. Fallon participated in a multi-year out of school program for immigrant students which positively impacted her, as she recalls how that experience "really helped with kind of exposing myself to other immigrant students who didn't speak the best English either. I think that was really important with my identity as a student." At private schools, Lily and Miguel expanded their opportunities at the cost of being emotionally and physically distanced from their home communities (Morton 2019). Aside from being publicly introduced as a FGLI student because Miguel received a full scholarship, both participants were among peers with different racial identities and higher socioeconomic statuses than at their earlier schools. This is a common scenario among FGLI students of color who may experience culture shock (Museus et al. 2015) like I will discuss for Lily shortly. Miguel's school was also in a predominantly white neighborhood, which added another dimension to his new educational environment.

Outside of school, some participants trace their academic interests and motivations back to their family's choices and values. Two participants described how their mothers nurtured their passion for reading, which has translated into them pursuing a humanities major. Kane described how her early introduction to the subject of her major gives her confidence to pursue it in college. This behavior not only strengthened her "academic self-efficacy" through reflection with

trusted people, like Wang and Castañeda-Sound suggests for FGLI students (2008) but also reveals that the daily acts of persistence which the participants demonstrate in college were evident in high school too. Kane shared that, "Well, not always, but since I was young, I was pretty good at English, mostly because my mom would read to me a lot as a kid. I think it has to do with that she talked to me in the womb a lot, too, so it might just be that. Anyways, I was always good at English. It's something I've been always comfortable in. It's something I don't have to think about too hard or expend an extreme amount of stress and effort just to get through to finish." The forward-thinking dedication of Kane's mom set her up for success and a foundation that helps Kane to manage other parts of her life as a college student, which aligns with literature on how beneficial supportive parents are to FGLI students (Roska and Kinsley 2017; Roska et al. 2021; Yosso 2005). Another example of parents' dedication to helping their children and simultaneously providing for them is reflected in Jasmine's experience, because her mom would buy books to sell secondhand once Jasmine read them. For Moot, their family's involvement with community service developed their interest in giving back to their communities. They described that, "My family was very assertive that even if it feels like we don't have a lot compared to other people here, there are people back home who have even less, but also that we can do a part in that." Even while navigating social and academic challenges including being bullied and excluded, Moot remained steadfast in thinking about how to address the unfair realities around them. Overall, multiple participants valued their familial wealth and how their families inspired their current path and goals (Yosso 2005).

Another influence on participants' education was the diversity among their peers including their awareness of other peoples' identities and how visible their racial and ethnic identities were. Both Isabelle and Kane considered their earlier education diverse and didn't

think about identity as much, particularly racial identity in Isabelle's case. On the other hand, Moot didn't think about diversity because, unfortunately, they were unaware of different communities including the regional ethnicity they now identify with. Moot's teachers contributed to this lack of information, and failed to help them accumulate their "community cultural wealth" and sense of their social capital (Yosso 2005) because they actively discouraged students of color from exploring or proudly sharing their identities in the college application process, which Moot likened to erasing and tokenizing themself. Elizabeth and Miguel had a different kind of experience because their educational environments were not diverse and did not reflect their identities. In fact, Elizabeth believes she may have been one of the only Indigenous students at her schools. She said, "I'm not sure if there were other ones and I just never met them or... But I never spoke to another Indigenous student." Her experience speaks to, like in Moot's case, either an intentional refusal to acknowledge and uplift student's identities or a lack of thought to do so in empowering ways that build community among students from similar backgrounds or cultures. This is a dynamic that FGLI students of color in college experience, and which they often take into their own hands to change (Warnock and Hurst 2016; Lee and Harris 2020). Miguel has done this since high school such as when he would blast the music and flag of his culture against a backdrop of flags and slogans that celebrate Donald Trump, even though he viewed himself "differently" in his school's predominantly white neighborhood. In demanding space, Miguel applied his "resistant wealth" (Yosso 2005) and made a counterspace (Lee and Harris 2020) to make his culture and pride for it visible.

A unique experience among the participants was from Fallon, who talked about going to high school where "a lot" of her friends are also first-generation, "...but they didn't have the same resources." She speaks to the tension created by gaining access to new opportunities, including

college advising and admission to The College or a similar institution, while many other first-generation and low-income college students, especially those who are people of color, do not. That "ethical cost," as discussed later, encourages students like Fallon to share resources and treat people with empathy, which helps everyone to persist (Morton 2019; Lee and Harris 2020).

A sad yet unsurprising reality among the participants are their experiences with racism, colorism, and being excluded. All participants described feeling othered and out of place, however for Fallon this was not compared to those around her but to the ways in which people stereotyped her neighborhood based on racist ideas about different racial groups and the gun and gang violence present there. In describing her experience with colorism, Isabelle raises a salient point about how skin tone intersects with race and racism. She expressed, "And I remember when I first moved, I made this one friend and she was like, yeah, when you first got there I was like, omg, everyone was talking about this super tan Californian girl or whatever. And I was like, what? I'm tan? Is that a thing?" The commentary about her physical presence that Isabelle encountered is similar to the ways in which FGLI students and students of color, including other participants, are pre-judged based on what they look like and the lightness of their skin (Museus et al. 2015; Lee and Harris 2020). For other students, like Jasmine and Moot, there were few Asian students in their schools which was noticeable for Jasmine who described it as being "very distinct and a sense of like, "I have no idea what's happening here." I just felt like very much an outsider, diversity-wise…" As previously described, Miguel attended high school in a predominantly white neighborhood, and so did Moot and Lily. In this way, whiteness is not only present in the lives of FGLI students of color in the identities of their peers, but also in their school's student body and the larger environment which surrounds them.

Regarding identities that the participants did not hold, there was also underrepresentation. In Lily's experience, the number of other students of color, specifically Black and Latinx students, added up to less than five. This lack of students of color is a trend that continues into higher education, especially for students of color who are also FGLI like this study's participants. Moot notes how they began to interact with their internalized racism more in high school, though this was also a time of positive transformation because they were surrounded by Asians from various countries and found ways to engage in activism related to their racial and ethnic culture. To build on student's individual growth and promote their success, not to mention wellbeing, colleges must create space for students of similar backgrounds to discuss their identities and grow together (Adams and McBrayer 2020; Wang and Castañeda-Sound 2008; Dover et al. 2020; Kreniske et al. 2020).

Compared to their earlier schools, participants' consider The College to be more representative of different identities in some but not all ways. Kane and Isabelle view The College as more diverse, and so does Elizabeth in the sense that there are more Indigenous students (she estimates less than 20 total). For example, Isabelle described how her high school enrolled a majority of white students. Their behaviors, including what they wore, set the standard for how students fit in or negatively stood out. In Fallon's experience, as she moved through K-12 education, there were more Black and Latinx students present compared to the low percentage of these groups on campus where white then Asian students are the most represented. This creates some challenges for how she interacts with white people, as Fallon explains, " I feel like my view of white people is, they will understand you until they can't. I've never really developed deep relationships with white people." This highlights that race influences how open FGLI students of color are to investing time and effort into potential friendships, but also how

race cannot be isolated from class, both of which shape student's experiences and understandings. Other interactions that the participants have with students who are remarkably different will be discussed in a future section. For Miguel and Lily, coming from predominantly white private schools, The College was a surprising experience. "It was completely different," remarked Miguel, which is echoed by Lily's realization that

"'Wow, this is a lot of diverse people,' not in just the sense that ethnically, racially. There's also a lot of people that I have found that are FGLI students, which is really nice because I think most of my friends are FGLI students, but also the type of people that think differently and have experienced different things. I would say this is the most diverse place I've ever been, and it really has helped me in general, in all realms."

Lily brings the perspectives of other participants together in a powerful statement: "diversity is not only about race and ethnicity, but also national origin, FGLI status, and more. These aspects of identity, culture, and upbringing contribute to how welcoming campuses are to underrepresented and marginalized students, but can enhance how all students develop as community members." As such, institutions like The College who enroll a diverse student body must continually work to help them feel that they belong, and take it seriously if that does not happen since students' mental health can suffer as a result (Stuber 2011; Shell et al. 2020).

The last essential aspect of the participants' K-12 education to note is that, for some, they had experience transitioning to new environments before their transition or adjustment to college. Isabelle spoke to the cultural transition that she felt when her family relocated from a diverse and progressive West Coast state to the South, and how she has mixed feelings about the boarding school she went to there. Although it was a public school that "was not state of the art by any means," despite what others think, Isabelle notes that "I've been away from home since I

was 15 and I lived with people, so that I think formed or made me more of an independent person or whatever." By living on her own, Isablle gained insight into and practice with living apart from her family in a new context where she must rely on herself. This contributes to the "navigational wealth" that she later pulls from as she lives on campus, makes friends, and finds mentors in professors, all of which create ties to her college (Yosso 2005; Demetriou et al. 2017; Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2018). Oppositely, Fallon's movement from public school to an elite, small college prompted a different set of feelings. She shared that, "I was like, 'Oh, I can do this. I can go to an Ivy because I'm doing so well in high school,' but coming to college, it was like, "Oh, you're actually average or maybe not that good," or something. It was just kind of a culture shock. Not a culture shock, but kind of a reality check, like, 'Oh, this is what a real kind of good school is compared to your public school in the city,' which is underfunded, and The College has a lot of money." Fallon's confidence shifted to concern, not only about her capabilities but also what The College's resources said about her high school. This is a complex dynamic for a first-year student to try and make sense of, especially since she could not control her level of preparation more than she did.

Simultaneously, however, Fallon's comment reminds us that colleges must do more to help FGLI students of color transition into their institution socially, culturally, and academically so that they are equitably supported because, to reiterate, colleges' efforts are not fully working for all yet (Lee and Harris 2020; Benson and Lee 2020; García Peña 2022). At various points, the participants faced reminders of how their educational trajectory has been influenced by inequality and identity, and these connections continued throughout our interviews.

As evidenced in their responses to motivation from family, peer interactions, and academic interests, the participants actively and enthusiastically participated in their K-12

education. Their engagement and sacrifices of time and comfort provided the roots for their daily persistence practices in college. These pre-college efforts not only offer meaningful context for the daily practices that some participants lean into more than others, but also raise questions about how their support systems are and could be maintained within higher education's structures to further empower their wellbeing and success.

Section 2: Academics at The College

The second section, Academics at The College, details what led the participants to the College as well as how they've experienced taking courses and working with others here. Specifically, it explores how prepared they were for academic demands and what strategies they employ. The participants' perspectives on competition at The College and different academic disciplines is included. This section concludes with how participants have been advised and mentored by professors as well as how they choose which ones to study with.

This analysis of the participant's academic performance contributes to our understanding of daily persistence by underscoring how others in higher education may fail to fully see FGLI students of color, especially as people with social, familial, cultural, and professional interests or needs. As such, we can consider what strategies the participants employ in addition to how much their environments and the authority figures around them enabled them to effectively use those strategies. For reference, the strategies that I analyzed include sharing resources, building community, showing up when uncomfortable, and asking for help. In this discussion, having a "sociological imagination" (Mills 2000) will be essential given that the participants were required to justify their deservingness to be part of a system that historically excluded them through college applications and putting in effort to close any gaps between the opportunities that they had compared to more privileged peers. In a setting with rigorous academic demands and professors who approach relationships with students differently, it will be helpful to keep Crenshaw's concept of "intersectionality" (1991) and Du Bois' "double consciousness" (1903) in mind. These theories remind us that our identities are powerful but also can be misunderstood or used in ways that harm others, regardless of intent, because they come from a less familiar

background. For FGLI students of color, the impacts of this power dynamic are felt as they seek out mentors, learn new material, and celebrate their achievements.

Pathways to The College

The first set of factors that led participants to enter college are about what The College offers, including through its progressive policies. This institution accepts undocumented students and meets 100% of their demonstrated need, which was important to Fallon when she learned about it from another undocumented student who attended The College. The second aspect which half of the participants commented on was the cost, or more accurately the affordability, of attending The College because it offered enough financial aid to them. For Kane who had another affordable option, The College's prestigious status was a deciding factor. In Elizabeth's case, she was eager to experience the rigorous academics that an alum called "the hardest four years of your life" in a beautifully well-kept physical environment. These elements of The College's system, its financial aid, rigor, and positive alumni perspectives, all define students' experience at The College and can make or break their sense of belonging (Stuber 2011; Nunn 2021).

Regarding the student experience, many participants liked that The College is small and provides an environment where students can more seamlessly connect with others. Having experienced this dynamic in high school, Miguel knew he wanted a similar experience where he'd be supported by professors, in part because the STEM field he wants to enter is "very competitive, very toxic… and majority white male." Here, Miguel holds space for how gender and race are inseparable given the historical reality of who higher education was designed for and the persistent demographics of this arrangement. As Isabelle describes it, even with

hindsight about the "annoying" things that people at the College do, she is happy with her choice because "the good things about The College make up for those things." In other words, the participants were aware of or experienced discrimination and inequality at their college (Museus et al. 2015) and still found their experience meaningful, in part because of the abundance of learning and growth opportunities present (Adams and McBrayer 2020). Moot agreed with this sentiment since they noted that they "wanted to see change happen in the environment where I was in. And I think that some movements have come and gone at The College, but I think the net has been a positive of good changes that have come to The College since I've been here." As much as FGLI students are aware of higher education's issues, they are also focused on the power of activism to change the system, including through their presence in it (Lee and Harris 2020, Warnock and Hurst 2016; García Peña 2022). It is essential to recognize that personally knowing your professors and experiencing more positive than negative things at college are privileges of going to a small and well-resourced college. All FGLI students, let alone FGLI students of color, do not experience these things. Considering that FGLI students are least likely to attend private four-year institutions like The College (Engle and Tinto 2008), the participants' experiences are not representative of most students in this population. Still, their experiences are important and demonstrate what is possible when the growing number of FGLI college students are heard and given access to environments where they can meaningfully engage with others.

While most participants only had expectations or hopes for college, Lily's first-hand experience visiting The College during an underrepresented students overnight event enabled her to get an exciting preview into what the next phase of her life could look like. She said, "I've never stayed out so late. It was past 12, and I was just like there and we were just singing and bonding. I've never seen so many people of color just being together, and that was... And also,

Asian. And it was just such a bonding experience that I just felt so comfortable here. I knew that I wanted to be here. I was like, this is somewhere that's going to make me so happy, and I'm going to have such a different experience than in high school…" In this simple interaction between students of color, all of whom could have chosen to attend another college, Lily was so moved by the diversity and happiness of the among her whom she could relate to (Warnock and Hurst 2016) as well as her trial of "hard independence" (Covarrubias et al. 2015) that she wanted to enroll at The College. Other participants' goals were to attend college out of state, choose a college that'd require them to be more extroverted, and where students critiqued the institution. These desires show how important joyful and healing moments of community and growth are to FGLI students of color as they step beyond their comfort zone, so that they can see their whole selves reflected in and affirmed by those whom they study and live with. The growing FGLI population, then, can prompt us to think about whether and how "counterspaces" and "counterstructure" as Lee and Harris (2020) define them become the standard at elite colleges across the U.S. and make superficial affinity spaces a pattern of the past.

The final overarching factor that made participants pursue college were people and organizations in their lives, particularly nonprofits dedicated to helping underrepresented students get accepted to often elite institutions. As previously mentioned, Fallon learned about The College from another undocumented student enrolled there. Similarly, Lily knew a peer from an extracurricular who attended The College, who she considered "very talented and very smart," which led her to agree with her counselor who told her that The College was "really nerdy… and very strong academically." Fallon and Lily had access to insider information much like Moot did. They saw how their sibling, who was enrolled at The College when they applied, had not only become more open minded but also received mental health services. These changes

and that The College is not a tech school of predominantly white and cis male students led Moot to consider The College "a good fit, a cultural fit" as their college access program encouraged them because they knew, "I don't want to have to spend my entire four years just surviving. I want to be able to do what I actually enjoy." In other words, race is one element of identity that remains salient and important for where the participants attend college and with whom they seek to spend time with. By having clear values and information to evaluate whether institutions met these preferences, some participants could make more informed decisions about where to apply and enroll for college. These participants displayed navigational and aspirational to access information about how to find colleges that would align with their values and interests, and foreshadows how they approach their time at The College (Yosso 2005).

Nearly half of the participants completed a college access program like Moot did. This experience was notably helpful for Fallon because her high school counselors were overburdened with 100 students each and therefore not useful to her. She recognized that, "Some people didn't really care what college they went to, but I had to care because I couldn't go to any college, so I had to search for colleges that would accept me. A lot of people I think… I feel like they regretted it a lot." Fallon's undocumented status partly motivated her to take advantage of the access program, however she speaks to how many students do not have space and guidance to consider whether they want to go to college, or to then receive personalized support in applying for admission. Unfortunately, this means that FGLI students of color not only struggle to persist to graduate from colleges and universities, but that some do not ever have the opportunity to begin such a journey. The literature shows us that FGLI students are aware of this dynamic and that it contributes to their positive feelings and pride about their own journey, which also occurred for participants like Miguel (Adams and McBrayer 2020) that I will further explore

later. As we learn from the spectrum of privilege that FGLI students hold, including "privileged poor" (Jack 2019) students like Fallon, we must also think more broadly about how students who would thrive on an intentional path to higher education or the workforce are being missed by other inequities in our educational system.

Preparedness

Due to their past educational experiences, some participants felt prepared to start college. Isabelle and Miguel did because of their prior academic environments, which were respectively residential and which "mimics a small liberal arts education" except that now they must fulfill the requirements for a major. Kane felt prepared because she knew what was expected from high school and managed stress well. For Moot, The College "hasn't been as difficult" and they've developed approaches to keeping track of their responsibilities that enable them to "generally keep up with the work." In these ways, FGLI students of color develop "academic self-efficacy" from their exposure to a college-like environment with similar rigor (Wang and Castañeda-Sound 2008). The resulting "mastery of the 'college student role'" (Collier and Morgan 2008) facilitates their transition, as they start college with a stronger foundation of these capacities than their "doubly disadvantaged" peers (Jack 2016). Subsequently, they likely have more experience in relationships with authority figures that they can apply to bonding with professors which can enhance their academic, social, and professional pursuits (Jack 2016).

A valuable distinction that Moot raised is that preparedness is not only something to address with students. Moot explained, for example, that "The lectures that my professor is teaching, it isn't clear. I can't hear them clearly. They're not talking clearly. They're not providing resources clearly. Their rubric is incomplete. Their syllabus is incomplete. And it doesn't matter

how much work I do when the professor just doesn't care about us and then just yells at us for not doing the thing." This relates to previous literature about how professors misunderstand their students' needs and academic abilities, and do not necessarily take responsibility for meeting students where they are (Schademan and Thompson 2016; Collier and Morgan 2008). There is also not enough information about how equipped professors are to connect in the classroom with FGLI students of color, or about what professional development would best address this gap, but we do know that FGLI students need professors to actively avoid being gatekeepers, invest in long-term relationships with them, and teach in culturally-relevant ways otherwise they may face negative mental health symptoms and earn lower grades (Demetriou et al. 2017; Soria and Stebelton 2012; Stephens et al. 2014). Therefore, professors must also be equipped to effectively teach students with different capacities and situations in ways that are accessible to FGLI students who do not know about the hidden curriculum or adequately prepare for class (Collier and Morgan 2008; Schademan and Thompson 2016). Another dynamic of preparedness is how a student's academic performance is influenced by the rest of their life. Isabelle says this best when she acknowledges that, "With academics, it's extremely dependent on your social ability to adapt to things." Though she credits her boarding school with speeding up her transition, she sees how, "...it is such a weird experience to have to go from living at home to living in a place where you're surrounded by your people and you have to find your own work life balance because you're living and working in the same place." Like with Lily's newfound vision for what college could be like, FGLI students of color must stay flexible as their freedom and responsibilities shift and they figure out how to settle these "ethical costs" (Morton 2019; Covarrubias et al. 2021). This means that we cannot solely study or consider FGLI students of colors' experience in the classroom because where and how they're living, and how they're being treated, will affect their

ability to manage their life including how they show their personality, work towards their goals, and navigate any challenges that arise.

With this in mind, the participants spoke to the traits and strengths they have that made them ready for college. Several participants spoke of their commitment to learning and to their education, considering how their family hasn't had this opportunity or how much they have invested. This is what Jasmine described as "having too much skin in the game to just give up now…" and reflects how they have harnessed what could be described as "family achievement guilt" (Covarrubias et al. 2021) into an ongoing motivator to see their sacrifices through, to persist. In looking to the past, Isabelle remarked that without her perseverance, she may have transferred whereas Elizabeth knew her strong work ethic developed during working while in high school for several years helped her avoid missing classes her first year and immediately take initiative to look for on-campus employment. These reflections and proaction are indications of how FGLI students of color use their "community cultural wealth," especially their navigational capital, internally to make the best possible decisions for their future (Yosso 2005). Beyond these approaches to college, other participants spoke to specific qualities that I will briefly capture here. Jasmine, who has "consistently been academically-minded," was hopeful because she is good at learning in different environments, much like Miguel who takes time to plan ahead for his major and collaborate with peers, both of which opened opportunities for him to become a teaching assistant and get compensated for his effort. As such, FGLI students of color do not succeed in isolation and many, like the participants, can thrive when they are valued members of their campus community (Schademan and Thompson 2016; Lee and Harris 2020).

Nevertheless, to get what they want out of their education, FGLI students of color must participate in an ongoing dance to figure out how much to give and take. Moot's experiences

being resourceful and working with others as a researcher and facilitator revealed how the performative work and exploitative burden of that labor can make it hard for FGLI students of color to use their strengths. They explained relationships in courses are hard to build because, "Once I enter the classroom, all I am is a bucket for the professor to put information into me, which I have in turn actively tried to resist and critique and report where I can, but systems of complaint here don't actually work." This is a complex issue with multiple layers, including that all professors do not see students as active agents with knowledge and ideas to contribute and expand upon, which has led to documented misunderstandings and consequences for students' achievement (Schademan and Thompson 2016; Collier and Morgan 2008; Yosso 2005). Likewise, the fact that Moot tries to raise awareness of their negative academic experiences yet feels unheard reflects many higher education institutions' bureaucratic nature and lack of responsiveness to their student body (Lee and Harris 2020). We also cannot ignore the racialized dynamic of who is asked to take on responsibilities, even beyond efforts to improve the system. "There's a lot of tokenization of, 'Oh, you're a person of color that can facilitate. Please keep facilitating for all these white people.' And, 'Oh, can you be in all our social media posts? Oh, can we tell your life story on social media?'" said Moot. Like for the students in Warnock and Hurst's (2016), greater FGLI visibility at The College reveals that the label holds different meanings and can be misrepresented in ways that FGLI students of color are not comfortable with. In this participant's experiences, whiteness was catered to because students of color and FGLI students were called upon to share and leverage their identities in ways that did not resonate with or benefit them. While it is important to give underrepresented voices a platform to share their insights, this must be optional and in spaces where they are treated with respect, ideally compensated, and encouraged to equitably distribute the emotional labor of this work.

I firmly believe that it is unacceptable for students of color to have their identities be showcased for superficial demonstrations of diversity (Ahmed 2012; García Peña 2022; Jack 2019) before they experience genuine inclusion into the campus community and equity with how resources are distributed. Instead of accepting Moot's feelings of being taken advantage of, we can look to Fallon to learn from how she embraces and shares her identity in a fulfilling way. She expressed, "I take pride in my status and my identity, and my perspective on different ways life at The College life is. In classes, even though I'm afraid to participate most of the time, because I feel like I won't sound as smart as everyone else, I feel like when I do participate or kind of find the courage to participate, what I say is useful in the sense that people might not have thought this way, either." By bringing her experiences into the discussion, Fallon not only demands to be seen and known, but also makes the learning experience better by grounding topics in their real life impact. This is consistent with prior research on the positive perspectives that FGLI students have about themselves and their contributions (Adams and McBrayer 2020; Schademan and Thompson 2016; Lee and Harris 2020). What remains unclear is whether this effort is hers to carry alone, how we can welcome other students to share their connections to what they learn, and how we can train those around them to respond with dignity, care, and respect. Fallon displays this level of consideration in how she treats others, as she aims to model self compassion and empathize with her friends when they experience imposter syndrome, receive low grades, or need additional academic support. We cannot forget, as Fallon summarizes, "That's kind of hard when you feel alone, struggling" and that FGLI students of color have a history of success being a collective effort and shared experience (Yosso 2005; Lee and Harris 2020; Roska et al 2021; Covarrubias et al. 2019).

Other participants did not feel they were sufficiently prepared in three distinct ways, when they compared themselves to their peers, to what they did not know, and to how they were taught to think about their capacity. The first is Lily's experience, where she thought she was prepared but struggled her first semester. A small social sciences class that she took with less than 10 student was tough because the material was difficult, and the experience was made harder by the fact that her peers all had previously read scholarly texts with a lot of jargon "for fun or as classwork," while she "was just going there not really knowing anything." These instances are similar to literature which found FGLI students to rate themselves as less prepared than non-FGLI students (Wang and Castañeda-Sound 2008). The frustration that Lily felt by not knowing these ideas or learning them faster is similar to the disappointment Elizabeth felt when she realized that she didn't know how to make the most of her courses or opportunities for learning beyond class. Here, we see the "you don't know what you don't know" conundrum unfold in the lives of this study's participants (Schademan and Thompson 2016; Collier and Morgan 2008; Dover et al. 2020; Demetriou et al. 2017) which was likely exacerbated by students starting or attending college virtually, amid the pandemic, which prompted an intensification of their burdens and loneliness (Davis et al. 2021).

Due to not knowing "the best practices" or being familiar with resources offered at The College Lily, like other students, was unable to pursue some opportunities sooner than they did or at all, since applications can have a class year eligibility requirement. Elizabeth, for example, did not seem to have the habits of "successful first-generation students," not because she lacked these habits or could not develop them, but rather because there was no person or system to communicate essential information (Demetriou et al. 2017). The final way that participants reflected on their preparedness is shown in Miguel's response, which related to how much he's

been exposed to deficit-based ways of thinking about his experience. To my question, he remarked, "Oh! I've always thought about weaknesses. Strengths, I don't know, that I always feel prepared in a sense, that if I know I'm worried and I'm stressed out, then I will proactively start studying or something like that." Despite primarily thinking about his weaknesses, Miguel's response here and in other sections display his growing capacity as a student and community member, which many FGLI students of color experience (Warnock and Hurst 2016; Lee and Harris 2020). Broadly speaking, his response is an important reminder that students must be thought about, taught, and spoken to in asset-based ways so that they can see themselves in these affirming ways and know which strengths they can rely on in tough times, too.

The participants had a spectrum of views about how and when students at The College are competitive. Although The College emphasizes collaboration, participants like Jasmine and Moot observed how institutional practices "lean in towards the competitive side more" and foster a culture of comparison. For example, Jasmine was judged and questioned by a peer for how she answered a question to an interview process they both went through. While Jasmine was uncomfortable, she also recognized that her peer's reaction was more about that peer's choice to be unkind rather than what Jasmine did. In order to avoid participating in what's called "misery poker," or comparing struggles and burdens to see who has it worse, Moot sets boundaries since their peers overextend themselves. There is a classed comparison dynamic to this, however, which Moot also acknowledged since some students must work multiple jobs to provide for themselves or their families. This is similar to Fallon's discussion of how students have to gain experience but that adds what was an unexpected pressure for her because she did not realize it is common for students to prepare for post-graduate life while they pursue their degree and The College's students are "superhumans," according to Moot, who "put a lot of pressure on

themselves" as Fallon summarized. These participants exhibit that peers rather than professors encourage competitiveness. For some participants, The College's more independent and competitive nature clearly conflicted with their values or the interdependent, communal efforts they were familiar with and had been part of (Jack 2016, 2019; Schademan and Thompson 2016; Morton 2019). However, Kane felt like The College was less competitive than their high school, which is not to say The College is not competitive, but that there were not enough responses about competitiveness at The College compared to participants' high school environments to evaluate whether Kane's experience was common or an outlier.

Academic Demands

In order to manage their academic demands, the participants employ a variety of strategies. The first set are actions that the participants do independently. These include building their self confidence, working alone and early in advance of deadlines, planning, addressing their procrastination, putting themselves out of their comfort zone (such as by asking questions of professors), finding joy in the topics they're learning, and studying what is exciting. I want to call attention to the power of self talk, which I believe is best articulated by Fallon as she describes what academic demands are like as a sophomore. She said, "I still struggle with managing time and managing studies and stuff like that, but I think it's more bearable in the sense that I've done it before so I can do it again." Although she identifies ongoing room for improvement, she actively builds her confidence by reminding herself that these challenges are not new and rather an uphill battle. This shows that an optimistic and practical perspective can help students believe that it is possible to persist, and this originates from a combination of their embodied, intellectual, and interpersonal forms of wealth (Yosso 2005).

The next set of strategies are actions involving others, such as asking peers and professors for help, asking professors specifically for extensions, working with peers, and attending office hours or TA sessions. Actually, Isabelle has noticed a correlation between her higher grades happening in courses where she's attended more office hours sessions. Miguel urged new students to attend office hours through his leadership role in a college transition program, which reflects one example of how peers are part of FGLI students' strategies (Lee and Harris) but also one way that these strategies come to be used, through peer recommendations. The final set of strategies less directly align with the skills that faculty and staff might try to foster in FGLI students of color for their success, but were used by participants and matter to my analysis of what costs FGLI students of color encounter during college. As a reminder, these costs include losing or missing out on opportunities, stepping back from some responsibilities, doing less than they used to do or than their peers do. Kane described her best study strategy as making good excuses for when she skips class sessions or asks for an extension. While this does help her navigate academic demands, it is possibly in an avoidant way that can make it challenging to maintain good progress (Soria and Stebleton 2012) or be known by and receive help from professors, as in the case of other participants. Kane thinks this strategy works because, as she shares, "I have a level of skill that I just rely on to tide me over in all scenarios. I fall back on the excuses when I need more help" which raises questions about what Kane is learning and whether she is gaining new information without gaining new skills or developing existing ones. On the other hand, Elizabeth has engaged more intensely with coursework by taking more than the recommended amount of classes during more than one semester. Speaking from experience, this can be manageable however there are not necessarily built-in opportunities for professors to help a student consider if this choice would be in their best interest. Likewise,

Elizabeth noted that this was hard to manage alongside her personal circumstances, including

being sick, so it is important to realize that FGLI students' strategies are not necessarily

sustainable or entirely productive to their academic success or wellbeing, which tends to be

worse than non-FGLI students (Kreniske et al. 2022; Cadaret and Bennett 2019; Kundu 2019;

Jenkins et al. 2013; Wang and Castañeda-Sound 2008).

Another aspect of academics that came up was what participants like and dislike about

different subjects at The College. The natural sciences were most frequently discussed, as Kane

did not like any of the courses she's taken in that discipline, and Fallon believes that it's

uncommon to use tutors or attend group tutoring sessions as much as she does. Despite this and

that it makes her friends feel like they do not belong, she is adamant that there is no shame in

having a tutor. She explains, "We were not resourced the best way we could have been in high

school, so if we struggle at The College, that's okay. The fact that we have tutors is something we

would never have in high school, so I think tutors are amazing." This perspective is not only

accurate given the spectrum of privilege among students, FGLI and not (Jack 2016, 2019), but

also incredibly valuable to remind students that college is not an equalizer and instead a place for

each student to pursue their own path which starts with them and their past experiences (Means

and Pyne 2017). The second discipline, the humanities, are liked by Kane and Fallon; Fallon has

noticed an improvement in her writing and communication from those courses. Regarding

improvements to the academic offerings, two participants brought a practical perspective to their

interactions with the academic departments. Miguel noted that some STEM majors are not

specialized enough, which is valuable information for FGLI students to be aware of, and since

these courses often cannot accommodate all interested students, Fallon has planned for a social

sciences back-up major. Moot commented on how certain language departments are

exclusionary and ask "invasive questions" about their family and identities. In response to this, they desired to organize a petition with students for changes, following the footsteps of past FGLI organizers of color (Lee and Harris 2020; Warnock and Hurst 2016) but this collective student activism is just one of several aspects of campus life that has struggled to fully return since the pandemic. It is within the best interest of educational institutions, then, to intentionally recognize and incorporate the strengths and "funds of knowledge" of their historically excluded students (Yosso 2005, González et al. 2009) so that they can have a fulfilling and dignified college experience.

Relationships to Faculty

Regarding their experience with professors, some participants described how they choose and prioritize which ones they will interact with. For Kane, they leverage their peer network to figure out which professors will be flexible, which helps her navigate academic demands. She explained, "Well, actually, I just go out of my way to find professors that I have heard are accommodating, the word people use is "reasonable" or "chill." I go out of my way to pick those professors. They usually just give me extensions and stuff when I ask for them." Rather than trying to conform to a system that asks too much of her, Kane quietly pushes back to manage her capacity and take care of other responsibilities beyond academic assignments. Another participant, Fallon, shared that she has been able to cultivate better relationships with folks who have and teach identities that she also holds, because that makes her "feel a little closer when they're talking about their stories in class." This was true for Moot, with regard to shared identities and values held. Fallon also preferred connecting with humanities professors as they have been stronger communicators. One perplexing interaction that she offered highlights why

this is the case. "When I would email my math professors, they just don't reply. One of them, he was just like, 'Send me an email as a reminder,' and I was like, 'Okay,' but he doesn't reply. He just wants to see the email, I guess," concluded Fallon. Her confusion makes sense: why would a professor ask for a reminder only to not reply? Perhaps he is chronically forgetful or, in the more likely case, this is part of the unspoken hidden curriculum of communicating with your professors and he simply needed a reminder to do what she asked but never intended to reply. This should not fall on Fallon to realize or potentially learn, and could discourage her from reaching out to professors to build relationships or when she needs support (Jack 2016; Schademan and Thompson; Demetriou et al). All of the participants included here convey that competent and caring professors are essential to their success, so as students use their skills and knowledge to carefully find faculty members who fit the bill, more work can be done to prepare both groups for this engagement (Shademan and Thompson 2016; Demetriou et al. 2017). As you will soon read, participants talked more about how professors were part of their current and future support system.

Throughout their time at The College, participants have also received advising and mentoring from professors which helps them do what is required and pursue what they want, respectively. I think about this as being the difference between advising and mentoring, and highlights a limitation with the idea of persistence only being about graduation. As I argue throughout this thesis, having a degree does not mean that or account for whether a FGLI student of color experienced a safe, enjoyable, or holistic period of growth in college. To account for the institutional, societal and personal factors that shape a student's college experience, we must look to the relationships that give this chapter of life meaning, including but not limited to those between a student and their professor. For Isabelle, she has two professors who she goes to in

order to figure out which courses to take "or what exactly I should be doing" and to talk about being FGLI. In Moot's and Fallon's cases, they took a course with their respective assigned first-year advisor and then, as Fallon said, getting "pretty close" led that professor to become a mentor. This is one dynamic that contributes to how students find and feel like they have guidance (Means and Pyne 2017). Understandably, if Fallon does not have a good experience in a professor's class, she does not try to speak to them outside of it. Instead, she will focus on seeking out help from professors who put in effort to help her and get to know her (Soria and Stebleton 2012) like when one professor offered to meet with her weekly after not earning a high grade on an exam. This was important to her, and to this study, because he connected with her by knowing her and her name as an individual in a relatively large class for The College, and responded to her situation without shaming her.

Though this professor's approach to teach students according to who they are and where they're at is arguably a basic expectation we should have, it also reflects the gold standard in how FGLI students want to be treated by their professors (Collier and Morgan 2008; Demetriou et al. 2017). Given that advising and teaching are repetitive aspects of a FGLI student's experience, we must consider how to use the interwoven nature of teaching, whether in a classroom or about major requirements, and mentoring to help create a more integrated and transparent structure within which students can build relationships without feeling like they must exchange their morals to do so (Jack 2016; Morton 2019). This will enable students to be advised and get through their institution's various offices and departments as well as make it better and gain as much as possible to prepare for their futures.

The College functions as an academic setting where FGLI students of color learn more about intellectual topics as well as about themselves and how to negotiate their connections with

the people and structures around them. Interestingly, as in the previous section, the participants frequently showed up when they felt uncomfortable or unprepared. Their dedication to fulfilling experiences in courses and with professors was not automatically enough for them to meet others' expectations or feel comfortable and successful, however. In order to provide an affirming and safe learning environment, daily persistence practices must be modeled by authority figures and important people in FGLI students' lives, and incorporated into the cultural norms of their campus. These shifts, as we will see through the participants' attempts to remain interdependent, address the disconnect that colleges and higher education can have from the communities around them. By recognizing and attending to these differences, we will be more responsive to FGLI students of color and the values which they are eager to share with us.

Section 3: Relationships

The third section, Relationships, documents how participants' bonds and connections have been strengthened or been strained during college. This includes friendships, relatives and particularly parents, as well as community members from their neighborhoods or The College's campus (faculty, staff). This section will be briefer than others and is another opportunity to provide more context into the participants' lives since a student's capacity to persist is developed through their relationships, which serve as an essential space to apply and strengthen their daily strategies, and will be further explored in following sections.

Given that relationships are crucial to how FGLI students of color applied to, chose, and transitioned into a college, we can learn about how daily persistence practices positively affect more people than the person who performs them alone. In this context, the participants practiced asking for help, showing up when uncomfortable, building community, and sharing resources, including helping their families to understand their college pursuits better. The two primary theories for this section as "borderlands" (Anzaldua 1987) and "community cultural wealth" (Yosso 2005) because the participants come to terms with their new schedules and distance from home through their interactions with and reliance on others, which often aligns with their cultures' emphasis on cultivating bonds to others that are oriented around care, communication, and understanding. Not only do these strategies partially address this group's ethical costs of upward mobility (Morton 2019) but the participant's demonstrations also suggest how we can frame these strategies as a communal effort for mutual growth and support to increase their use across higher education.

There was no single amount of connectedness that the participants experienced to their home community, which I think about as the people and places in a participant's life from before

college that they consider important. Three participants were less connected to friends, organizations that provided financial or social capital, and extracurricular programs and part of this disconnect simply happened over time. This is a common secondary cost to the "ethical costs" of attending college, especially in new environments and farther regions (Morton 2019). Fallon speaks to her old friends "...more when they're commiserating over struggles" because now they "have views that don't align anymore." The process of losing relationships as you become socially mobile is one area that researchers like Lee and Kramer (2013) seek to study further and understand better, because it also affects students' capacity to physically return and emotionally reconnect with their home environments. In one participant's case, they had a smaller number of relationships which they counted to be five, including their best friend who they met at The College, that they must maintain. On the other hand, Miguel and Lily remained in touch with family, friends, and folks from their high school or neighborhood without any concern. To Miguel, his bonds with high school classmates remain important. He catches up with his former "support group" over an annual meal to "catch up" on holiday breaks. In Lily's case, her community of relatives, friends, and people in her life "have been supportive." She adds that, "We don't necessarily communicate when I'm here. But when I'm back at home, it's very much like I feel very loved." Likewise, she continues to work with the program directors of a college access program for "high achieving" FGLI students with college aspirations that she participated in. By having folks in her life who she can interact with, mostly in short-term yet meaningful ways, these touchpoints serve various purposes such as tying Lily to her family, providing encouragement, and offering ways to share her access to new environments. All of these processes, which impact how a student feels belonging on their campus, are often an ongoing challenge among the FGLI students in earlier literature (Morton 2019; Rowan-Kenyon et al.

2018; Nunn 2021; Benson and Lee 2020; Kreniske et al. 2022). As a result, Lily is a prime example of an ideal yet often unattainable way for FGLI students of color to negotiate their physical absence from their pre-college life.

There are some specific challenges to maintaining relationships as a college student, which the participants understand and respond to in different ways. While friends, professors, and family members were the most commonly named people in the participants' support systems, some did not form or strengthen relationships because of their past experiences, different perspectives, busyness, or challenges staying true to themselves in a new environment. Other researchers have shown that the previously mentioned categories of people were the most important to FGLI students, and explain that the family dimension of this challenge can be explained by colleges' lack of programming for and acknowledgement of FGLI students' parents (Demetriou et al. 2017; Kiyama et al. 2018). This is particularly salient for FGLI students of color (Garriott et al. 2021). Moot had different impressions of their peers virtually versus in-person, and previously were excluded by their friend group, so they were most comfortable having a single friend like their best friend of over a decade and did not make as many deep peer connections as they currently wish to. Related to Fallon's experience of changing and being less like her friends, Isabelle would not understand "weird" events that she wished to talk about which, based on her description of said events, were painful, racist, and discriminatory. For others, though, it is less a matter of finding the right people or continuing your shared life approaches and more about having enough time to maintain relationships from and to home. These barriers to connection are consistent with the body of literature on FGLI students (Jack 2016, 2019; Morton 2019; MacInnis et al. 2019; Lee and Kramer 2013).

There are a few ways that participants keep their relationships going, even when it is particularly difficult like in Jasmine's and Miguel's experiences. As Miguel puts it, "There's so much to do that I don't get to stop and reflect on what I have done... It's like through email that I contact my high school teachers and give them a page log of what I've done, and they're like, 'God, that's so exciting for you.'" Amid the chaos and multiple demands of college, technology and social media can help FGLI students keep in touch with people in their network (Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2018) and, as Elizabeth shared, with friends who stay in the same neighborhood or state after college. Although all of participants' points of connection to others may not be live or in-person, these exchanges contribute to a shared interest among the participants to keep their ties to the people whom they care about. This was especially salient for Lily, who called her parents nearly daily during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when students on-campus lived in isolation. Considering that FGLI students were most likely to have their access to Internet and digital devices affected by the pandemic (Herder 2021), it is likely that other FGLI students of color (and especially those who were unable to live on campus) had a more isolating experience. Finally, a FGLI student of color's relationships also include the one they have with themself, which Lily explored when she was unsure about how to negotiate her recent increase in independence and wondered "if I have to bend myself to please other people." Over time, she "realized that maybe I don't have to replace certain parts of me anymore" and refused to pay the cost of adjusting to white, middle-class norms that conflicted with her own (Morton 2019). To avoid or counter these kinds of challenges, participants described finding friends who they click with, whether through shared identities with other students of color or similar expectations about the regularity of their interactions, as well as those who embrace and celebrate their culture (Lee and Harris 2020). As we know, this does not always unfold according

to plan for all FGLI students (Benson and Lee 2020), however the participants' commitment to keep trying underscores their daily acts of persistence.

Family

Multiple participants shared how their family dynamic and relatives' perspectives impact them. Some are motivated to do their best and find their direction in life so that they can build a community and succeed for their relatives, especially their mothers. Like I stated earlier, this is a reframing of "family achievement guilt" (Covarrubias et al. 2021) that contributes to their familial and aspirational wealth (Yosso 2005) and then their resulting persistence. During the pandemic, when students like Moot were living at home, this was harder to pursue because they were on "thin ice" as Moot's family disowned each other and they became more transparent with their mother about the pain she caused. For Miguel and Jasmine, their mothers were sad about their distance while at college and believed that "all the kids were going to be like [her]," respectively. These mothers' reactions signal not only a forward-thinking parental instinct to look for and prevent any problems so that everyone is okay, which colleges should incorporate during students' enrollment (Kiyama et al. 2018) but also an emotional responsibility for FGLI students of color to carry in addition their own feelings and concerns (Morton 2019; Covarrubias et al. 2019, 2021). Miguel does this lightheartedly, as shown in his response to his mom. He said, "'Well, I could have gone to Alaska or California or somewhere like that.' I'm like, 'Girl, please. This is only a train ride, not an airplane ride away,' but I still felt nervous.'" Here, we can see Miguel try to make good on this emotional cost and comfort his mom by looking on the bright

side of his relatively close relocation for college (Morton 2019). Isabelle credits her middle child status with making her be incredibly independent and neutral towards changes in her life, which has developed her adaptability and how she chooses her battles with peers. I recognize this familial experience as part of Isabelle's navigational capital (Yosso 2005) since it enhances her capacity to move through an unpredictable institution where her experiences and opportunities are never fully in her control. While colleges should support each student and their family during the transition, we cannot overlook that students are entering an entirely new world in their own ways and may not fully know what to expect nor how to invest in their relationships like before, as much as they may wish to.

Whether with peers or family members, FGLI students of color must negotiate different layers of responsibility, interest, and availability in their relationships. In the same way that relationships can serve as a source of fulfillment, empathy, and happiness, these associations to others can also create confusion or uncertainty. The emotional toll of navigating relationships is key to how the participants show up not only in their courses, but also for their minds and bodies as individuals and in order to engage with other aspects of campus life. Overall, the daily persistence practices of the participants are also propelled by external forces and individuals such as family and friends. The relationships that FGLI students of color have can be strained when they attend college, yet simultaneously serve an important dual purpose of reminding us of our motivations and keeping us connected to supportive people.

The relationships that people in higher education try to foster with FGLI students of color, as well as the programs and resources that they create for this group, must account for the existing relationships that FGLI students of color prioritize. Colleges can also attempt to help students navigate changing dynamics and availability, from the moment someone officially steps

on campus to start their college career, for example by including family members in accessible orientation programming (Kiyama et al. 2018). We cannot lose sight of the fact that college students' time is being pulled in different directions towards different people and individual persistence strategies can be helpful or applicable, but ultimately cannot address how others respond to this journey or navigate higher education themselves. Figuring out how to stay connected to one's communities and foster new relationships at the same time is one task for a FGLI college student of color, but this is not an individual endeavor. As the depth of a student's relationships impacts their well-being and sense of belonging, it will be in the best interest of institutions best interest to stay curious and committed to growth, just like their students.

Section 4: Wellbeing and Belonging

The fourth section, Wellbeing and Belonging, explores participants' experiences in and thoughts on different dimensions of campus life such as clubs, personal growth, mental health, employment, housing, and food. I will discuss the participants' reflections on the challenges that they have had navigating non-academic parts of campus in addition to how they feel and think about The College as well as their experience in college so far.

Most commonly, building community and asking for help were the daily strategies that the participants leveraged. In some cases, they asked for help by demanding it or taking on leadership roles to provide resources and information to themselves and their peers. The other strategies of sharing resources and showing up when uncomfortable were also present. Two extremely related theories for this section are Yosso's (2005) "community cultural wealth" and Du Bois' (1903) "double consciousness" since the participants gain a stronger sense of their position and power in their institutions, in part by leveraging their forms of wealth and then applying these wealths in light of their newfound knowledge. FGLI students of color both value their campus life engagement and also connect their satisfaction and ease with this aspect of college as key factors in their wellbeing and sense of belonging. As a result, this section illuminates how the participants look after their own minds and bodies and the paradoxical nature of daily persistence, since they must sometimes enter uncomfortable or painful situations in order to secure their health, stability, and identities as well as futures, whether that is their own or their institution's.

Participating in clubs and organizations

On campus, several participants are involved with different student clubs and organizations and hold leadership positions. Nearly all are part of organizations related to social justice or their identities, including affinity groups, professional support for underrepresented students in their major, creative performance groups, and activist clubs. Other involvements related to hobbies they have or are roles within the department of their major, such as being a peer mentor or a teaching assistant (some of which are paid roles). Some participants described feeling more settled into The College's ecosystem because they found a community of friends who have taken on more leadership as time passes or, like Fallon said, "I didn't give up my first year, so I'm here and now I'm in a better place." Moot's experience is different from other participants in that they work closely with organizations near their home and stay in touch with students who were in the same clubs at The College but have since graduated. The participants collectively organize events including guest speaker visits, coordinate trips, build community, and attend events for free food. As Fallon describes, "What I've been participating in is just to make more connections and friends. I feel like at The College, there are definitely walking CEOs here, and it's kind of making those connections and meaningful relationships with people. I think that's how I've been more involved this semester compared to the last, where I was more worried about my grades." She speaks to a tension FGLI students of color, which is how they will divide their time, and for which there is never a right or common answer, especially as students' interests and capacities change. Between doing well academically, being social with people whom they can relate to, working to earn money for expenses, and trying to build their social capital, FGLI students tend to be very intentional about what college experience they want to

have. As in the participants' case, these activities often contribute to their success (Demetriou et al. 2017).

In reflecting on their reasoning for engaging with these areas of campus life, the participants had different motivations and experienced levels of enjoyment. The two reasons shared by Kane and Miguel were to prepare for their future because they "thought it would look good" for graduate school and to help their peers engage with a topic they've come to enjoy, respectively. Miguel's teaching assistant position was recommended to him by staff and faculty, and his approach is to "always [be] filled with energy and excitement," which he thinks "does help students just because before they're always tired… I get to make them laugh or get them more excited about math…" Clearly, he finds fulfillment in this role because of the impact he can have on others who were in a similar situation as he once was and this reinforces how important professors are to students' leadership development (Demetriou et al. 2017). Despite enjoying work that is fun or which provides resources that participants can take to their communities, Moot acknowledged how some campus programs geared towards addressing inequality have "a lot of white savior problems" and could benefit from more critical engagement with the race and power dynamics that plague higher education (Museus et al. 2015; Warnock and Hurst 2016). Unfortunately, across academia and in other parts of The College, more education and effort is needed to not replicate the same issues that people seek to improve. Beyond creating workplaces and classrooms where people can voice their concerns, there must also be avenues that value the involvement of people like Isabelle who are not formally part of any clubs or organizations and who instead choose to work jobs and spend time with their friends.

Developing their Identities

All of the previously mentioned engagements with campus life have encouraged the participants to explore their identities and mindset during and through their relationships with others. This affirms that like college students in general, FGLI students of color also develop their identities as they pursue a higher education (Patton et al. 2020) which can and does positively impact their self-perception and ability to analyze social issues (Hurtado et al. 2015; Norma López 2023). This happens to Kane when she meets people with other identities and considers what fits or resonates with her, which is consistent with literature on how peers influence college students' identity development (Renn 2020: 239; Shell et al. 2020). For Fallon, her exploration and "identity work" (Gray et al. 2018) has happened during events hosted by a cultural affinity club that was not available to her before The College. Elizabeth also gravitated towards people who shared her identities on campus (Hurtado et al. 2015) including by finding a mostly queer friend group. She described that her social interactions and friendships tend to be limited to people who are queer and low-income but that has not been problematic or upsetting to her. In other participants' experiences, this internal exploration is not always easy or fast, and Isabelle insightfully spoke to the personal investment it requires (Gray et al. 2018). She said, "I had to do a lot of, I still am, doing a lot of mentally reworking around my idea of what it means to be of a high socioeconomic status and then how that ties into race and other identities." Similar to others, Isabelle is not only making sense of her own experience or doing so through her understanding of others' experiences, but is also trying to adopt ways of thinking that are more reflective of this new information by continually enacting an intersectional lens.

As this thesis seeks to demonstrate, class and race work together in powerful and, if not properly attended to, sometimes harmful ways for FGLI students of color. The result is that many

are attentive to the impacts of both class, race, and other social positions, and spend time thinking and speaking about this multilayered dynamic. While it can be hard to recognize and make sense of any experience in an isolated way, especially since the dynamic shifts depending on the people and places involved, participants like Miguel look for indications that they are progressing towards their values. In his case this is to be an effective leader for one of the underrepresented student affinity groups who are majors in one academic department. To do this, he asks himself, "How do we find a way to give them time to advocate for themselves or do things that are beneficial?" Much like peer advocates in Lee and Harris' study (2020), Miguel seeks ways to facilitate an exploration like the one he and other participants had, by making them feel seen or connecting them to people and resources that make a positive impact on their lives. Therefore, I cannot understate the potential of leadership as a component of the community-building strategy among FGLI students of color, since they can apply their insights for this group's mutual and long-term growth and persistence as well as institutional improvement.

Navigating Class

The presence and actions of peers who come from wealthier families was also influential to the participants' campus life experience and how they saw power be used. Isabelle described how more privileged students "have a super hard time grappling with" their positionality "and then also understanding they can still be queer or a person of color and then also this." By being "weird and sneaky," Isabelle explains that they "end up doing a lot more harm." Although she was unsure if these people realized and cared about their impact, Isabelle recollected that multiple students have attempted to hide their wealth. This displays how students are unable to

critically engage with the idea of intersectionality and create an uncomfortable situation for students who are not only aware that they have less money but also constantly engage with this reality through classed, racist interactions. Another instance of confusion occurred for Jasmine when she learned about a mutual aid initiative being spearheaded by wealthier students to redistribute money on campus and she wondered if they were "targeting this at me, because what do you want me to do?" It is important for more "resourced" students, as Fallon eloquently referenced them, to be clearer about where responsibility lies in the social justice efforts they lead to not cause more harm, like Isabelle said, and to create social spaces where FGLI students of color are not pitied or ostracized. Also, wealth shows in other more public ways, as Moot spoke about a friend whose "parents bought a library at [a semi-elite private school in a popular East Coast city] so that she could have that as her safety school." This is an absurd display of wealth and authority but also stood out among Moot's various experiences with classmates who come from semi-famous or political families, given this particular peer's past racist transgressions and the fact that Moot has "family literally in a military regime right now." In lasting ways, richer students wield their power to shape narratives and expectations as well as change their circumstances in ways that FGLI students of color cannot because they do not have the same financial or social resources. The shocking ways that higher income students live and interact with their college that these participants discussed is similar to those documented in Jack's work *The Privileged Poor* (2019) which is one of the few academic examinations of FGLI students of color in the context of an elite higher education institution.

Often, the participants identified wealthier peers through visual symbols such as clothing and off-campus food. In fact, one of Elizabeth's first-year roommates was an international student who purchased her entire college wardrobe once she arrived in the U.S. This

understandably shocked Elizabeth, who reacted "I was like, 'Wow.' Respect, I guess. But also, I could never in my whole life… stuff like that is very jarring." Likewise another participant was surprised about a peer's clothing when Jasmine spoke to her growing awareness of expensive clothing such as the wildly popular Canada Goose winter coats. She once stepped on one, which prompted her and a friend to look at its price online. Jasmine thought, "'Oh, this is crazy.' It was just thrown off on that chair and I brushed my foot against it." In this accident, Jasmine was surprised by the coat's high cost, that it wasn't treated with a great deal of care by its owner, and that she'd done something wrong by stepping on it. Perhaps Jasmine had such a strong reaction because it was more expensive than what she is accustomed to. Considering that the coat was financially out of her reach, perhaps this distance put the brand on a pedestal which made Jasmine feel like she could not touch it nor could it be dirtied like any other outerwear would be. Importantly, the cost of clothing does not determine its value or style and all belongings deserve respect, though this can be challenging for FGLI students of color to believe when campus norms are set by wealthier people and often white dominant norms (Jack 2019).

Miguel has not felt bad about not participating in the accumulation or display of these kinds of symbols, including shopping online or ordering food through delivery apps. Though he was around this kind of behavior in high school, he was surprised to see it happen so frequently at The College, in part because of the high "hidden fees" and that it doesn't make sense given on-campus options. In our interview, he rhetorically asked his peers, "'How much money do you have?' I don't have the money to do that, so I'm just conscious. I don't need anything right now, so I'm just chilling. If anything, when it comes to food, I find ways to [get dinner] and then have a late night [meal] so I can have two meals for free. For free, instead of Uber Eating McDonald's or something like that." Miguel's approach is not only more financially conscious, but it also

makes sense to him in the way that Elizabeth realized and wanted other students to know that it's normal to get "separated from the rich students here at [The College]." These understandings are part of the sharing resources and showing up when uncomfortable persistence strategies, since they help the individuals and those around them to move forward in this different and complex environment. I agree with my respondents that it is most certainly surprising to see students not take full advantage of their on-campus resources, though either approach is valid and ultimately a manifestation of the differences between students of a particular class status and their engagement with campus life.

FGLI students of color observed that, with greater access to options and materials items, wealthier students have more social capital and can increase their comfort. Isabelle and Miguel spoke about how wealthier students lead different lifestyles on campus and have either a greater or less accurate sense of what options are available to them compared to non-FGLI students who must constantly grapple with the barriers or limitations which they encounter. For example, Isabelle recounted how a student would complain that they were "broke," yet had their tuition paid for by their parents. When peers do not have self awareness of their wealth or the related privileges it provides them, and how that shapes their college and post-graduate possibilities, the participants were initially bothered. In high school, Fallon had a classmate who felt confident that he would be admitted to a nearby elite university because one of his parents taught there, which made Fallon wonder why this student with a parent in and familiar with the educational system would attend a "less resourced" and lower ranked school. She suspected that his "higher rank" based on grades in her school would make him a competitive applicant, but came to accept his audacity with a reminder to herself that his privilege and resources enabled that access. To reaffirm her academic self efficacy, Fallon is guiding herself through the reflection process that

Wang and Castañeda-Sound (2008) recommend. It is wonderful that Fallon can process the inequalities that she sees first-hand, however this is also a cost to her and not something she should have to deal with or process, especially alone. Likewise, her acceptance does not change the reality that FGLI students do not experience the same sense of security nor have the lifetime access to knowledge to make informed decisions through familial networks that non-FGLI students have. To provide more examples of students' experiences with higher income peers, when Isabelle spoke about not knowing how to pursue graduate school, one of her friends who claimed to have "zero clue how to do anything" or what they want to do was called out by another student who recalled that the friend's father is a consultant at an elite company who suggested she pursue the same job. As Isabelle said, she knew that they "are not the same, bae." In other words, students see through the persona that their wealthier and more privileged peers present themselves with and FGLI students of color acknowledge their differences without developing ill will towards their wealthier peers or being consumed by these differences.

In this way, being aware of and coming to terms with different financial circumstances and choices on campus is one element of FGLI students' persistence strategy to show up when things are not comfortable. As discussed earlier, some FGLI students of color do not know wealthier students or do not develop deep relationships with white students, so how other students look becomes a gauge for how FGLI students of color expect they will act. In this way, the wealth gap also becomes a social one that is reinforced on multiple scales, from wealthier students' refusal to acknowledge their privilege to how information and opportunities are distributed in this society. This stratification can negatively affect FGLI students' health and wellbeing, including their ability to plant roots at college and experience a sense of belonging (Nunn 2021; Stuber 2011, Kreniske et al. 2022; Dover et al. 2020; Morton 2019).

In order to deal with these differences, the participants leverage their past experiences and new relationships. Isabelle pulls on her time learning alongside students who were wealthier and who held "different opinions," sometimes about her, in high school. With his insights from high school where Miguel "saw what it meant to be the 1%," Miguel has more experience navigating the "issues" that are created by student wealth gaps. This is unlike other FGLI students at The College who are now experiencing and trying to talk about these differences for the first time with him, as is common among FGLI students' upon their arrival to elite higher education institutions (Jack 2019). Lily has sought out this kind of understanding from her friends, and has been deeply affirmed by their support. She described one such interaction to me during our interview: she helps her parents complete paperwork and other tasks for their business and healthcare and shared this with a peer. She said, "And then I talked to one of my friends who doesn't have this type of situation and then she told me that she is... Basically she's saying that she's very sorry about this, and then she comforted me and all of that. And then I realized that was the first time that someone recognizes that I have all these things going on, and then kind of explicitly appreciates it." Given that her parents expected her to take on these responsibilities as the oldest child, this friend's response was a rare recognition which "felt very nice" to receive and served as a positive factor for her mental health (Soria and Horgos 2021). To supplement the common feeling among FGLI students of color that they have less support, Lily took initiative to actively seek out a friend's which made a powerful impact on her mindset (Wang and Castañeda-Sound 2008). Lily's memory of being shown compassion and appreciation from a peer who cannot relate speaks volumes about how non-FGLI students can actively help FGLI students of color heal rather than cause further harm by being evasive, dramatic, dishonest, or misrepresentative about their background as Isabelle experienced with her wealthier and more

privileged peers earlier. This kind of dynamic, then, can be one that we strive to foster to not only account for how wealth inequality shapes campus life (Jack 2019) and prevent further class divisions so that, as Lily has done, students can find common ground and feel like their previous ways of life are normal instead of contradictory to their life at college.

Managing mental health

Most participants described having poor mental health because of the stress of being FGLI and a college student. Specifically, Kane was "depressed at the prospect of going to college because it was four more years of this bullshit," and Miguel also experienced anxiety and imposter syndrome (MacInnis et al. 2019) because "college in general isn't meant for me or a person like me." Moreover, the "realness" of moving along in his studies and needing to think about his career and face uncertainty were additional factors for his stress (Kreniske et al. 2022). Another element beyond the physical realm of college life that contributed to participants' stress was political events, like media coverage of "Trumpers," which weighed on Elizabeth. Moot spoke to how some mental health struggles are rooted in being low-income, because of the scarcity that a student can feel in combination with not having control over their life as a student. They described that, "Another thing with FGLI is not knowing how to take up space for ourselves. [We think] "Oh my God, I can't leave the lights on all the time." And then our roommate will leave the lights on all the time." They continued that we don't ask for space, "And we deserve those physical spaces so that we can define them on our own terms." Adjusting to a new environment is a challenge that's compounded by different norms for FGLI students and, for many, there are a greater amount of resources that can be hard to fully use (Jack 2019; Jenkins et

al. 2013). In this way, being FGLI and being a college student are two separate stressors for the participants but an individual will always be impacted by their personal past and events in society. The participants in my thesis have experienced mental health challenges, particularly due to their surroundings and societal circumstances, which are consistent with previous studies on FGLI students (Kreniske et al. 2022, Soria and Horgos 2021; Jenkins et al. 2013).

Each day, participants also persisted by showing up for themselves and taking care of their wellbeing, even when the discomfort they faced was internal. As a result, it is essential to describe how the participants respond to their changing mental health status, such as how they process events and consider psychological services or counseling offered by The College. There is a range of proaction to intentional lack of action, starting with Miguel knowing how to cope and manage his stress from being in therapy during high school. Now, he looks to reliable stress relievers like sports and being in community with others. Similarly, Elizabeth tries "not to get overwhelmingly crushed with despair" by media coverage by turning to her support system of peers for empathy and understanding. While Kane pushes through, "getting up and working and going to class…" even when she is not feeling well, Isabelle has decided it is in her best interest to not process situations. She shared that "I just started to push [racist and harmful situations] away. And just being like, I'm just not going to process that because I think if I were to process it, I'd be probably upset." This avoidance has the potential to be damaging because, as we have seen, the college environment is full of many stressors and triggers for FGLI students of color. While I cannot argue that this is a sustainable solution, I understand that Isabelle is simply responding to the overwhelming amount of events and interactions with what she has (her agency) to maintain her sanity in a predominantly white, and historically racist and exclusive, institution. The last way that participants try to take care of themselves is by going to CAPS,

though some students have thought about that option and not pursued it or do and "feel weird" that they do not pay their counselor even though they couldn't afford to. Overall, most participants have experienced poor mental health due to being enrolled in college and living in our unfair society. While participants' lack of accessible professional mental health care aligns with prior literature (Stebleton et al. 2014; Garriott et al. 2017; Wang and Castañeda-Sound 2008; Kreniske et al. 2022), their perspectives on alternative outlets and one's choice to compartmentalize were not reflected in those studies.

To make sense of experiences that they have with campus life, the participants pointed to some influential factors that shape their time as a college student. One portion relates to identities that they hold, including their ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, FGLI-status, and gender. More than once, multiple identities were brought up together and not seen as discrete labels but as interlocking positions that work together to affect a person's social experience. This intersection of their identities and social categories also forms their community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005) which colleges can and should draw on to facilitate their transition to college (Kiyama et al. 2018; Stuber 2011; Nunn 2021). The wealth of knowledge, experiences, and skills is what Likewise, the participants choose their friends accordingly to be around folks with similar progressive values. Two participants talked about how their cultural identities were uncommon in previous educational spaces, so The College has presented them with an opportunity to relate to others in this way and feel proud of who they are. This is not solely positive though, as one participant described feeling "immense pressure because of the fact that I'm one [student of my nationality] in a room of other students that I must now represent." A distinct factor that a participant brought up is the professional title they've taken on at The College, such as being a social scientist. Finally, Elizabeth shared how dealing with personal health concerns contributed

to not "feel[ing] as connected to the student life and the student population as a whole," however she's also developed strong friendships with people who've provided emotional support at The College. Two societal factors that were discussed were the pandemic and having to do virtual courses/clubs as well as political events, including the growing visibility of Pro-Trump, racist, and harmful rhetoric. One point worth celebrating is that even off campus, the participants' pride does not waver. Like Miguel who will "blast Mariachi music through Wallingford as a Trump flag waves around," the participants see themselves as multidimensional individuals and show up despite their discomfort to demand to take up space.

Engaging in Paid and Unpaid Work

On campus, several of the participants hold part-time jobs that provide them with professional experience and connections to others in their campus community. While some roles provide administrative support to academic departments or libraries, the three other main categories relate to engaged scholarship or community service, academic research, and peer mentoring. These are the same kinds of involvement that Demetriou et al. found among the most successful first-generation college students (2017). The participants work various amounts of hours per week, though as an example, Elizabeth has consistently worked two jobs at The College for 15 hours weekly to fund social activities and food expenses. Unlike many FGLI students, none of the participants shared that they work a full-time job while they are enrolled in classes full-time (Saenz et al. 2007). Most, however, also completed paid summer work such as on-campus research, which gave one participant time to cook and bond with friends over meals from their individual cultures and served to not only promote relationships with professors but also her sense of belonging on campus (Shademan and Thompson 2016).

Although this work is not compensated, I believe it is essential to recognize the organized labor of FGLI students of color in their unpaid clubs, organizations, and committees, whether their work is for a hobby interest, to advocate, or to build and maintain an affinity space on campus. This is relevant to FGLI students of color as neither of these labels has a dedicated physical space on The College's campus, which means students must make an ongoing and repetitive interpersonal effort based on their changing surroundings as time and space permits gatherings much like FGLI activists in the literature (Lee and Harris 2020). Likewise, undocumented FGLI students of color especially hold an unequal and unfair burden of labor that most cannot supplement with paid work assignments because fewer opportunities can be funded without work authorization, which no undocumented student has. As Jasmine explains,

"The resources [undocumented students] have, we kind of have to do it on our own. We had to reach out to undocumented alumni last semester, and most of that stuff is from us." She continues, "I know undocumented student life is definitely super difficult to navigate, especially because we can't change the laws, and the country just has to change for us to be able to do something. I think also for us, or for me at least…we have to prove that we're worthy enough to be in America, and that, also fighting with our FGLI identity. We're the first in our family to go to college. We're at this great institution which has a lot of money, but what can this institution do for us? They can't change a lot either."

In this excerpt, Jasmine speaks about how frustrating and challenging it is for undocumented students to receive the help and advice they need, in a similar but not identical way to how low-income students attempt to organize around an "invisible and stigmatized identity in flux" (Warnock and Hurst 2016). This is not a situation that documented FGLI and non-FGLI students, especially those who are not people of color, can relate to considering that

they have easier access to upward mobility by knowing the hidden curriculum, having more experience or permissions in college-like environments, and leveraging more traditional forms of social capital in their personal lives (Jack 2016, 2019; Morton 2019; Anyon 1980).

Engaging the Challenges

Six major challenges that come with being a student at The College, which I will outline in this and following paragraphs, were identified by the participants. The first is that organized activism for improvements within the institution or broader society is weaker, according to Moot. They elaborate that they, "recognize that the institution is not designed to maintain the institutional memory of those marginalized groups. And so a lot of that labor is left to us in ways that for other groups, it's already set up for them, which is very frustrating." In other words, Moot calls us to think about how change often happens thanks to students and, in many cases, The College actively works against (or does not have systems set up for) recollection of what has happened on campus, especially in the experiences of FGLI students of color (Warnock and Hurst 2016; Lee and Harris 2020). This puts this student group at a disadvantage because both the FGLI population and population of students of color have a shorter history in academia compared to continuing generation, middle and upper class, and white students. As a result, we have less of an established foundation and at times experience more intentional exclusion (Museus et al. 2015) which makes it more challenging to implement new approaches to college life, whether an institutional policy change or a personal routine to complete our degrees. Likewise, this lack of memory specifically presents an obstacle for the continuity of club leadership roles because participants described documents getting lost, funding protocols being

unclear, money being unavailable, interpersonal relationships making harm unavoidable, and executive members being required to dedicate extensive time to communicating with the people who oversee student life. These complex responsibilities add new social and advocacy dimensions to the kinds of familial and academic roles that FGLI students of color have held in earlier studies (Collier and Morgan 2008; Covarrubias et al. 2015, 2019, 2021).

The next two challenges are about how The College's staff treat current and former students. One example of how the institution prioritizes its own interests over students' interests is when staff police student behavior, such as by writing down a student's name when they are unknowingly in a place they aren't allowed to be, which happened to one participant. There have also been instances shared on private social media pages for The College about their public safety punishing a student who entered a locked building when they were hungry, to get food that was inside. Of course, no one wants to feel unsafe. For FGLI students of color, this type of profiling can harm their mental health (Kreniske et al. 2022; Jenkins et al. 2013) or ability to engage with their campus like they would otherwise want to (Nunn 2021; Benson and Lee 2020) which is unacceptable and speaks to the need for racial bias training as well as consideration of why limitations are set on campus spaces, how clearly these are communicated, and in what ways they are to be "enforced," if that is necessary. The third challenge is that alumni, FGLI or not, are disconnected from campus events and students' concerns, which a participant suggests can help to maintain an idealistic and often false image of what The College is like. The same participant believed this was to maintain steady alumni donations, and another senior participant noticed that this lack of awareness among stakeholders makes it harder to build momentum for proposals, especially since the advisory boards that current students sit on do not meet over a long enough period of time to see their ideas become reality. While there is little scholarship on

FGLI students of color and their interactions with faculty and staff, Vue has highlighted the tensions that staff and faculty who were FGLI face when they seek to reconcile how to help FGLI students as employees of an institution that often create or contribute to students' challenges (2021).

Moving on, three final notable challenges involve navigating the parts of campus life that are organized by offices within The College. The first has to do with receiving accommodations, which I will primarily discuss in the context of housing. Accommodations are special permissions granted to students with a documented disability or chronic medical condition, usually by an office called "Student Disability Services." While accommodations must legally be provided to ensure equal access to campus life, the range of permissions granted and how well implemented they are vary by staff and faculty. Likewise, the very need for an accommodations process demonstrates that institutions are not universally designed to be accessible and meet students' needs, as FGLI students' difficulties integrating into campus life show (Stuber 2011; Nunn 2021; Benson and Lee 2020). Likewise, being granted accommodations does not guarantee that students' needs will be met in the same way that official resources and programming do not automatically serve their purpose for the students who use them (Lee and Harris 2020).

Moot shared how they had to advocate for housing that meets their needs over several months and received a poor response despite persisting through bureaucratic channels. In their experience, a representative from the housing department suggested that they should be able to get the housing they requested because they have priority as a senior, rather than guaranteeing the housing and helping them to meet all of their spatial and sensory needs. Instead, the housing department wanted Moot to receive accommodations for their sexuality, which as they pointed out and we all should know, is not a condition which gives someone a disability. Although Moot

expressed grace towards the staff whom they interacted with, in an attempt to understand why they were so hard to get a hold of and to get them to do their job, they also shared, "I had also emailed other people and no one was responding to me. And eventually I got my single, but it was just like, for months and months and months, I was stressed out not knowing where the hell I was going to be living and whether that environment would be good for my health. And I just didn't have an answer. So that was really disappointing." The direct and indirect negative mental health that Moot experienced because of their institution's failure to design processes that are effective and responsive is unfortunate and disappointing, especially since since FGLI students are already more likely to have anxiety, depression and PTSD (Kreniske et al. 2022, National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine 2021; Jenkins et al. 2013). Although no participants experienced outright "conflict," with staff, such administrative obstacles are also present in how students must interact with authority figures to lead clubs or organizations and change on campus (Warnock and Hurst 2016; Lee and Harris 2020) and can deter them from asking for help or getting what they need to survive comfortably let alone succeed. A similar incident was experienced by Elizabeth, who described facing difficulties to get accommodations that would be meaningful and helpful for her health situation. As previously discussed, being a FGLI student of color is also already complex and can lead to challenging or traumatic circumstances (Kreniske et al. 2022; Jenkins et al. 2013) and institutions should proactively plan their services to be more transparent, accessible, efficient, and useful.

The fourth and fifth challenges relate to food and social events, which do not reflect all of The College's preferences and therefore also make these parts of campus life inaccessible to the participants at times. Elizabeth talked about how The College's food options are bad because they do not reflect student's cultures and are not generally nutritious or cooked in ways to

preserve the ingredients' health benefits. Moreover, the meal plan does not accurately reflect the rising cost of food. This is a double whammy for FGLI students of color, since having culturally-relevant meals that are also affordable could aid their sense of belonging, connection to their home community, and their happiness (Nunn 2021; Yosso 2005). Unfortunately the impact is, as Elizbaeth states it, "you can't do your best academically and like even show up, if you aren't feeding your body correctly, and you just won't have enough energy to do stuff." She is raising how academics are interconnected, affected by, and affecting other parts of college life and vice versa, since health is affected by and affects all dimensions of an individual's life (Kreniske et al. 2022). As low-income students can sometimes receive enough financial aid to cover some or all of their meal plan, theoretically having more food from their culture on-campus could lower this indirect cost and prevent a chain of negative mental health and academic implications (Cadaret and Bennett 2019). Ultimately, this is about more than eating delicious meals, though that is a valid desire, and about ensuring that students' are reflected in all aspects of their college experience (Yosso 2005) to foster more lasting connections between students and between students and the institution (Nunn 2021; Jenkins et al. 2013).

By being unable to have sufficient funds to use it at a local grocery store to purchase enough food to last the semester, The College's financial aid does not serve its purpose and low-income students must inadequately eat or pay out of pocket. This is not always possible and adds to the financial and mental responsibility of figuring things out for FGLI students, unlike students who have more disposable money. It is also a cyclical problem, as students may not feel well given their consumption of on-campus dining options and be unable to cook for themselves, which repeats and worsens their health; for some participants, they have observed how food at The College has led their friends to develop eating disorders. Another norm that conflicts with

some participants is that events on campus tend to be geared towards extroverted people, which makes it harder for FGLI students to socialize and relieve stress with their peers. Whereas another participant is a homebody who chose The College to step out of their comfort zone and that works for them, not all students want to or can adapt during college, in the same way that not all students can take care of their physical health with the current dining options. Clearly, The College must diversify their options across all aspects of campus life to reach more students (Benson and Lee 2020).

The final major challenge that I will note about campus life is that undocumented students are often conflated with international ones. This is not only incorrect but also harmful. At The College, the advising of undocumented students has been left to one person, the same person whose work focuses on international students, and Fallon observed that the larger international students population receive more attention which is unfair to both groups. Such a lack of institutional resources can be interpreted by students as a lack of support (Means and Pyne 2017) which has negative consequences for their wellbeing and success. Considering that fewer students will enroll with DACA than ever before, as Fallon pointed out, both undocumented participants echoed that the need for an undocumented advisor is greater than ever before. It is worth noting that, although all of the participants haven't experienced or spoken to this during their interviews, campus life was significantly altered and arguably not existent during the first two years of the pandemic like it had been before. This had an unusually more inequitable impact on how FGLI students of color experienced "campus life" and any potential sense of belonging that researchers are likely still evaluating and documenting. I also want to acknowledge the pandemic affected all of us as humans surviving the COVID-19 era, which of course has unique implications for faculty and staff, and which people in all parts of society are

still collectively unraveling the impacts of let alone fully responding to or learning from them. As all students were not living on campus at an institution where historically over 95% would be, and since the students who lived on campus were isolated amid loss, grief, and uncertainty, the return and remake of a stable, traditional campus life is still ongoing.

By exploring the complexity of enacting persistence strategies each day, we can better understand FGLI students of color, ensure their equitable access to campus life, and meet their basic needs as human beings. A broader angle of daily persistence, beyond coursework and interpersonal relationships, is valuable to research and how we support students. This section showed how FGLI students of color can benefit from the structures and programming on their campus, but also that these aspects may require their leadership or continuous involvement to function and reach students as intended. In this process, students' mental health is negatively impacted and they are not compensated for their time or contributions. While college may never be a fully leisure experience for FGLI students of color, there is no debate that this group deserves to be nurtured for their holistic growth and recognized as introspective people who are grounded in their cultural traditions and life goals. To make this a reality, colleges can host more spaces for students, faculty, and staff to discuss and learn about how to navigate class and the wealth inequality present on many elite U.S. campuses, especially since these privileges may be more visible at a small institution like The College.

Section 5: Navigating the Institution

The last section, Navigating the Institution, explores how participants' experience as a college student is shaped by their financial circumstances and The College's resources that are or have been available (or not) to them. This includes a discussion of their preparedness for college overall, how they have changed so far, and how they make sense of the FGLI label. Then, the participants share how, through this label, they have found benefits, community, and relatability to their peers on campus. Finally, to uplift their insight, the participants share what they would want people to know about being FGLI at The College.

All four daily practices— sharing resources, asking for help, showing up when uncomfortable, and building community— were strategically utilized by the participants during their interactions with peers, staff and administrators, and campus resources or opportunities. Also, each theory that I introduced earlier guided my analysis. These theories include Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality, Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth, Du Bois' double consciousness (1903), Mills' (2000) sociological imagination, and Anzaldua's (1987) borderlands. Each scholar helped me to document and frame how the participants identify, articulate and negotiate unequal circumstances as they foster a critical consciousness with their peers, advocate for themselves, and uplift information or ideas that can help other FGLI students of color to succeed. Through my study of how the participants navigate their institution, I aim to delineate which bureaucratic processes and structures require improvement as well as which serve this population well. As with every institution, I recognize that bureaucracy is part of what enables a significant amount of functions to occur and a greater number of people to be served. Simultaneously, in looking at another dimension of daily persistence, we can hold space for critique and innovation to ensure that students are centered as consumers and those being served

by the institution, because they already know what would work best for them. Now, it is time for staff, administrators, faculty, and more privileged and wealthier peers to enter dialogues with an open mind, to see each FGLI student of color not as a student who produces results alone, but rather as the expert of their experience and a potential partner to advance change in higher education with.

Preparedness

Before starting college, some participants were worried about whether they were prepared because they felt nervous, had demanding family responsibilities, and compared themselves to others in the college application process. These concerns relate to the trend among FGLI students in the literature to doubt themselves and struggle to view themselves as ready for college (Morton 2019; Schademan and Thompson 2016; Covarrubias et al. 2015, 2019). For some, like Jasmine and Miguel, they didn't know what to expect in general and because their siblings had commuted to a nearby college rather than attend a college out of state, respectively. This lack of awareness about what college is like, or of the hidden curriculum at play at The College (Anyon 1980), contributed to their nervousness. Like many FGLI students, (Covarrubias et al. 2019) in Lily's family, she often helped her family by doing things that required English fluency, such as completing paperwork, paying bills, and registering for healthcare insurance while simultaneously managing her schoolwork. This makes her feel "a little bit depressed and anxious" because "sometimes it's just so much going on that you feel overwhelmed." Such feelings persist even though she gets "parental validation" (Roska and Kinsley 2019; Roksa et al. 2021) of the value of her education and to prioritize her studies. I want to acknowledge that the role Lily holds is demanding. She has chosen and been able to rise to the occasion, which may

not resonate as an expectation or reality for all FGLI students of color. I included her experience to raise the point that some students have more tasks to manage than other students have, depending on their cultural values or family dynamic, some of which can have potentially serious consequences if not handled quickly and properly. This is one familial factor that could worsen a college student's mental health (Kreniske et al. 2022; Soria and Horgos 2021).

Finally, Fallon did not feel prepared for college because she did not feel like she had been prepared for the application process and experienced more doubt when she saw the academic statistics of other students who were accepted into college and had done more advanced coursework. She explained, "I remember during those applications, I would watch a bunch of videos of, 'Oh, this is what I did in high school. This is what I did when I applied.' There'd be 17 AP classes, and my school doesn't allow more than three AP classes a year, so I'd have six. I just did the most I could…" Here, we can see how Fallon has internalized the difference in opportunities and resources that she had compared to other students which made her think that predicted her ability to succeed. Although these inequalities can and do impact students' experiences, they are not determining factors for a students' success. Space must be held from students to see they are not alone in facing imposter syndrome (Wang and Castañeda-Sound 2008; MacInnis et al. 2019; Stephens et al. 2014) and not only realize that it is possible to become more prepared as they move forward but also understand how to develop and manage their capacity. This will enable them to make informed decisions and focus on thriving as a college student in their unique circumstances.

On the other hand, several participants felt some level of preparedness because of their individual characteristics, supportive relationships, and similar past experiences. They identified their strengths to include being easygoing, adaptable and compassionate. Jasmine spoke about

how she also consistently passes along information about resources and that this is a common practice among FGLI students, including when they're not eligible or interested personally, because "that helps us support each other and we all succeed." These are "counterspaces" (Lee and Harris 2020) that push back against narratives of scarcity and competition, where peers can help to fill one another's unmet needs and progress towards goals. Multiple participants spoke about being driven "go-getters" who are eager to put themselves out there, including applying to opportunities "whenever [they] hear about one" which resulted in one person getting involved with many mentoring programs. This extends to if they need help or anything else because, as Lily heard from a family friend, "you miss 100% of the hoops that you don't shoot." As a result, she plans her goals such as to study abroad even years ahead and is comfortable asking for anything to achieve them because she values asking over being rejected. One unique trait that Isabelle identified in herself was that she "doesn't take social things seriously" which can help to stay grounded after uncomfortable interactions. As demonstrated by what the participants mentioned, their self awareness helps them to understand what internal power they have and what external networks they can build to navigate their responsibilities and unexpected situations. These are all acts of daily persistence that use and restore the participants' cultural wealths from navigational and resistant to aspirational and social capitals (Yosso 2005).

A distinct comment was from Jasmine, who talked about how her ongoing efforts to become more self aware are difficult to maintain because The College moves very quickly. She described that "you can get very caught up where you just want to get to the next day or you're very focused on getting everything done on the checklist and it's hard to think outside of that." Therefore, it is one thing for students to develop and use their capacity and an entirely separate thing for institutions to recognize, incorporate, and celebrate students' strengths (Warnock and

Hurst 2016; Lee and Harris 2020). There were no explicit mentions of actions taken by The College's staff or administrators that could be classified as a "microprogression" or a subtle but intentional effort to make students aware of and feel included at college (Trolian and Locke 2018). For FGLI students of color, their cultural values to make the most of college and grow in multiple dimensions (academically, professionally, personally) is overshadowed by the institution's culture to celebrate independent productivity (Jack 2016, 2019). Here, the participants' abundant "funds of knowledge" are evident, including how their backgrounds and daily life continually replenish their fund or, for example, how Miguel can draw on the ways he "navigated through things at high school that [he] had to do by [himself]" which made him "confident that [he] was able to survive" at college. Regardless of whether students have experience in a college-like environment (Jack 2016, 2019), they have unique personalities and journeys to draw on (González et al. 2009; Yosso, 2005) as well as cultural and familial history to learn from. More work is needed to ensure that students are encouraged and able to have a balanced schedule as well as a lifestyle where they can engage in academics, campus life, and the personal growth they are promised— to not only survive but also thrive.

It is no surprise that money was on the mind of the low-income students included in this study, as in previous research (Cadaret and Bennett 2019). For most, this occurred with the personal or indirect costs associated with being a college student that a college does not charge for and the processes of interacting with departments on campus to receive adequate funding. In both instances, the participants sought out funding for their direct college costs, or things like tuition, room and board which are billed by The College, as well as indirect costs including study abroad expenses, social events, and food. Elizabeth, who is "always thinking about money," works part-time on-campus like other participants and many FGLI students at The College. Her

thoughtful approach is to plan ahead for special occasions and work more shifts to buy gifts whereas Miguel has had to navigate telling friends "I don't really have the budget" to venture off-campus. While Elizabeth participates, Miguel resists the financial part and middle class norms of college culture (Jack 2019). In response to this social inequity, The College's FGLI student group distributes fare for the local public transportation so that low-income students can get into the nearby large city. This would be considered a "counterstructure" (Lee and Harris 2020) because it is not operated by the institution and, unfortunately, there are no initiatives to fully address how expensive it is to pursue other off-campus social, academic, or professional opportunities that wealthier peers may engage in. Lily described what this is like, saying that "The first thing I think of is not, I want to do this. Well, I do think that, but then the other question is, can I afford this?" She continued to describe how a "fear of affordability" requires extra attention from her because she worries and anticipates that she might have to reach out to multiple potential funding sources. This was the case when she needed support with vaccines to travel abroad, which totaled several hundred dollars.

I want to highlight one participant's reflection on how students afford to get what they want out of college and how that is shaped by their race and privilege. Fallon said,

"I know this one person who literally is doing that part-time job to graduate early and a STEM minor, and they just have no time to themselves, because she has so many goals that she has to reach because she can't afford a full four years. It's more like, 'This is my only chance of college,' in that sense, while I've seen economics majors doing their work, but they're partying every single weekend and it's like, 'Oh, I guess they can do it.' It's not the fact that they're economic majors, it's the fact that they're white, I think, and they're always doing takeout or

GrubHub and stuff. That's expensive to me, so I feel like their view of college is way different than how we view college."

Fallon has observed that another cost of being FGLI and a student of color is that you must work harder (Saenz et al. 2007) and in a sense, pay your way with your time meanwhile others do not experience a pressure to academically perform well and perform quickly. These students, who have been white and studying social sciences in her experience, can and do also pay for things like food delivery which makes this kind of scholarly performance more convenient. It is also relevant that Fallon associates ease of navigating college with whiteness, given the ways in which students and faculty of color are pushed to the margins of their institutions (Warnock and Hurst 2016; Lee and Harris 2020; García Peña 2022; Whitaker Vue 2021). Likewise, it is a college-specific example of how a person's socio-economic status shapes their opportunities, resources, and life quality (Kreniske et al. 2022; Stuber 2011). This is not to say that all white folks are wealthy or have enough disposable income to have these behaviors, nor that social science courses are relatively less demanding than STEM ones. Rather, I seek to uplift how Fallon sees race, class, and academic focus intersect, which is important to how she and other FGLI students of color navigate their relationships, their perspective towards class status, and their college (Jack 2019; Benson and Lee 2020; Stuber 2011; Nunn 2021). Likewise, this perspective can also help institutions think about how to invest in students so that they can design a college experience that unfolds at a manageable pace, with balance between their social and academic lives, and that ideally provides them with space to revel in their achievements and enjoyable experiences.

An outlier to responses about money was Kane's, because she appreciates that she does not "have to worry about paying for anything" as a FGLI student. Though some colleges or

scholarships can provide FGLI students with full rides to cover direct and even indirect costs, this is not the experience for many, including most of the participants in this thesis. As I will discuss later, the allocation and distribution of financial aid became a point of contention for several participants at one or more points during their college career.

Using Resources

Now, I will explore some participants' general perspectives on The College's resources. To start, Elizabeth described not receiving assistance to transition into college or to navigate the institution. She shared, "I don't remember receiving much support in my freshman year. I very much felt like a fish out of water." This is important because, as you may recall, she previously spoke of missing out on or having a delayed start with opportunities that she otherwise would have pursued and likely benefited from. Likewise, The College has many programs and resources geared towards FGLI students and new first-years, so for her to not recall experiencing any means they were either unremarkable or not impactful, or simply never reached her. Similarly, Fallon who is a sophomore described that "I think I know about the resources, but I don't do anything about them because I don't know how to use them very well or effectively enough." Interestingly, this inertia was not reflected in her discussion of how she's engaged with professors, her peers, or clubs; however, Fallon has sensed that she has not made full use of resources so she chooses to not seek them out. This means that administrators, faculty members, and peer leaders who oversee or advertise resources must make the process more transparent and share their navigational wealth so that students are empowered to ask for what they need and want because they know how to and believe their efforts may be successful.

Moving on, I will highlight some academic and general resources that participants have used. They include peer tutoring for a course in optional group sessions or one-on-one, as well as for writing which can be required by a course. Beyond the literal help he receives in tutoring, Miguel consistently attends because it "has helped [him] to see other students both have taken this course and then have succeeded…" which makes this a casual and comfortable place of encouragement and motivation for him. Moreover, the undocumented participants in this study mentioned using paid lawyer consultations and the international students email that they receive, though the former wasn't helpful to one person. A growing practice within The College is for "undocumented allies" to distinguish what opportunities are open to undocumented students by writing "they do not create an employee-employer relationship" in advertisements, which offers one effective action and can prompt us to consider what other options are available to streamline and expand the impact of programming and funding to first-generation and low-income students. All of these behaviors are consistent with the most effective strategies among first-generation students (Demetriou et al. 2017) and reflect an existing or building "mastery of the 'college student' role" that Collier and Morgan (2008) outlined based on their research with FGLI students.

Lily is one participant who demonstrated having a relatively stronger grasp of the hidden curriculum (Anyon 1980) and presents relatively more comfort with navigating a system that is not designed with her in mind. She shared that in the past she has successfully changed her final exam dates to travel home when it is more affordable, even though there is a written institutional policy against dates being changed. This is an extremely insightful demonstration of "navigational capital" (Yosso 2005) for this study, but also for other FGLI students to realize what is actually possible. Lily reflected, "I feel like I've been very fortunate that usually if I

explain to them, I reach out to them, I'm usually able to get what I want." By exercising her navigational capital and trying, even if it's not in the perfect or a promised way, she has "unlocked" an unspoken resource of flexibility in her relationships with professors which is not guaranteed to all students yet highly beneficial to those who receive it (Jack 2016; Schademan and Thompson 2016). While I do not know why some participants are more proactive than others, and while personality, interpersonal preferences, and cultural norms likely play a role (Jack 2016) for most, I would argue that students who want to use resources but do not are hesitant because of their experiences or stories from other FGLI students of color (or students with any of those identities) about their undignified, disrespectful, slow, or unhelpful interactions with authority figures at The College. These experiences do happen at other institutions, and are shared among peers (Lee and Harris 2020; Warnock and Hurst 2016). In the participants' lives, these kinds of events include Moot's efforts to secure housing, Lily's attempts to fund her study abroad vaccines, and an upcoming mistake by the financial aid department that traumatized Elizabeth. I also want to acknowledge that students should not solely be expected to build their capacity or ask for help more often, but that we should restructure how resources are communicated and provided to decrease barriers for historically excluded students.

Beyond course-related resources, the participants have accessed valuable forms of monetary, health-related, and social support. These include CAPS, the FGLI food pantry, the FGLI emergency fund, clubs (specifically affinity groups and sports teams), having relationships with alumni and professors, and the FGLI community. In some ways, there are resources in place to theoretically address some challenges that FGLI students face (Soria et al. 2020; Kreniske et al. 2022). As you can see, as the list goes on, the resources become more generalized or harder to measure participants' usage of them. Still, I will describe their reflections on these parts of the

institution. For the participants, CAPS was mostly not helpful, but also a mixed experience that depended on which counselor they had. In one student's case, there was such a long waiting list into the middle of the semester that they had not started counseling at the time of our interview. Similarly, many folks applied for help with unexpected costs such as medical bills and a flight home when the campus closed due to COVID-19, but the former request and others were denied. Through clubs, the participants have received tangible resources (ex: public transportation fare), felt part of a community, and eaten free food. They described establishing relationships with professors from their own initiative after being in their courses, through doing research with them, or through structured mentoring programs. Likewise, participants engaged with the larger FGLI population organically, through either or both of the major FGLI student groups or during events hosted by the FGLI Office, particularly during orientation. These events are not always accessible, though, as Fallon said about an event on imposter syndrome, "those worries kind of last the entire semester. I think just talking about that would be really nice, because I definitely missed them because I had work to do." To return to health-related resources, which impact students' ability to engage socially and academically, some participants uplifted how health insurance from The College and having a health center on campus enabled them to receive care for pain and medication. The added confidentiality, particularly of mental health counseling, made the difference for students like Miguel who thought that "The fact that my parents don't know is nice just because I come from an immigrant family and I don't think immigrant families are generally accepting of that…" For some, The College provided preventative care that students would not have usually sought out before enrolling which are tangible ways that the institution has contributed to their well-being. This level of access to mental health, basic needs, and interpersonal support is unlike what is available to or used by FGLI students in the literature

I reviewed (Stebleton et al. 2014; Garriott et al. 2017; Wang and Castañeda-Sound 2008; Kreniske et al. 2022; Nunn 2021; Stubler 2011).

Lastly, there are some professional resources that are relevant to FGLI students of color as they become more career ready. The two mentioned were borrowing professional clothes that the Career Services office loans out and connecting with alumni to learn about life after college. Moot described that they, "definitely talk to a lot of alumni. I am someone who likes to do interviews. I like to talk to people. I like to learn what's up. And a lot of that is because I don't have role models. My parents aren't really role models for ... They are in some ways, but aren't who I want to be in terms of what I'm good at and what I want to do next." Moot speaks to how alumni can fill a gap in his community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005) to highlight job pathways that they are not already familiar with or exposed to, like how their parents modeled community-service during their upbringing. They continued that,

"I talk to a lot of alumni or people adjacent to alumni about what they do, how they do it, and how to be a functioning human being. Because something I keep coming back to is even with how to eat. Do I really know how to feed myself when I graduate and live on my own? The College has not prepared me for that…"

I included Moot's entire description of what these engagements with strangers are like because they show that alumni-student relationships are valuable spaces for guided self-reflection (Wang and Castañeda-Sound 2008) that boost students' self esteem and can build their capacity to have relationships with professors (Schademan and Thompson 2016; Jack 2016) but also that The College is not currently meeting students where they are at, to provide a well-rounded and practical education. FGLI students of color must already navigate other parts of society and adulting, like discrimination and higher rates of loan debt. For first-generation

folks specifically, they likely do not have close family members who have finished college and can give them perspective on what the next phase of their life will be like, which can recreate the feelings of unpreparedness that the participants described experiencing as they finished high school and started college. A similar dynamic is present for low-income folks, as their family and support system may not have the time or financial resources to support their transition out of college. Therefore, students of color who are both first-generation and low-income face multiple learning curves that The College does not yet appear to be accounting for in the environment they create because students continue to seek out alternative spaces for growth from their own initiatives (Lee and Harris 2020) rather than receive them for The College's offerings. The reason why this is, in addition to the prior experiences shared here, must be investigated by staff and faculty who recognize their assumptions and have an open mind (Schademan and Thompson 2016; Collier and Morgan 2008) to receive one of many things that students can offer yet is often overlooked: their feedback as active agents within The College's system.

Other broad resources that the participants did not mention include: grants for summer work experiences, programming hosted by the FGLI and Career Services Offices during the academic year, and guest speakers hosted by academic departments. Rarely, as I've also observed from doing research on other elite and small institutions, are there resources that intentionally focus on students' class, race, and first-generation status simultaneously. That there are resources which exist yet were not referenced in the interviews does not mean that participants did not use them, or do not have feedback to give administrators. I instead offer these unmentioned resources to provide a fuller picture of what is available at The College. To add on, I believe this is necessary information to contextualize the participants' experience and to compare this ecosystem against what other institutions offer their FGLI students of color.

Accessing Resources

As we work towards the goal of making sure there are enough relevant and accessible resources for all students to use, it is necessary to hear students' stories of what it is like to access resources in their current state. Some participants described positive experiences getting or using resources that strengthened their pride and relationships with others. For example, Fallon has sought out two tutors, including for a math class which has been harder for her at The College than in high school but is required for her desired major. Moreover, she said, "I also really like that this semester, I definitely take more advantage of my resources… Now it's like, "Oh, [health center staff] care about me, so I want to do that." This reflection emphasizes how important it is for resources to not only be available but also stewarded and represented by respectful and kind people who students will want to engage with, where "...students feel valued by and connected to their institution" (Garriott et al. 2021). In Elizabeth's experience, the two mentoring programs that she participates in, one with alumni and one for people interested in graduate school, has helped her connect with people who share her identities including other FGLI students of color with similar goals. As she described, "And you meet very regularly with [an alumni] and talk about, if you're having problems at [The College], or regarding your future plans. You might not know, because you are first-generation or stuff like that. And I'm still very close with the person I was matched with." Elizabeth's experience shows how institutional resources can blossom into long-term experiences that are helpful and exciting to students (Means and Pyne 2017). This is not always the case, though, as she also joined a program where students are usually mentored by a faculty or staff member at The College and can receive funding. "I really don't think that program did anything to me, except be a line I can put on my CV, which is terrible. But it never meets. My mentor was very unresponsive to me. I don't think there were many resources for the

fellows. So I don't really get the point, honestly," reported Elizabeth. This clarifies that some FGLI students of color are looking for mentors, community, and consistent gatherings rather than titles or surface-level interactions, which can inform how programs are designed and who is recruited to participate so that they are effective and engaging (Schademan and Thompson 2016; Demetriou et al. 2017).

Unfortunately, aside from their quality, there were several instances where participants could not easily figure out how to access needed resources. Elizabeth has applied to the FGLI emergency fund "a couple of times," yet was not approved once, which was "annoying." Fallon's application was denied too because her "emergency wasn't an emergency enough." To her, it was still valuable that she asked and tried. I agree with Fallon because students are growing and building their navigational capital in the process, however I believe that the institution must put in effort to meet each student populations' needs as well. Two common reasons why resources were hard to access were the staff who manage them and the bureautic, unclear processes that students were required to complete (Lee and Harris 2020). Moot had interacted with a nice employee in Student Disability Services (SDS) but when they left, there were no paper records available. They recalled, "I couldn't prove my disabilities until I went to seek out CAPS again. So I had to go to therapy in order to get disability services. And I get it, but also it was very frustrating because all I wanted was screen reader readable text." As Moot pointed out to me, they understand why SDS has a process but they wouldn't need accommodations if we already had an accessible learning environment, which was available with the technology used during the pandemic for remote courses. Aside from encountering a "housing coordinator who refused to meet" with Elizabeth, she had another negative SDS experience when she was concerned that she would have to miss class due to a health issue. Elizbaeth waited "a long time for them" to

respond and was unhappy that they only allowed her to "miss a couple more classes" because that wasn't enough support. She had to "persevere" through courses, surgeries, and her recovery independently, and the SDS process did not alleviate that responsibility but rather made it more ambiguous much like how FGLI students struggle to access other health services (Kreniske et al. 2022; Garriott et al. 2017). As she said, "I got lost in the forms at first. I was like, 'Am I even doing this correctly?' And I still don't know to this day if I did the first part of it correctly…" To restate a foundational point, college resources must be made more transparent and clear for students to assess what they need and what is worth pursuing as they balance multiple responsibilities and needs that arise.

Of the resources discussed, financial aid has been especially challenging for some of the participants to secure. Elizabeth was most affected by the financial aid office's protocols when they counted her scholarship (between $5,000 and $10,000) twice, effectively reducing her aid and increasing her bill due by that amount. This was an enormous shock. She shared, " Not only was it a huge mistake of amounting almost to $10,000, it was very stressful for my mother and I in like kind of an emotional trauma that we weren't really expecting, because for a couple of days we were just in the limbo of like, 'Hey, how are we going to magically produce all this money that we don't have?'" This was a serious issue, but not one that the Student Accounts Office could help her with or that the Financial Aid staff would give time to when Elizabeth realized and walked over to their Office. She said, "They brush[ed] me off the first day saying, "This sounds like something you need to make an appointment about." I'm like, "But this is very pressing and also, no, and you need to talk to me right now." She did have to wait overnight to speak to a "dismissive" man who "was very annoying and kind of disrespectful to [her] because he was like, 'Are you sure you're not just reading it wrong?' Rather than acknowledge and

respect her navigational capital (Yosso 2005), Elizabeth was ignored. While it was resolved once Elizabeth caught their mistake, the Office never apologized to her. This should never have happened and was handled in a poor manner by the staff's process and response, which might make it harder for her to reach out if she ever needed to in the future (Jack 2016, 2019). No other students described encountering these kinds of errors, but Lily spoke about how her financial aid is never enough or settled so she must constantly advocate for more need-based aid every semester. Of course, affording college is a particularly serious issue for low-income students and under no circumstances should a person ever be treated in undignified ways as they advocate for themselves or for what they need and were promised.

To move forward in ways that amplify The College's resources and existing ecosystem of support for FGLI students of color, two participants offered their ideas. Informed by past students' activism, Moot uplifted that, "what the school can do is physically give space to people of marginalized identities too… literally take areas of the college and just don't make them for white people. Just give them to FGLI students." It is interesting that Moot identifies a separation between white people and FGLI students, even though white students can be first-generation to college and/or low-income as well. Their language choice reminds us that FGLI students of color find community and define themselves in relation to people who share multiple of their identities and that we must consider how to hold space for FGLI white students but not overshadow that for some students, race and FGLI status create one interlocked impact on their college experience that is challenging to view in isolation of either label. To return to Moot's main point, this physical space could ensure that students have space for their clubs to gather and to exist outside of predominantly white, wealthy spaces. It would also affirm that this group matters and is supported (Means and Pyne 2017). Such changes benefited other FGLI students of color

(Warnock and Hurst 2016; Lee and Harris 2020) who had space to process and collaborate together. It would also address Elizabeth's critique of The College, which is that "the school is not particularly responsive to the student body, which is I suppose probably true of all universities. But, since this is such a small school and you just run into people in the administration and that's a little harder, I think, to ignore. Yeah, I think there are also some problems with admitting mistakes." As you can see by the flow of her speech, how to support FGLI students of color (or any other historically excluded group) does not rely on a specific series of factors to consider or have clear answers. Instead, there are tangible acts and changes that can be made, including to give students more space to share their ideas and make decisions about the environments or processes which affect them, sometimes without their say or influence as documented in the stories above.

The FGLI Label

Participants learned about the FGLI label through their parents, friends, college access programs, and college and financial aid applications. Some participants described hearing the term, often FGLI or FGLI, and not knowing what it meant or not realizing that the two mentioned acronyms represent the same population. Kane was first randomly introduced to the term and learned about the meaning when her mom instructed her to hide being low-income since "People will be jealous" about her full ride to college. During our interview, Kane was not sure she understood that or if it was true. Parents were also influential in Isabelle's experience, because she relied on the knowledge of her peers' parents who graduated from college. She came to learn about FGLI as "an identity" and one kind of underrepresented minority (URM) because that was the language that fly-in programs for high school juniors to visit colleges would use.

Another instance when FGLI was used to categorize a participant was when Miguel received a full scholarship to attend his private high school and was introduced as a FGLI student. This is not something that colleges would ever do because of federal privacy laws and at The College, there are specific policies to provide need-based aid to all and safeguard FGLI student data (ex: emails) so that each individual can opt to share their information or not. Through her participation in college access programs and observation of how peers' parents would sign their children up for "certificates that they could put on their applications," something that she was not doing, Jasmine realized some students are FGLI and others are not. When FAFSA asked Lily about whether her parents went to college, that indicated to her that being first-generation meant something. Additionally, College applications showed Fallon that being FGLI "was a significant identity," because before "it was common. Everyone was like that. None of our parents went to college because they just immigrated here." In these scenarios, the participants are being exposed to the hidden curriculum (Anyon 1980) and higher education's middle class norms (Jack 2019) but their identities or wealths are not being affirmed (Yosso 2005).

A unique response was from Elizbaeth, a senior who cannot recall how they were introduced but is still learning about what the term and label mean. She remembered, "I know I was really sad because a bunch of my friends somehow freshman year got a FGLI shirt and I didn't. I was like, 'Why didn't I get a shirt?' Which I think is pretty indicative of how much I knew about it." I find Elizabeth's journey as a FGLI student salient because it is used to recognize a student population but also leveraged to build a community among them, and this does not always unfold according to plan (Warnock and Hurst 2016). She continued, "Of course, I always identified as a first-generation student who was poor. So I always had that identity. But I think I didn't come to associate it with an overarching community here at Swat until my junior

year." There must be space for FGLI students to be seen as individuals who may choose to associate with the FGLI group or community, or not, and in different ways and with various levels of ease. I believe that her experiences illustrate the importance of not getting caught up in how familiar you are, as someone doing the work to support and champion FGLI students, so that we can attend to other important dimensions of the FGLI experience. These include not obfuscating the differences between first-generation and low-income students, or students who are first-generation versus first-generation and low-income, as well as between FGLI students and undocumented students. This is true even for staff and faculty who were once FGLI students themselves (Vue 2021). While a student may be both FGLI and undocumented, being undocumented creates safety, legal, and social situations that all FGLI students do not encounter. Simultaneously, we must respect student privacy and let individuals identify as FGLI when and how they choose to, if at all.

The participants mostly feel positively about the FGLI label, including having pride for how hard they have worked and how their accomplishments have given them access to new spaces. Kane described that, "I'm low income, but I've come here [to The College]. I've gotten all these scholarships. I've gotten everything paid for. I was a good enough student to justify that. I worked so hard to achieve this. Wow." It is special to reflect on how far the participants have come with the resources, communities, and networks they had, and with appreciation for all that they did not. Miguel added on to explain how being FGLI has been a motivator, especially since "not many students get to do that" and, more personally, he and non-FGLI peers "are at the same level academically now." He is demonstrating a high level of "academic self efficacy" (Wang and Castañeda-Sound 2008) and his pride extends beyond himself to a larger community because being FGLI connects him to other dedicated FGLI students. He explained, "I'm proud to be FGLI

just because every student that I have seen who is FGLI is such a hard worker. We're doing so much. We have to do so much more work to be at the same level, but we're also just pushing it even more by doing more than the average student or something like that. I've never considered any FGLI student to be just average." The narrative of hard work among FGLI students was common and reflected in their experiences academically, with campus life, and in navigating the institution.

Another impact of the label is that being FGLI helps participants to stay grounded and grateful. Isabelle shared that, "I think for me, part of [the label] is just who I am and that is just how I guess is my experience. So I kind of just have to be it and deal with it. But also, I don't know, I think it makes me not take for granted certain things. Because I am at college. For many people, this is just another stepping stone in their life or whatever. But this is something that is monumental for me and my family and my extended family." In other words, Isabelle has a broader perspective on how going to college is a privilege and will be impactful, so while she was always FGLI, she wants to make the most of her position too. She is both recognizing and maximizing her social capital (Yosso 2005; Adams and McBrayer 2020) while at college. Jasmine recognized how the FGLI term fluctuates and does have a spectrum of intensity, as does all inequality, which can make it hard for students to know if they *fit* the label for a lack of better words. She described, " I have a friend who was like, 'Yeah, I thought I was FGLI until I got here and then the school said my income levels don't actually align with that.' And I was like, 'Oh, this is crazy.'" It is helpful to have a shared vocabulary for what FGLI means and includes, nationally or at a specific college, and that being FGLI is not the only way to identify whether students struggle financially or otherwise as a college student. It is understandable that students want to know whether they qualify as a FGLI student, but also there is no fair way to standardize

who belongs in the community because a student's family's income and education has different meanings depending on where they live or other pieces of context. Perhaps a more helpful next step is to address the scarcity of programming and resources available on college campuses for the entire community, as this support is not already embedded in what everyone experiences, and would benefit FGLI students of color as well as students with different identities, needs, and desires.

The participants further discussed the FGLI label's nuances given its shifting and changing meaning to different institutions and individuals. Some noticed that the label is not standardized and that the first-generation in FGLI does not mean the same thing as first-generation in the immigration or citizenship sense, where someone who is first-generation would be the first generation in their family to live in a specific country. Jasmine also pointed out that other institutions, such as Brown University, use U-FGLI to include and serve undocumented students alongside FGLI students, possibly in part because there tends to be an overlap between these populations. Beyond their experience in higher education, Moot talked about how the FGLI label reflects "a baseline of wealth inequality and intergenerational wealth that [they] didn't have access to that others might. And I think there is also a lot of feelings that come with that about the American dream and whether we're supposed, as I mentioned bootstrap theory, about whether we're supposed to pursue the American dream and meet up with these expectations, or can we really engage with radical work and still feed ourselves at the end of the day? And navigating those feelings." In their experience, FGLI as a term both helps them think about access to wealth, ideas of meritocracy or beliefs that hard work will pay off, and questions about whether they agree or want to work towards a new way of living. This reflects the internal dilemmas experienced by other FGLI students (Jack 2016) and interestingly parallels Jasmine's

reflection, as she feels like she thinks about the label through more dimensions because "a lot of FGLI students don't dwell as much on the label or the kind of burdens or the weight or the responsibility within it as well." While she analyzes ideas about FGLI, she does not want to "ruminate" because that can be "counterproductive." Indeed, there is a fine line between wanting to give meaning to your experience without giving it the power, and Jasmine has put in effort to keep her agency in how she views her circumstances.

One perspective that I want to uplift is how, for Kane particularly, being FGLI provides the benefits of pursuing an affordable higher education and having freedom to speak from their lived experiences. For example, Kane shared that she thinks of her "low-income status as an advantage" because she has not had "to pay at all for all of the years of school" which makes her proud to not burden her family and be independent. She also spoke about how, for the sort of richer students here, I feel like they need to say, 'Coming from a place of privilege as someone with money who's white,' blah blah blah and then they say what they want to say." Comparatively, she remarked, "But I don't have to do that because I'm FGLI." I appreciate that she has been able to access resources and opportunities that are equitable and allow her to earn a college degree without debt or academic and social burdens to be mindful of how much space she takes up with her privilege. Again, whiteness and wealth are associated to discuss how students who are not FGLI and people of color have an inherent responsibility to be mindful of what harm they might cause in higher education. In her comment, I believe that Kane speaks to how FGLI students have an often underrepresented set of identities on college campuses that, while it can and does feel isolating, also is a strength to contribute and exist unlike anyone else because of what we have overcome.

Oppositely, this openness can be used against students in dangerous ways like when Moot's high school peers found out that they were low-income. It also obscures the fact that FGLI students of color deserve to exist in higher education and have value as people, not because of what they contribute or provide. Moot shared that people "were saying, 'Oh, it must be so nice to be queer or poor because you actually have things to talk about in your essays.' And I was like, 'These are things that have literally traumatized me. Why would you say it's a good thing that I have something to write my college essay about?' And people wouldn't apologize." This was an unfortunate experience for Moot to face, and speaks volumes about how essential it is to teach people about different socioeconomic statuses, but also how to process their relative privileges or disadvantages. This would not only promote more exchange and understanding between students from different backgrounds, but also avoid many of the uncomfortable and hurtful experiences that students have with their non-FGLI peers (Jack 2019).

Finally, some participants spoke more on the social implications of being open about their FGLI identity. While Jasmine believes it's positive, she was not as sure about how comfortable people are with broadcasting their income level by wearing a shirt that spells out "First-generation, low-income." or by making jokes like her friends have. She said, " I remember sometime we were walking out after maybe getting a care package and ran into someone else and my friend is like, 'Oh, poor people, poor people,' for stuff like that, and they're FGLI as well…also something I'm just wrapping my head around." For many FGLI students of color, applying to or attending college mark the first times they learned or talked about their socioeconomic status. Being low-income also presents a number of financial and social challenges, many of which I've discussed in this thesis. Given these realities, it makes sense that Jasmine was caught off guard by her friends yet also participates in the joke. She is showing that

being comfortable with your financial situation and commiserating with others who relate can be powerful and even freeing. This is also a dynamic that Lily experienced and spoke to, even though it culturally feels strange to share her FGLI status. She explained, "it's kind of like, why would you want to say that you are in poverty? But then you realize that it's almost like poverty is an unspoken sickness that you don't really talk about." By sharing her FGLI identity, she found others who also identified in the same ways and felt more empowered and confident. She continued that she is, "a person who is first generation, who is from a low-income [background], who doesn't have the resources, and I'm no longer feeling ashamed of that. To have the language to talk about it and to be open about it, that has been really powerful." Clearly, a student's class and income shapes their higher education and it is ideal, if not necessary, for them to be able to share these parts of themselves with pride and not judgment. While in college, FGLI students of color are presented with opportunities to make sense of and use their linguistic and familial capitals (Yosso 2005) to participate in and define their own college norms and culture.

Finding and Building a FGLI Community

All participants spoke about having positive ideas about or experiences with the FGLI community at The College, and how they've found relief and valuable relationships within that community. Multiple participants described how identifying as FGLI makes them "able to connect with other students" who are similar, including Kane who felt that it is "always comforting to know that [FGLI] is a substantial presence" on The College's campus. She was not the only student to be surprised by the high visibility of FGLI students at The College. In fact, the participants talked about how even though FGLI students can compare their struggles in an "oppression olympics" they've also experienced deep unity with and empathy from other FGLI

students in their time of need, such as Elizbaeth's financial aid scare. She remembered, "All of my friends receive a lot of financial aid and they were all freaking out with me, because they were like, 'What if that happens to us?' Or, 'What are they, we going to do?' It was a very low-income solidarity moment." This was a beautiful display of the coalitions that FGLI students develop because they care about each other and believe that their abilities to succeed are intertwined. Fallon has had similar moments with her FGLI friends as they process their emotions on campus. She said, "I thought I would have to navigate myself, but there's a difference, just because after [FGLI events in her first semester], I made friends. Even now, if I said something to one of my friends, she'd be like, "Oh, you could do this, there's this at The College," Fallon's friends would suggest avenues to support that she could pursue which helps share their wealths and knowledge about how to navigate The College. Beyond camaraderie or resources, Lily also echoed what Kane shared earlier about how being in a campus community with people who are like you is not always easy yet is often rewarding (Lee and Harris 2020; Warnock and Hurst 2016). She mentioned that "some faculty are very open about it, if you are FGLI…they're very down to talk about it and talk about your challenges, and help you navigate, so that's been really nice." There are some faculty members at The College who were also FGLI students, but Lily's comment speaks to the fact that a strong community for FGLI students of color includes allies who may not share the same identities but can relate to students and use their knowledge or experiences to support them nonetheless (Schademan and Thompson 2016).

At the same time, FGLI students also experience unique challenges related to having limited social capital, experiencing stress and lack of hope, and not being able to share their education with their parents. It might be helpful to think about these challenges as burdens because they are not of our own creation or our faults, and are a result of how the United States

and institutions like The College respond to first-generation students, low-income people, and people of color (Yosso 2005). Kane spoke of how she struggled to pursue opportunities that would help her prepare for a career, because FGLI students "don't really have any connections or anything, really. Even finding a summer internship or a job during school is very difficult. I would say my greatest difficulty from being a FGLI student comes from that…" and she has observed this "is pretty universal with FGLI students." In this study alone, some participants successfully found the opportunities that Kane referenced, however none of their paths were as easy or clear as possible. This is one aspect of being a FGLI student that affects their overall feelings and attitude, which can be negative. For example, Isabelle was "very stressed just because [college] is such a commitment." She elaborated that, "I think it's an investment for me and my family and not me going to college in general, but then also me especially going to The College. By me going out of state and doing this thing, there's a pressure to succeed and to do well." In other words, the changes that she and her family made to make it possible for her to attend The College magnifies the potential of a higher education for everyone and makes Isabelle worry about not messing up this regional, emotional, and relational dynamic (Morton 2019).

Another participant, Lily, has been unable to engage with The College like she wants to, alongside her family. She did not have "much hope for college" since she was first-generation and did not know what her professional goals were. According to Lily, her motivations were "to get an education and hopefully make friends," but that as a college student it is saddening to see parents and alumni visit campus. She explained, "It's a 10 hour drive [for her parents to come to The College] and also they work pretty much every day, [so] it's impossible for them to come." While she is happy that other students can share the physical campus and class experience with their families, she also wishes that was possible for her. This is a valid and understandable desire

as any individual enters a new, exciting environment like one of college, but is also relevant to her success because parents can positively influence their child's motivations and persistence and are regularly not incorporated into the student transition experience (Kiyama et al. 2018). It is even less likely that FGLI students have the material resources for their parents to visit without hurting their health or their employment, like when Lily's parents dropped her off to move in and returned home the same day, because they cannot afford to miss any days of work. Finally, involvement in the institution also came up for Elizabeth, who wishes that she were more involved or "engaged with the FGLI community here" since the FGLI students she knows "are nice and wonderful." It is likely that she is not the only student who feels this way, especially since she and other students have experienced health challenges that define how often and in what ways they can engage with their school (Kreniske et al. 2022; Cadaret and Bennett 2019; Dover et al. 2020).

Growing as a College Student

Now, I want to shift to discuss how the participants have changed and grown as a college student. For Kane, she looks at the world differently because, after living independently and feeling new things at college, she has "a broader perspective of everything." Jasmine has felt "pretty proud" of her achievements and has greater awareness of her potential, but that it hasn't only been positive. She said that she is not sure "how much…The College has negatively hurt my perception of myself." Other participants also communicated that they are developing their confidence and security with how they handle academic responsibilities and share their culture. Lily is both comfortable and proud to embrace her culture and do what's affordable, including thrift clothes. When she realized she would not be judged for that like in high school, she said, "

"And that was just like, 'Oh my God, people actually appreciate what I dress as' and I don't feel ashamed that this is a hand me down." This surprise not only reaffirmed that there was nothing wrong with Lily's fashion sense or how she presented herself, but also celebrated clothing with sentimental value which in turn empowered her to be herself on campus. Lastly, Elizabeth spoke about the impact of having professors who represent her and uplifted intentional efforts to increase faculty diversity because "the hiring of the Indigenous professors [during] junior year was a huge turning point for The College and for myself, because it allowed me to take more classes that were aligned with my research interests and my personal interests." In the same way that enrolling more FGLI students of color creates more organizing and programming related to their identities and goals (Lee and Harris 2020; Warnock and Hurst 2016) the same can be said for faculty who help inspire and teach said students, especially when they share identities for students to build relationships on more common ground than before (Vue 2021).

The other major way that the participants have thrived as college students is by strengthening their skills, and feeling more positively about their abilities. While many were unsure that they changed at all, the following excerpts capture what different participants decided to share in response. Isabelle reported, "I have gotten to know myself better. I think before college, it was very hard to spend time alone. And I know I understand certain aspects, why I do things, why things that I do, why they occur and all that. I think I just have gotten to know myself a lot better since, I don't know, as years have gone by." Here, she pointed out that she has grown but that might be more related to getting older rather than being a college student. Miguel matched Isabelle's response because forgot that some students are not FGLI and a person of color, since both coupled with "being apart of an immigrant family" made him grow up and keep a level head to deal with stress better than peers who weren't maturing as fast (in part because

they didn't need to). Elizabeth felt similarly, as her perception of herself has remained fairly consistent because she has surrounded herself with "the same safety community network of queer and minority students." She added that she now sees herself as an "academic" because she is "more prepared and equipped to do academic work." This new identity has informed her career goals to become a professor, as she explained that "I've seen both sides of what a good and bad professor can do for a student's life in a college or university, and how creating good relationships with professors can be a really positive experience" especially when they share an ethnic identity with that student. Simultaneously, she wants to avoid thinking of herself as a machine which can "produce academic results" because she has persevered (or persisted) through so much more than coursework as a college student. Without a doubt, here and in their earlier responses, the participants emphasize how powerful it is to not doubt yourself but to also be supported, informed, and encouraged as a whole person rather than misunderstood and overlooked (Schademan and Thompson 2016; Demetriou et al. 2-17; Covarrubias et al. 2021).

This section includes demonstrations of every daily persistence strategy, with a strong emphasis on sharing resources and asking for help. The participants have extremely perceptive reflections on their preparedness for college and The College in particular, as well as how they approach money and wealth on campus. Being able to access resources and sufficient financial aid were important and shared goals for the participants, especially since many shared how it was not until they asked for something that they realized it was possible or even received what they needed. All participants had ideas about how The College could make their processes and systems more transparent, efficient, and effective for the needs and goals of their students related to health, financial equity, social engagement, and professional development. The FGLI students of color in this study want to see more physical space and decision-making power guaranteed to

their student population in order to facilitate procedural and cultural changes that will be sustainable after they graduate. Last but not least, the FGLI label is a meaningful distinguisher for students to find people whom they relate to and build a meaningful community as well as to celebrate their personal pride and persistence. This is not consistently the case, though, since it can be a culture shock to talk openly about being low-income, especially off-campus. In addition to boosting awareness of the label by using a shared understanding and definition, the FGLI label can address stigmas associated with being the first in your family to attend college and doing so as a person of color and/or someone from a low-income background (Gray et al. 2018). In being responsive and accountable to FGLI students of color, their daily persistence practices will not cost as much to their wellbeing and success, and we can celebrate their strategies without celebrating the circumstances under which they developed these strengths.

Final Reflections

In this last part of "Navigating the Institution," I want to highlight what participants want people to know about being FGLI at The College. Instead of making choices about what to say and how to communicate my ideas, as I've done for the rest of this thesis (because of space, time and the stories that were most relevant). Instead, I want to offer seven participant's perspectives to my question. Below, they share their final thoughts on how important difference is, how to stay true to yourself in an institution that can encourage you to conform, and how being FGLI is an embodied experience and can give you pride. Furthermore, they speak about how their challenges are not exclusive to The College, that community exists there, and that getting resources can be a hard but also rewarding process.

Q. What do you want people to know about being FGLI at The College?

A. "Well, maybe to anyone who is not currently a FGLI student at The College, I would be like, "I'm a student, the same as you. There's really no difference between us in a way. In most ways, there's no difference between us. It's just we have different burdens to bear. To an incoming FGLI student, I would think it'd be like, "If you got into here, you'll do well." Any FGLI student in any college, I'd be like, "If you try, you'll do well." If you try towards what you want to do well, you will do well in that specific goal. Yeah, pretty generic.

But that's all I would say." - Kane

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A. "I think a lot of people might think that's just a thing that people put in their applications just to get a little extra brownie point, if that makes sense. But I think it is very salient to many, many people…. it's something so small and not visible that you won't really think of it. But it truly is something that affects you in the sense that everyone around you seems to be able to adjust so much better.

Especially the first year of college, everyone seems to be adjusting at a much quicker pace than you are, or better able to just go out and do things. Like you're stuck and what are office hours? How do I talk to my professor? How do I write this email? How do I apply for internships? And everyone else just seems to already know. But in reality, they may not know on the get go, but they do have parents, family, they can ask…connections they can reach out to do and go about these things… It's not something that people should be, I don't know, whenever there's some type of identity, people are like, oh, you have to, they're going to coddle them now or whatever.

But it's not, like coddling. It'd be nice if people were to remember that that is an identity that does exist, I guess. Well, it does exist, but it's not just a box to check." - Isabelle

A. "I think there are challenges at The College that will be present for you as a FGLI student, that will be ... That are the way it is for any institution, very similar to, in the sense that there will be students who come from very privileged backgrounds and people who might not understand or have very similar struggles as you do, but that might be the same for any number of institutions that aren't just exclusive to The College, but that the opportunities and the resources are present. It's just that you have to go through a lot of loops and put yourself out there, which also is maybe not the best thing either, that it's so hard to access them at times or feel like it's difficult to, but in terms of support, I think other FGLI students, at least at The College, have been really great and they are really great people who you can joke around with and are good friends and people to be around as well." - Jasmine

A. "Be prepared to have your opinion about how the world works changed. Also assert your value in yourself; with that, setting boundaries. There are definitely plenty of narratives that FGLI people are supposed to play in this school, and I don't think we have to play them. And it is very hard to protect ourselves or care for ourselves in the midst of it. But if I were to summarize an idea I don't know, fuck white people. I feel like that shouldn't be said, but it's simply like, oh, the administrators suck." - Moot

A. "It's a nice community. I think, even if you may be struggling to find the resources, I think there's something to be said at Swat, that those resources probably exist somewhere. It may just

be hard to find them, but I think that you can reach out to either other FGLI students or really get into it with the administration to find them. I mean, obviously, I think it's an unfair burden for FGLI students to have to do those things on their own, but I think they do exist for a lot of stuff, and that it's a pretty fun community…" - Elizabeth

A. "That yes, there are resources here at The College, but they're not advertised as well and so it becomes the student's job to find them, find them through like this jungle or something like that, and then later on, fight for what you need. Yeah. It's not as easy as just asking and having them say yes. It's sometimes a battle." To add on, "That it's hard. Yeah, it is hard. It's hard, but at the same time, it's much more rewarding because of the fact that we are doing this, and that's something that I take pride in and that they should also take pride in." - Miguel

A. "[FGLI] is an identity that we can wear with pride, I think. It's kind of signaling that you've went through a lot of stuff in order to be here. And I feel like it's something like we have a community that is also very supportive, and it's like we're really proud, at least I hope we are. Yeah." - Lily

Conclusion

With an increase in the admission and enrollment of FGLI students of color, we have more awareness of the social, academic, cultural, and financial costs that this group encounters without a similar understanding of how these costs are accumulated and negotiated on a daily basis in different institutional contexts. As a result, I sought to explore three questions about the daily persistence practices of FGLI students of color that empower them to move through their institution and make it better in the process, whether through changes to their college's systems and campus or by way of the relationships and communities they build. In their academics, relationships, and time spent working with others, the participants' actions and perspectives help to answer the initial questions that I proposed for this research. As a reminder, I initially asked the following questions:

- How do FGLI college students navigate The College, a selective liberal arts college?
- What strategies, if any, do FGLI students employ that exemplify resistance and community-building?
- How does a FGLI identity shape a college student's engagement in college life?

The participants in this study regularly demonstrated their daily actions of persistence which includes asking for help, sharing resources, building community, and showing up even when things were challenging or they felt uncomfortable. More directly, they continued to show up for themselves, to specific events such as class sessions or appointments, but also by remaining enrolled at The College each day. These acts are the strategies and practices that I sought to identify with question one and map across different aspects of their college experience.

Each day, the participants have an opportunity to stop persisting yet they instead choose to share who they are as they simultaneously change, redefine their priorities, and grow within and against structural inequalities and the limitations that others place on them. On the wealthy and white campus of an institution with many systems that are confusing, resistant to change, and inaccessible, the participants remain optimistic and open to possibilities, foster meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships, and dedicate their leadership to improving how other historically excluded students experience campus life.

Based on my own experiences in and with a FGLI campus community, I also desired to learn about whether these trends of activism and bonds were common or an anomaly among other FGLI students of color. The participants complicated this binary to show how some of their acts, such as sharing resources and showing up when they are uncomfortable, help bring light to specific processes and approaches at The College that are outdated or harmful. In organizing with other students, or aligning themselves to certain values of justice and equity, the participants found peers and professors to whom they not only related but also with whom they found community. In this way, the existence alone of FGLI students of color is an act of resistance in an institution that may unintentionally deny these students their needs and valuable resources. Their presence holds space for others who may be struggling or feeling mistreated, and leads us to envision a more inclusive version of higher education that reflects the students who are admitted.

Finally, to my last question, the participants presented a multilayered reality for their engagement with campus life. As they navigated social clubs and organizations, academic support services, and relationships with others, there were helpful or exciting opportunities amid and sometimes alongside demoralizing or surprising displays of wealth and privilege. In this

way, a FGLI identity contours where students of color spend their time and seek out

interpersonal connections as well as academic and professional advice. While it may appear to

limit their interactions, we can choose to read this as an intentional and informed decision to

protect their wellbeing and thrive in communities where they are represented and affirmed.

Moreover, being FGLI provides them with an opportunity to stay aware of and in touch with

their background as a source of knowledge and motivation, especially when their next steps

remain unclear.

Yet, the participants hold and continue to accumulate costs that are physical, mental,

social, academic, and professional. These negative impacts of attending The College and being a

college student in general show up in students' self talk, personal relationships, and connections

to the people and the activities in their lives. Currently, The College is not consistently and

entirely accounting for these costs or its role in their creation, even though these burdens to

unnecessarily persist through processes which can be changed do limit students' capacity.

Recommendations

In addition to the participants' ideas, I want to highlight the main takeaways of my

research which can serve as recommendations to guide colleges to do better by and for the FGLI

students of color whom they admit.

1. Hire more staff and faculty who are people of color, and who were FGLI undergraduates
   a. Including for a FGLI Office Director and Advisor, as well as Undocumented
      Students' Advisor and Program Coordinator (or similar titles and complementary
      roles across the institution, to ensure FGLI support is comprehensive)

2. Provide semesterly professional development to all staff and faculty on the meaning of the FGLI label along with common trends in the backgrounds and needs of this population and how to best engage them; allow FGLI students, especially those of color, to take leadership roles and directly share their insights in this programming

3. Review and update existing policies for The College's offices and departments, particularly Financial Aid and Career Services, to ensure that they are as accessible, trust-based, and as transparent as possible

4. Offer a no-cost FGLI pre-orientation to create an intentional and near-peer led space for new incoming students to meet each other and current FGLI students, as well as gain early education about what resources and opportunities are available. This can also be a unique opportunity to introduce key staff and faculty members in a low-stakes environment.

5. Compensate the labor of FGLI students of color when they are engaged by staff and faculty to provide feedback and when they lead programming and initiatives to fulfill gaps or create Lee and Harris' "counterspaces and counterstructures" (2020)

6. Organize more visibility for FGLI students (events, posters, campus communications, alumni spotlights, etc.) and healthy engagement with class and race across campus to proactively prevent harm being done by wealthier and more privileged students to their FGLI peers of color

7. Provide low-income students with direct funds to assist with their move-in, including to make it more feasible for their family and support system to help them and be incorporated in the college transition, as suggested by Kiyama et al. (2018)

While I believe that these are fairly straightforward recommendations, and would be a meaningful place to start given their practicality, I also want to dream bigger so that we can meet students' various needs in equitable ways and demand more of our institutions like the participants have. Given the different enrollment options and graduation rates of FGLI students depending on their financial resources and geographic location, more personalized support based on the data available to us is needed during college advising and college success programming to enable FGLI students to make informed, strategic decisions. This guidance and insight may lead them to a more supportive environment which in turn improves the odds of their persistence, in the traditional sense of graduation, and their ability to thrive.

Future Research

As I mentioned in the Introduction, this thesis takes up ambitious and broad questions in a fairly small context. There are many other directions that similar questions and curiosities could go, and I want to mention a few that would (from my perspective) most enhance the ongoing question of how to facilitate the success and wellbeing of FGLI students of color. It would be worthwhile for researchers to explore the experiences of FGLI students of color who participate in "sibling" mentoring programs, where they either serve as a mentor or are a mentee, and who are peer leaders for FGLI-specific pre-orientation programs. Another area of relevant research is how FGLI students of color navigate their career readiness and professional development. In our interviews, the participants discussed how their persistence strategies continue in this realm of college life but that these practices are harder to use and benefit from than in other areas. Therefore, more insights are needed related to FGLI undergraduates of color use of career-related services, including for those who pursue graduate school or stay in

academia as college staff or faculty, since this is a demanding role full of potential to transform how systems within higher education work (García Peña 2022; Vue 2021). Finally, to ensure that all stakeholders can engage with and participate in this conversation, we must address the inconsistency of the label used to describe the FGLI or FLI population. Without it, we will waste precious time to share emerging research findings and uplift students' voices while they can experience their impact, and as they persist towards a fulfilling future each day.

To close, we must think beyond persistence as only about whether students reach college graduation because the unequal systems that we experience and our challenges and triumphs alike do not begin or end in college. It is unfair and unhelpful to judge whether students make it through a dangerous system that is often not accountable, including to its students, in part because that completely ignores their efforts and contributions. College is not for everyone, whether at all or at one specific institution, but can also be a longer experience over more years or one that an individual returns to when they want to and have enough material resources to.

As FGLI students of color, we cannot lose sight of the fact that we are people first. We must continue to persist and organize for our persistence strategies, actions, and perspectives to be fostered and shared. Though it is challenging, sometimes this may look like us stepping back or doing less, and working with others to ensure that our institutions do what they should have done in the first place: prepare for our arrival with the recognition that "we" changes and so their preparation must be tailored and ongoing. This would mean that wherever our separate paths take us — to graduation, more formal schooling, the workforce, or something else entirely — we receive care from the people and systems around us to live fully, intentionally, and courageously with others along the way.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

First-Generation and Low-Income at The College

Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study about how first-generation to college and/or low-income (FGLI) students navigate The College, including its resources, administration, student body, faculty, and their transition to college. If you agree to participate in this study, you would be interviewed for about 1 hour. Everything that you share will be kept anonymous and confidential.

This study is being conducted by Aleina Dume, an undergraduate student in the Departments of Sociology and Anthropology and Educational Studies. It will be the core of my senior thesis, which is a requirement for my Sociology and Anthropology major. Being a research participant is **optional** and confidential. There is no penalty for not participating. As a FGLI student attending The College, I would like to invite you to participate in my thesis research project. Please note that the interview and the relationship we may have personally or professionally are completely separate so your decision regarding the study will not affect our relationship.

At any time, you can choose to a) stop participating in the study, b) not answer interview questions and c) "take back" any information that you have shared but do not want included in the research project or d) withdraw your participation entirely (even after the interview has ended).

There are 5 qualifications to participate in this study: (1) You must be enrolled in a Bachelors degree program at The College; (2) You must be in your sophomore, junior, or senior year of college; (3) You must identify as first-generation to college and/or low-income (FLI/FGLI); (4) You must be at least 18 years old; and (5) You must identify as a student of color.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you agree to participate in this study, you would be interviewed for about 1 hour. You may choose not to answer any questions, and you may discontinue participation at any time. Your information will be kept anonymous and confidential.

I do not anticipate any risks or benefits as a result of this study, but it is helping me to complete my work in college. All participation in this study will remain confidential and any identifying information will be appropriately changed to protect your privacy. No one except me will have access to the interview recordings. There is minimal risk of discomfort in the interview, except for any uncomfortable experiences that you may choose to share. If at any time you become uncomfortable or unsure about participation in this study, you are welcome to share questions and concerns with me. Also, keep in mind that you are also free to refuse to respond to any question or to withdraw participation at any time, even after the interview has ended.

The information you will share with me if you participate in this study will be kept anonymous. Your information will be assigned a code number that is unique to this study. The list connecting your name to this number will be stored in a Google Drive file that can only be accessed through my school email and only I will be able to see the list or your interview. No one

else will be able to see your interview or even know whether you participated in this study. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the list linking participant's names to study numbers will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in my senior thesis.

If you have any questions about this study or your rights as a research participant, please contact Aleina Dume, [contact information] or the Chair of my department:

Professor Farha Ghannam

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

500 College Avenue Swarthmore College

Swarthmore PA, 19081 USA

By signing below, you are certifying that you are at least 18 years old and agree to be interviewed.

Signature _____

Date _____

Agreement to be Audio-Recorded:

I would like to record this interview. I will store the recording in a password-protected file on my phone and my password-protected Swarthmore College Google Drive account. I will destroy the file when my research is complete. If you do not agree to be recorded, I will simply write notes.

By signing below, you are agreeing to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature _____

Date _____

For Zoom interviews only:

Agreement to be Video-Recorded:

Zoom automatically records video. I will store the recording in a password-protected file on my laptop and my password-protected Swarthmore College Google Drive account. I will destroy the file when my research is complete. You may turn off your camera at any time if you do not want to be video recorded.

By signing below, you are agreeing to have the interview video-recorded.

Signature _____

Date _____

Appendix B: Interview Question Guide

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself?

2. How would you describe your K-12 experience?

    a. How did diversity in your K-12 education compare to diversity at The College?

3. What influenced your decision to attend The College?

4. How have your expectations or hopes for college compared to your experience?

    a. How did you feel about starting college?

    b. Did you feel prepared for college? Why or why not?

5. How would you describe your experience at The College? (general, academic, social, support)

    General

    a. What support have you received during your time at The College?

    b. What strengths do you feel you brought to the college experience? How easy or hard has it been to use those strengths? Why?

    c. What challenges have you experienced as a college student?

    d. Have you encountered norms on The College's campus that don't align with your values, expectations or experiences?

    e. How have you spent your summers as a college student?

    Academic

    f. How have you navigated academic demands?

    g. What resources on campus have you accessed? What has that experience been like?

    Social

h. In what ways are or have you been involved on campus outside of class?

    i. How did you come to get involved?

i. Are there any communities that you stay connected to, such as family, friends or organizations that were in your life before college?

Identities

j. What other parts of your identity influence your college experience?

k. How has your perspective of yourself changed since starting college?

l. How have your perspectives of The College changed over time?

6. How did you first learn about FGLI/FGLI as an identity that college students have?

a. What do you think about this label?

b. When do you recall being introduced to this label?

c. What does it mean to you to be a FGLI college student?

7. How do you use or try to use resources from your institution to prepare for life after college?

a. How does life after college influence the decisions you make as a student?

b. What are some of the career options you're imagining?

8. How might the College support your plans for the future?

a. Have you engaged with Career Services before?

    i. If yes: How would you describe your experience? If no: Why?

    ii. Are there any ways that Career Services could better serve you?

9. How has being a FGLI student impacted your college experience?

10. What do you want people to know about being FGLI at The College?

Demographics:

1. What year in college are you?

2. What gender do you identify with?

3. What is your age?

4. In what ways are you part of the FGLI student group?

5. What race and/or ethnicity do you identify with?

6. Where is home for you?

7. Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you want to share?