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You Belong Here: The Role of Small Learning Communities in First-Generation Students of Color's College Transition

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You Belong Here:

The Role of Small Learning Communities in First-Generation Students of Color's College Transition

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Education

by

Ana Karen Reis

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

You Belong Here:

The Role of Small Learning Communities in First-Generation Students of Color's College Transition

by

Ana Karen Reis

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, Chair

This study sheds light on the assets First Generation Students of Color bring with them to a Research I University and highlights the role a small learning community plays in helping them identify and activate their assets. Through a qualitative case study consisting of five synchronous online focus groups and document analysis, I delve into the undergraduate experiences of 20 Women of Color. Asset-based theories, particularly Community Cultural Wealth and Funds of Knowledge guide this study's design and analysis. Findings reveal the institutionally produced imposter syndrome and ethical costs of pursuing higher education students experienced. Yet in the face of these challenges students actively strategized, considering reverse transferring to a community college or a state school closer to home. Students attributed the small learning

community with allowing them to find a support system and a safe space where they belonged. Through the small learning community students refuted institutionally-produced imposter syndrome, cultivated the power of their voices, and experienced identity affirmation and development. Students' aspirational, familial, social and navigational capital allowed them to persist at SGSU despite various challenges. These findings demonstrate small learning communities are an effective strategy through which students can experience validation from institutional agents and learn to validate themselves by recognizing the assets they carry. Through small learning communities, higher education institutions' roles can shift from passively enrolling students to actively ensuring their success by initiating support and taking measures to guarantee students use campus resources and services. Beyond implementing small learning communities and enrolling diverse students, colleges and universities must serve these students well by ensuring more faculty of color are recruited, hired and supported in academia, training faculty and staff to recognize students' assets, validating students through the physical campus environment, implementing asset-based curriculums and producing equitable graduation, graduate school enrollment and job placement outcomes for FGSOC.

The dissertation of Ana Karen Reis is approved.

Walter R. Allen

Marcela Cuellar

Jessica C. Harris

Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

DEDICATION

Dedicated to my beloved mom, Yolanda, who was able to master the U.S. higher education system long before I did, who fostered my love of learning by reading to me each morning before elementary school, who advocated for me during my K-12 education before I learned to advocate for myself, who researched scholarships I could apply, all while being an immigrant to the U.S. and still learning acquiring English as her second language. Your selfless, sacrificial and courageous love are like no other.

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VITA

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SELECT PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

Gomez, A. K., Cobian, K., Hurtado, S. (2021) The Role of STEM Program Directors in Broadening the Impact of STEM Interventions. *Education Sciences*, *11*(11), 742.

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Gomez, A.K., Cobian, K., Ramos, H, & Hurtado, S. (2019, April). *Cultivating STEM Talent: Lessons from Exemplar Institutions.* Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association. Toronto, CAN.

Gomez, A.K., Hurtado, S., & Cobian, K. (2018, November). *How Campuses Do More with Less: Leveraging Resources for STEM Transformation and Graduating Underrepresented Racial Minorities with STEM Bachelor's Degrees.* Paper presented at the annual meeting for the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Tampa, FL.

Gomez, A.K. (2018, June). *Community College Transfer Students' Transition Process: An Evaluative Study of a Transfer Success Program.* Paper presented at the UCLA Community College Studies Conference. Los Angeles, CA.

Gomez, A.K., Hurtado, S., & Cobian, K. (2018, April). *Improving STEM Degree Attainment Rates: Lessons from Hispanic Serving Institutions.* Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association. New York, NY.

Hurtado, S., Eagan, K., Gomez, A.K., Cobian, K., White-Lewis, D., & Ramos, H. (2018, March). *Strategies for Organizational Transformation.* Infographics presented at SoCAL PKAL Regional Network Meeting. Los Angeles, CA.

Gomez, A.K. (2017, November). *Latinx STEM achievers: Exploring the role of Ventajas y Conocimientos.* Paper presented at the annual meeting for the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Houston, TX.

Gomez, A.K. (2017, May). "*We have less, but we do more with it:" Learning from HSIs' STEM degree productivity.* Poster presentation at Annual UCLA GSE&IS Research & Inquiry Conference. Los Angeles, CA.

Gomez, A.K., Hurtado, S., Figueroa, T. (2017, March). *Improving STEM degree attainment rates: Lessons from Hispanic Serving Institutions*. Presentation at the Annual American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education Inc. (AAHHE). Irvine, CA.

Gomez, A.K. (2016, May). Driven to STEM: *Exploring the role of Community Cultural Wealth in Latino/a Students' STEM educational trajectories*. Panel presentation at Annual UCLA McNair Research Scholars Symposium. Los Angeles, CA.

Gomez, A.K. (2015, August). *Stories that challenge the dominant discourse: A case study of Latino/a STEM achievers.* Oral talk presented at UC Berkeley McNair Scholar Symposium. Berkeley, CA.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Every Fall, thousands of First-Generation Students of Color step foot onto college campuses across the United States. They carry the hopes and dreams of the many generations that came before them, who were never afforded the opportunity to pursue a college education. They embark on a journey they often know little about, within a college community that all too often knows just as little about them. Who are First-Generation Students of Color? What do we know about them? What do we have yet to understand about their experiences? In the section that follows, I will describe the identity of First-Generation Students of Color in order to begin conveying why centering their experiences in research studies such as this one is so pivotal.

First-generation students are defined as undergraduate students whose parents or guardians do not have a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Based on this definition, approximately 56% of college students are considered first-generation students (Schuyler, Childs, & Poynton, 2021). A robust body of literature has documented the challenges first-generation students face accessing higher education, succeeding academically once they do enroll and persisting to degree completion (Pascarella et al., 2004). Some of the most commonly noted risk factors for first-generation students' lack of persistence include: inadequate academic preparation, having children, working full time, and having a low-socioeconomic status (SES) (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). We must consider that though these "risk" factors are ubiquitous in higher education literature, there exist deep-rooted structural factors that are often unacknowledged, yet contribute to students' departure from higher education (Museus, Ledesma, & Parker, 2015).

The larger structural factors at play are undeniable when examining recurring trends in first-generation students' higher education experiences. For instance, after three years of college attendance, more first-generation students who began their postsecondary education had left without earning a degree (33%) compared to peers whose parents attended some college (26%) and peers whose parents earned a bachelor's degree (14%) (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). Similarly, after six years of entering postsecondary education, fewer first-generation students had earned a credential or remained enrolled (56%) compared with continuing generation students whose parents had some college education (63%) or a bachelor's degree (74%). Notably, this pattern remained across public and private 4-year colleges and universities (65% vs. 73% and 83%) and public two-year colleges (49% vs. 57% and 60%), portraying long standing inequitable educational attainment rates for first-generation students (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018).

The focus of this study is not only on first-generation students, but on first-generation students of color. Out of all first generation college students, 54% are racial/ethnic minorities, with the vast majority coming from Black and Latinx racial backgrounds (Schuyler, Childs, & Poynton, 2021). Thus, nearly 1 in 3 college students (30%) possess the intersecting identities of being both a first-generation college student and a racial minority, referred to as a First-Generation Student of Color (FGSOC) (Schuyler, Childs, & Poynton, 2021). Crenshaw (1991) posits that individuals who possess multiple marginalized identities (i.e. racial/ethnic minority, low socioeconomic status) will experience greater disadvantages. She describes the way African American women experience multiple marginalization as a result of racism that advantages white people and sexism that advantages men, in an effort to shed light on the racial dimensions of sexual harassment of African American women. Through the lens of intersectionality, Crenshaw (1991) effectively conveys African American women's positioning within two systems of

subordination, racism and sexism. She emphasizes that multiple marginalization does not simply mean that burdens are doubled, but rather that the effects of sexism and racism intersect to create experiences unique to African American women. For African American women, experiences of racism are shaped by their gender and conversely, experiences of sexism are shaped by their race, such that their experiences vary from African American men and White women for instance. In a related vein, First Generation Students of Color experience racism and classism as a result of their racial/ethnic identities and socioeconomic backgrounds. Together, these marginalized identities present unique challenges for FGSOC, including experiencing academic, social, and psychological challenges (Gray, 2013).

Some of the social and psychological challenges FGSOC face include having lower academic and career related goals, decreased critical thinking skills, and receiving less social and intellectual support, which can have a negative effect on academic preparation, performance and degree completion (Stephens et al., 2012). FGSOC from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have also been found to experience stigma, marginalization, invalidation, stereotyping, misinterpretations, having to work full time, depending on financial aid to afford their educational costs, and incurring large amounts of student loan debt (Espinosa, Turk, Taylor, & Chessman, 2019; Rice et al., 2017). Research also points to "poorer academic preparation, internalization of negative stereotypes, less awareness of information about colleges and funding opportunities, ongoing financial concerns, culture shock, low self-esteem and underdeveloped study and time-management skills" (Conferey, 2021, p. 141). As the first in their families to attend a higher education institution, FGSOC are also less likely to have traditional forms of cultural capital, such as the knowledge to participate in advantageous activities like forming study groups and utilizing campus resources, or the practice of forming relationships with faculty

members. Parents of first-generation students may also lack awareness of middle-class norms of college, and as a result be less able to provide support to their children navigating the transition from high school to college (Conferey, 2021). As Students of Color, FGSOC experience racial discrimination and microaggressions, which have been found to lead to feelings of alienation and invisibility associated with mental health difficulties and lower college completion rates (Perez Huber & Solorzano, 205; Slaughter, 2009).

Background of the Problem

Given the aforementioned literature and "risk factors," some scholars believe that FGSOC are simply not adequately prepared and engage in practices that are detrimental to their persistence, such as maintaining relationships with their families and communities during their time in college (Sy & Romero, 2008). The majority of such studies focus on critiquing students' culture, and propose solutions that involve students changing their behaviors, environment and attitudes (Tinto, 1975, 1993; Jenkins, 2015). In this body of literature, the university's campus racial climate is rarely critically examined or even considered as a factor that can be linked to students' experiences. Yet, numerous studies have demonstrated that students are cognizant and perceptive of their university's negative campus racial climate and that it affects their college success and persistence. For instance, in one study nearly half of all surveyed college students believed that many students on their campuses were prejudiced against racial/ethnic minorities (Cress, 2008). Another study found that college students perceived their campus to be inhospitable to students with minoritized identities such as race, gender, age and disability status (Vacarro, 2012). Students of color are especially perceptive of their campus racial climate and are more likely to rate the campus racial climate as more negative and report a lower sense of

belonging compared to peers from other racial/ethnic groups (Koo, 2021; Museus & Maramba, 2011).

FGSOC's perception of their university's campus racial climate is important because it directly impacts their personal and academic well being. Students' perception of their campus racial climate can impact important college outcomes, such as their retention, degree completion, transition, college adjustment and career aspirations (Hurtado et al., 2012; Koo, 2021). Experiencing a negative campus racial climate has been empirically associated with student substance use, academic disengagement, lower GPA, and lower self-ratings of academic self-concept, social self-concept, and academic knowledge and skills (Cress, 2008). Negative campus racial climates also affect students' psychological well being, such that, as a result of experiencing discrimination and microaggressions, students of color are more likely to experience depression, stress and negative mental health outcomes, as well as lower rates of happiness, self-esteem and life satisfaction, compared to their white counterparts (Torres-Harding et al., 2020; Wallace et al., 2016). Indeed, decades of research have shown that students' educational experiences and their educational outcomes are in large part a result of their college environment and not merely the result of their culture, intelligence, effort, or ability to integrate into the college campus (Harris & Wood, 2016; Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

Given the consequential effect of campus climate on First-Generation Students of Color's psychological and academic outcomes, this study will investigate one of the high impact practices (HIPs) shown to mitigate the negative effects of a negative campus racial climate and to produce positive outcomes for students: small learning communities (Chambliss and Takacs, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Small learning communities are a pedagogical innovation conceived by the work of John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn in the 1920s (Shapiro and

Levine, 1999). Their theories about learning as a social process created the foundation for active learning practices still in use today, such as interactions with peers and instructors, integrating ideas across different disciplines, clustered courses, sub-colleges within universities and programs for first and second year students (Smith et al., 2004). These innovative curricular structures eventually led to the formation of small learning communities, and by the year 2000, more than 500 higher education institutions had established some form of a learning community (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2009). That number has continued to grow steadily ever since, especially since small learning communities became widely regarded as a high impact practice by several educational organizations, such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) and the National Institute of Education (NEI) (Conferey, 2021).

Important to note, is the critique of HIPs as tied to whiteness in their disregard for marginalized students when developing practices, strategies, and programming opportunities that facilitate student success and add value to students' educational experiences (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018). Indeed, the literature on HIPs is based on idealized notions of the "traditional" college student: a white, 18 year old, high socioeconomic status male that can effortlessly implement HIPs such as "internships, community service and volunteerism, foreign language coursework, study abroad, independent study, co-curricular activities, and culminating senior experiences" (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018, p. 136). The issue with this conceptualization is that it does not take into account the differential access students with multiple marginalized identities, such as FGSOC, have to such experiences, and therefore such recommendations perpetuate administrative violence in their erasure and disregard (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018).

Small learning communities are typically regarded as a high impact practice, however the small learning community that will be the focus of this study does not entirely fit into the

conception of a HIP since it is not accessible across the student body. Instead, this study's selected small learning community intentionally recruits First-Generation Students of Color from low-income backgrounds to apply, and ultimately selects students based on those who may benefit the most from a high-touch supportive environment. As such, the small learning community in this study aligns more closely to Stewart & Nicolazzo's (2018) conception of trickle up high impact practices (TUHIPs) in that it focuses on providing resources to the most vulnerable students. As such, I will refer to the learning community in this study as a TUHIP, rather than a HIP, from here on out.

Research Questions

This study seeks to fill a gap in the learning community literature by focusing on an understudied population, First-Generation Students of Color. Additionally, rather than continuing to focus on the role of learning communities in promoting students' academic success and persistence, this study will focus on investigating the important role that learning communities can play in addressing the detrimental effects of a negative campus racial climate by fostering First Generation Students of Color's asset identification and activation. Moreover, this study will focus on a small learning community specifically designed for FGSOC in the humanities and social sciences, which is a less researched area compared to STEM learning communities or learning communities for general student populations (Boyd, Clark, & Mendoza, 2022). Through a case study methodology that incorporates focus groups and document analysis, this study will address the following research questions:

1. What assets do First-Generation Students of Color use to succeed in their educational pursuits?

2. How does a small learning community help First-Generation Students of Color identify and activate their assets?

Significance

While studies examining small learning communities do exist, (Inkelas and Weisman, 2003; Zhao and Kuh, 2004) few have sought to understand how they directly impact First-Generation Students of Color specifically, let alone examine small learning communities intentionally geared to supporting this particular student population. As colleges and universities enroll increasingly more First-Generation Students of Color, it is imperative to intentionally support and promote their success through trickle up high-impact practices such as small learning communities geared for FGSOC, since attrition rates remain high for this student population (Conferey, 2021). This study will provide important insights on how colleges can promote the successful adjustment of FGSOC during their first year, which is a crucial point in their higher education journeys that is typically marked with greater attrition rates (Conferey, 2021).

Given what we know about FGSOC's college experiences, it is negligent to expect students to navigate higher education institutions alone, rather than mobilizing institutional resources to partner with and support students (Anderson & Blankenberger, 2023). We must also work to rectify negative campus racial climates and their negative effects on FGSOC, which small learning communities have the potential to mitigate (Chambliss and Takacs, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Research has proven small learning communities an effective tool to promote student success and retention, yet studies have not focused on the ways small learning communities support FGSOC and their complex needs specifically. It is important to focus on FGSOC since this student population not only needs academic support but psycho-socio-

emotional support as well to combat the effects of a negative campus racial climate on their psychological well being, including their increased likelihood to experience negative mental health outcomes and lower rates of happiness, self-esteem and life-satisfaction as a result (Wallace et al., 2016).

In order to ensure the success of learning communities aimed at supporting FGSOC specifically, we must examine FGSOC's experiences within different types of learning communities and explore what aspects of the learning community best support them. Qualitative methods are best suited to offer rich descriptions of students' lived experiences and therefore interviewing students participating in learning communities directly will provide fundamental insights. Moreover, FGSOC's experiences must be examined through an asset-based perspective in order to avoid deficit thinking that places the onus of success or failure on students and their culture, while failing to take into account important institutional and contextual factors that directly affect them (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Zambrana & Hurtado, 2015).

Overview of Chapters

This dissertation will be divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 will outline the study's significance and the research questions that guide this study. Chapter 2 will encompass the literature review and theoretical lenses that frame this study. I will explain in depth how the asset-based frameworks of funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth are used in conjunction to inform this study. The literature review will provide important contextual information on the history and impact of small learning communities, the experiences of First-Generation Students of Color in higher education, and the effects of a negative campus racial climate along with factors that mitigate their impact. Through Chapter 3 I will discuss the merits for a qualitative research approach, my rationale behind using a case study, and detail the

methods used for data collection and data analysis. In Chapter 4 I will unravel the findings of this study and how they directly address this study's guiding research questions. Lastly, Chapter 5 will provide a synopsis of the study's findings in light of existing literature and theoretical frameworks, as well as a discussion of important implications for research, theory and practice.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

I will begin this chapter with the literature review, which will first discuss the campus racial climate First-Generation Students of Color are met with when they arrive at higher education institutions. Once I have depicted the university's racial context, I will then highlight documented factors that mitigate the negative effects of a negative campus racial climate (many of the factors are commonly found in small learning communities, including faculty and peer interactions). Subsequently, I will delve into the early conceptualization and rise of learning communities in the higher education landscape, emphasizing their historical position as a "high impact practice" and the positive student outcomes they have produced. I will also offer an explanation of the different types of learning communities that exist, in order to shed light on the importance of conducting research on learning communities that is nuanced and detailed, rather than broad and general. Lastly, I will end the review of the literature with an account of the critical gaps present in small learning community literature and the current study's contributions.

I will follow the review of the literature by detailing this study's foundational guiding theoretical framework which is informed by Neri, Zipin, Rios-Aguilar & Huerta's (2023) comprehensive framework that encompasses cultural and social capital, Community Cultural Wealth and Funds of Knowledge. I will describe the origins of each framework, their primary arguments, and how the concepts are relevant to this study. Together, these frameworks will refute deficit thinking about Students of Color, contextualize the challenges First-Generation Students of Color face in relation to systemic racism, and address issues of power, race and privilege. The theoretical framework will also address why the student engagement literature is

incomplete and must be reconceptualized to relocate the onus for being involved from students to institutions. I will detail the need for an asset-based framework that positions FGSOC as holders of valuable knowledge and resources for higher education attainment. Through this conceptual lens, I will position small learning communities as an institution-mediated form of student engagement that does not put the onus on students to get involved, but instead intentionally partners with students to provide an opportunity for students to reap the benefits of campus engagement.

Literature Review

Learning communities represent an organized institutional effort that can foster experiences proven to support FGSOC's journeys through higher education. In order to fully convey the need for and potential of learning communities, I will begin this section by discussing how negative campus racial climates impact FGSOC. I will then highlight some of the protective factors against a negative campus racial climate that have been identified in the literature, including positive faculty and peer interactions and increased interactions with Faculty of Color. Though not solely linked to small learning communities, these protective factors are commonly found in small learning communities. I will bridge these two bodies of literature to further highlight what is known about small learning communities and what knowledge gaps surround the experiences of FGSOC in small learning communities.

Campus Racial Climate

Campus racial climates describe the overall feel and organizational structure of a college racial environment, and consist of the institution's policies, student services, and interactions among students, faculty, staff, and administrators (Hurtado et al., 1998). In higher education literature, a campus racial climate is typically described in one of two ways, as receptive, warm,

welcoming, and supportive to students, or as hostile, chilly, racist and unwelcoming. Researchers have characterized a positive campus racial climate through the inclusion of four important elements: 1) the presence of students, faculty and administrators of color, 2) classroom curricula representative of the past and present experiences of People of Color, 3) institutionalized efforts to recruit, retain and graduate Students of Color, and 4) an institutional mission that reflects the university's commitment to pluralism (Carroll, 1998; Hurtado, 1992). Students inhabiting a negative campus racial climate on the other hand, are often discriminated against, alienated, and marginalized through individual behaviors, institutional policies and practices, and social beliefs and conditions that subordinate, discount, or ignore students as a result of their status or identity (Hardiman and Jackson, 1997; Hurtado, 2007). Given their racial/ethnic background, socio-economic status, immigration status, and/or first-generation identity, First-Generation Students of Color, are likely to experience negative campus racial climates through prejudice, racial stereotypes, microaggressions, discrimination and othering, both within and outside of the classroom–all of which can deter their persistence within higher education (Cress, 2008; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Iacovino & James, 2016; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

Rethinking the Campus Climate Heuristic

It is important to note that simply stating that Students of Color experience a negative campus racial climate does not convey the nuance or context of their experiences, and instead "obscures the complexities of racialization in favor of an essentialist understanding of race as a static social identity status for which there are shared and relatively uniform consequences across groups" (Abrica, Hatch-Tocaimaza, and Rios-Aguilar, 2021, p. 5). In fact, the entire concept of a campus *climate* can detract from fruitful discussions that center power and race and can lead to racial justice, since this concept relies on a climate heuristic that obscures students' experiences

of race. The use of campus climate as a metaphor of a meteorological climate that is warm/welcoming or chilly/unwelcoming disperses responsibility for the creation of a negative campus climate and makes the campus environment intangible, consequently enabling continued institutional inaction since it is all the more challenging to address an issue that is unseen. This inaction however, is disguised through repeated use of campus climate surveys that are strategically implemented to appease racial justice demands and support institutional leaders' façade as virtuous individuals who are invested in racial justice but simply need more information to enact change (Abrica et al., 2021).

Factors that Mitigate a Negative Campus Racial Climate

Higher education institutions are responsible for addressing the detrimental effects their negative campus racial climates have on the First-Generation Students of Color they eagerly recruit and enroll under the unfounded promise of being welcoming and supportive. Researchers have offered a number of plausible steps institutions can take to mitigate the negative effects of an unwelcoming campus racial climate, including providing opportunities for increased, meaningful faculty and peer interactions that support student engagement. As we will later see, small learning communities provide opportunities for students to interact with peers and faculty, making them an effective initial practice for addressing negative campus climates.

Faculty Interactions

One of the most significant experiences that mitigates a negative campus racial climate is the formation of strong student-faculty relationships (Chambliss and Takacs, 2014). Decades of research have long established that students who have more frequent interactions with faculty are more satisfied with their college experience, are less likely to depart from the institution, and report learning more than students who have less faculty interactions (Anaya & Cole, 2001;

Astin, 1993; Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Kuh et al., 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Positive student-faculty interactions are tied to several favorable student outcomes, including retention, academic success, and increased academic self-concept. Positive faculty-student interactions are marked by faculty who respect students, give students honest feedback about their abilities, and provide students with emotional support (Cress, 2008). Positive interactions with faculty have also been linked to students' more positive perceptions of the campus climate, even when students believe the campus is racially biased or discriminatory, which underscores the protective role student-faculty relationships can have (Torregosa et al., 2016).

While we know that providing opportunities for FGSOC to have meaningful interactions with faculty can positively impact their overall experience in higher education, and even mitigate the detrimental effects caused by a negative campus racial climate, we know less about how to best facilitate faculty-student interactions for FGSOC. Historically, the onus has been placed on students alone to seek out these meaningful interactions, even with the knowledge that FGSOC can find it difficult to approach faculty, especially faculty from a different racial/ethnic background than their own, since students can fear that faculty will hold negative perceptions of their racial group (Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis & Thomas, 1999). Rather than expecting students to readily interact with faculty, institutions must acknowledge that engagement requires institutional action and accountability to support students' behaviors (Kuh et al., 2005). Small learning communities can serve as a bridge between faculty and students, and should therefore be examined more closely to better understand how to leverage them for this purpose.

Increasing Faculty of Color Representation

Increased interactions with faculty are important for students navigating a negative campus racial climate, but even more importantly, those students must have increased interactions with faculty who represent their racial/ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, institutions should also focus their efforts on recruiting, hiring, and retaining more Faculty of Color so that the faculty body can be representative of the student body and students can interact with more diverse faculty. Research has found that across racial and ethnic groups, students prefer to disclose more information to faculty of their own racial background (Noel and Smith, 1996). African American and Mexican American students in particular indicate being more willing to disclose information to faculty of their own racial background, especially information about racial, academic, or sensitive topics.

Unfortunately, FGSOC do not readily have access to faculty of color since 33% of all college students are Black, Latinx, or Native American, yet only 11% of all full-time faculty at degree-granting postsecondary institutions are Black, Latinx, or Native American, with even less representation at the most elite institutions (Griffin, 2019). As a result, Students of Color are more likely to encounter People of Color in service roles on campus than in faculty positions in their classrooms, making it more difficult for their identities within the university to be affirmed and validated, and to form meaningful relationships with faculty that can support their success and wellbeing (Espinosa, Turk, Taylor, & Chessman, 2019).

Similar to the underrepresentation of Students of Color at college campuses, the underrepresentation of Faculty of Color in higher education is also in part due to negative racial climates wrought with overt and covert racism, including stereotypes, microaggressions, ongoing racist comments, and marginalization by other faculty and peers, which severely dissuade and prevent underrepresented minority scholars from pursuing faculty positions (Robinson et al.,

2016; Pittman, 2012). In order to improve Faculty of Color representation on college campuses, institutions must reform their hiring, tenure and promotion processes; require their faculty search committees to undergo anti-bias trainings; assess their department and campus climates for Faculty of Color; and take serious action against any issues of racism, discrimination, or marginalization among faculty. Without a positive and welcoming environment for Faculty of Color, it is unlikely they will be retained and able to have the positive impact they have been proven to have on FGSOC.

Peer Interactions

Another powerful factor that contributes to students' positive campus experiences are peer mentorship and peer interactions. Peer mentorship has been found to positively impact students' overall grade point average, adjustment to campus, number of college credits earned, retention, and general satisfaction with their college experience (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Ferrari, 2004). Students who receive mentorship from other students are able to navigate college with a greater degree of confidence (Chambliss and Takacs, 2014). Increased interactions with peers are also associated with a more positive sense of belonging on campus for students from underrepresented backgrounds, which can serve as a protective factor in the midst of a negative campus racial climate (Stebleton et al., 2014).

Indeed, sense of belonging represents a fundamental human need (Maslow, 1954), and in higher education it can occur when students feel as though they are an integral part of the institution (Anant, 1996). Both social interactions through which students discuss more personal beliefs, religious values and political opinions, as well as academic interactions in which students express concerns about classes, group projects, and study with one another, are linked to students' sense of belonging and mattering (Cole, Newman, & Hypolite, 2020). Simply having a

peer they can trust and share common interests and concerns with allows students to experience a greater sense of belonging, persist to their second year of college, and earn a higher GPA (Mayhew, Rockenback, Bowman, Seifert, & Wolniak, 2016).

Based on the documented factors that improve FGSOC's college experiences and that are commonly found in small learning communities, it can be hypothesized that small learning communities have the potential to improve FGSOC's college experiences and help mitigate the detrimental effects of a negative campus racial climate. While the protective factors against a negative campus racial climate have been well documented in the literature, we have yet to understand how these factors can be simultaneously implemented through small learning communities and how FGSOC experience them. In the next section I will discuss what we know about small learning communities and the role they have played in the higher education landscape. I will also discuss what we have yet to learn about their contribution to FGSOC's higher education experiences and why the study at hand is significant.

The Early History and Rise of Learning Communities

In the late 20th century, higher education institutions were enrolling increasingly more and more students, raising their tuition costs, and yet not substantially improving their undergraduate education. Although more students were enrolling in colleges and universities, fewer students were actually completing their degrees, which ultimately resulted in alarming non-completion rates (Tinto, 1993). These trends fueled growing concerns that the U.S. education system was not adequately training its students to compete in a global economy. In response, the Carnegie Commission on higher education published a 1987 report that identified some of the major problems facing higher education, including the disjointedness between K-12 schools and colleges, unclear campus missions, competing aims of curriculum focused on a

liberal arts education versus a career-oriented education, faculty's unequal distribution of time to research and teaching, and a lack of collaboration between academic and student affairs communities (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). A decade later these ongoing issues persisted, and the Kellogg Commission published a report admonishing postsecondary institutions to examine the heightened public distrust of higher education, the growing pressure to increase student enrollment, continuous tuition increases, and a lack of institutional flexibility (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Several policy agencies and organizations also invoked colleges and universities to reform undergraduate education, particularly through the implementation of learning communities. The Boyer Commission for instance, counseled universities to "foster a community of learners" (Boyer Commission on Education Undergraduates in the Research University, 1998, p. 34).

Learning communities were seen as a promising solution to address attrition rates since they provided intimate spaces of support for students to collaborate with one another and interact more frequently with faculty, while simultaneously engaging curricula that were designed to be more inclusive and connected (Fink & Inkelas, 2015). From first-year seminars to common intellectual experiences and even living arrangements, learning communities encompass an array of possibilities, with the shared aim of engaging students through smaller, more collaborative spaces of learning and connection. Most commonly, learning communities consist of a cohort of students who share a common interest, career goal, or identity, take a series of courses together, and participate in co-curricular activities with one another (Mintz, 2019). Several typologies have been created to delineate the most important factors necessary to establish a learning community. One master typology integrates characteristics from various others; it suggests five main features: 1) paired or clustered courses, 2) smaller cohorts among large enrollments, 3)

team-taught series of courses, 4) special populations (e.g. First-Generation Students of Color), and 5) coordinated living arrangements (Fink & Inkelas, 2015). In addition to these features, learning communities are also characterized by their core practices of "community, diversity, integration, active learning and reflection/assessment" (Smith, 2004, p. 97).

The conception of learning communities can be traced to the work of John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn, who both founded experimental schools where they put their theories about learning as a social process into practice (Shapiro and Levine, 1999). Active learning through student interactions with peers and instructors was the foundation of their pedagogy. They also emphasized integrating ideas across different disciplines and integrating learning across courses and semesters (Smith et al., 2004). Their focus on democratizing education in the 1920s led the way to innovative curricular structures in the 1960s and 1970s, such as clustered courses, sub-colleges within universities, and programs for first and second year students (Smith et al., 2004).

Learning Communities as a High-Impact Practice

As they proved their value in engaging students and increasing their academic success and persistence in higher education, learning communities gained growing support from educational organizations (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). For instance, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) endorsed learning communities as high-impact practices (HIP), which are "institutionally structured experiences and activities that deepen learning and increase student engagement" (Conferey, 2021, p. 141). The AACU also deemed learning communities and first-year seminars among the top 10 practices empirically linked to numerous student benefits, including academic performance and retention (Conferey, 2021). The National Institute of Education (NEI) also championed learning communities, encouraging all colleges

and universities to create learning communities around specific themes or disciplines (Fink & Inkelas, 2015). As learning communities continued to grow rapidly, several reports and studies began documenting their impact and effectiveness. Most studies examined quantitative outcomes, such as academic performance through grades, retention, and graduation rates, and seldom centered the effects on marginalized students (Love, 2012).

One foundational systematic review of 63 learning community research studies between 1988-1999 consistently found that students who participated in learning communities demonstrated greater persistence, higher academic performance via college GPA, more tolerance towards differences and more appreciation of pluralism (Lindblad, 2000). A comprehensive 2007 review on learning communities found that learning communities are indeed an effective strategy for improving student persistence, not only for academically prepared students, but even for students who arrived at the university underprepared (Andrade, 2007). Lenning and Ebbers (1999) corroborated previous findings confirming that students who participated in learning communities demonstrated positive outcomes, including: academic performance via GPA, engagement with the learning process, and retention. Learning communities have not only been linked to increased academic performance and persistence but additionally to greater academic and social engagement through the development of communities of support through peers (Tinto, Love and Russo, 1994) and increased interactions with faculty and peers (Cheseboro, Green, Mino, Snider and Venable, 1999). Learning communities have also been evidenced to help students improve their critical thinking skills, communication abilities, and motivation to take responsibility for their own learning (Inkelas and Weisman, 2003; Zhao and Kuh, 2004).

Beyond proving the efficacy of learning communities, more recent studies have delved into exploring what aspects of a learning community are linked to positive outcomes. One study

investigated the effects of three different types of living learning communities on students' experiences and academic outcomes and found that even the most simple learning communities, with few components and limited resources, were still associated with positive student outcomes (Stassen, 2003). The author's findings are significant because several institutions do not have the economic resources to sustain learning communities that require extensive coordination. Yet, as Stassen's (2003) study demonstrates, even modest learning community models with a couple of components, such as clustered and team-taught courses, are still able to facilitate students' academic and social engagement and lead to favorable student outcomes. Another study sought to identify the learning community components associated with positive outcomes by drawing upon the responses of 241 research university freshmen who completed the *College Student Experiences Questionnaire.* After controlling for demographic variables and background characteristics, the researcher found that the relationship between participating in a learning community and learning outcomes was mediated by students' levels of engagement (Rocconi, 2011). In other words, participating in a learning community was not directly related to students' educational gains, but rather indirectly related to educational gains through student engagement. This study found evidence to argue that the pivotal factor in learning communities is their ability to provide students with greater opportunities for student engagement, (defined as the way students spend their time and energy), which can ultimately lead to deeper learning. Thus, student engagement has to do with students' quality of effort (Pace, 1979) and not simply the number of activities they participate in.

Even though learning communities' efficacy has been well established, it remains challenging to ascertain what particular components of a learning community lead to positive outcomes, largely because learning communities are heterogeneous in nature, varying in the

number of paired courses they offer, program components they incorporate, recruitment and selection processes, and their overall theme or focus. Some small learning community characteristics that have been linked to positive outcomes include: peer mentoring, two to four linked courses, faculty collaboration regarding course content and assignments, a seminar component addressing academic skills, peer or faculty tutoring, and increased involvement with faculty, peers and staff (Andrade, 2007). Interestingly, the duration of the learning community, whether it spanned a single semester or an entire academic year, did not produce notable differences (Gordon, Young, & Kalianov, 2001; Johnson, 2001). Similarly, learning communities that featured a residence hall component did not tend to yield more positive outcomes (Johnson, 2001). Though the learning community concept is applied differently across institutions, connecting students' learning experience in meaningful ways through a supportive environment appears to be the overarching factor among learning communities that is associated with positive student outcomes such as involvement, satisfaction, achievement and persistence (Andrade, 2007).

Closing the Knowledge Gap in Learning Community Research

Foundational studies on small learning communities have typically assessed the impact of learning communities on the general student population, without mention of how they impact FGSOC in particular. In fact, small learning communities across higher education institutions are not typically conceptualized and implemented with the goal of supporting FGSOC specifically, even though this student population can greatly benefit from intentional increased support. Moreover, the majority of studies that evaluate small learning communities are quantitative and therefore do not always capture the nuance that is characteristic of learning communities. Such studies tend to focus on outcomes like academic performance measured by GPA and persistence

evaluated by graduation rates, without accounting for psycho-social outcomes, such as sense of belonging or self-efficacy that profoundly impact students' experiences (Bradley, 2022).

For instance, one 2022 dissertation study investigated the effects of participating in the Women in Science and Engineering Residence Program at the University of Michigan on underrepresented minority students and first-generation students' likelihood of receiving an undergraduate degree in a STEM field (Boyd, Clark, & Mendoza, 2022). The study drew upon survey data, document analysis and seven interviews, and found that compared to continuing generation and white peers, first-generation students and/or Students of Color in the LLC had limited interactions with faculty, had a more negative perception of institutional climate, had lower academic interactions with peers within the LLC, had lower GPAs, did not have an increased sense of belonging, and reported low affinity for the LLC (Boyd, Clark, & Mendoza, 2022). Students in the study reported barriers to connecting to peers in the LLC as a result of their residence hall infrastructure, which did not have large enough shared spaces for socializing, had buildings that were too far from one another, and abided by policies which prevented students from entering each other's buildings (Boyd, Clark, & Mendoza, 2022). Importantly, the University of Michigan students in the study were required to participate in a LLC, which is not always the case for learning communities at different universities. In the study at hand for instance, participation in the learning community occurs by invitation only and through a selective application process in which invited students apply and once admitted confirm their participation in the program.

The findings from Boyd, Clark and Mendoza (2022) is but one example that demonstrates how students from different backgrounds can experience a small learning community entirely differently. In their study, first-generation and Students of Color did not reap

the benefits of participating in a LLC even though their white counterparts did. Herein lies the danger of research on learning communities that typically does not disaggregate findings by students' background, let alone center FGSOC's experiences, and instead makes broad claims about the benefits of small learning communities. Furthermore, while Boyd, Clark & Mendoza (2022) investigated the effects of a LLC on first-generation students and Students of Color, the LLC itself was not designed solely for FGSOC. The LLC was also focused on students in STEM, which is typically an area that is more heavily supported as opposed to the humanities and social sciences (Anderson & Blankenberger, 2023; Maltby, Brooks, Horton & Morgon, 2016). Lastly, while the study did include 7 interviews and document analysis, the primary source of data that informed the study's findings was survey data. Survey data heavily informs the literature on small learning communities, not providing the depth and nuance that qualitative data can.

Overall, studies on learning communities have focused on confirming that this "high impact practice" leads to increased academic performance and retention for the general student population, without centering the outcomes of students with multiple marginalized identities. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the notion of high impact practices itself is problematic in its façade as an unbiased and equitable practice that promotes all students' success, while in actuality it "reflects whiteness and the normalization, optimizing, an preferencing of the 'traditional' student body (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018, p. 137). These studies have also been largely conducted using quantitative measures, typically only varying the type of learning communities examined (Love, 2012). The current literature on small learning communities documents the benefits they provide at large and not specifically for FGSOC. Neither does it take into account FGSOC's particular needs, their nuanced experiences in small learning communities, or focus on disentangling which specific program components are most effective for this student population. Moreover, learning

community research has primarily focused on academic outcomes rather than psychosocial outcomes, which have been shown to be pivotal factors in student development and achievement as well, especially for FGSOC who are directly affected by universities' negative campus racial climates (Schreiner, 2013).

We have yet to learn what aspects of small learning communities can be leveraged to support FGSOC as they navigate higher education institutions. Without this knowledge, it will continue to be difficult to conceptualize and implement small learning communities that directly meet the needs of FGSOC. As such, this study will center the experiences of FGSOC in a small learning community for students in the humanities and social sciences and will be based entirely on qualitative data, in order to contribute a more in-depth and nuanced perspective to what we know about small learning communities, as various scholars have implored future researchers to do (Jessup-Anger and Howell, 2021; Spanierman, Soble, Mayfield, Neville, Aber, Khuri, & De La Rosa, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

Given this study's focus on First-Generation Students of Color specifically, it is important for my theoretical framework to actively dispel deficit thinking about this population, contextualize the challenges they face in the higher education landscape and shed light on the roles of power, race and privilege. As such, I will draw upon two asset-based theoretical frameworks, Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) and Funds of Knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti, 2005) as a lens through which to view and name the assets FGSOC carry with them into higher education institutions. I will trace each of these frameworks' conceptual underpinnings, as well as related theories to accurately portray an in-depth understanding of their guiding principles.

I will begin by addressing a common misconception in higher education literature regarding student engagement. Doing so will help to inform this study's aim to place the onus on institutions, rather than on students, for navigating higher education and engaging in beneficial practices. For decades, higher education researchers have fervently investigated student engagement as a fundamental factor that leads to student development and retention. Foundational research by Alexander Astin (1993) and Vincent Tinto (1993) established the type of social and academic engagement that is conducive to student success, as measured through students' grade point averages and retention rates. Astin (1993) posited the most influential factors that contribute to student learning and development to be the peer group, frequency of interaction with faculty, and the degree to which students are actively engaged and willing to allocate time and effort into learning. Similarly, in his search for fundamental factors that promote student retention, Tinto (1987) theorized students' social and intellectual integration into the academic and social environment of college as determinants of students' degree completion. A robust body of literature has established a connection between student involvement and positive student outcomes such as persistence and academic achievement (Astin, 1984, Bean, 1980; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, 2005).

Through such foundational studies, student engagement has been defined in the higher education literature as the time and effort invested *by students* in educationally effective practices that lead to desired outcomes (Kuh et al., 2007; Hu and Kuh, 2001). The term "student engagement" originated from research focused on student involvement, particularly in the form of large-scale annual national surveys. For instance, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) measures engagement along six dimensions: academic challenge, active learning, student and staff interactions, enriching educational experiences, and supportive learning

environments (Trowler, 2010). Yet, engagement in this vein has been narrowly construed as a one-way venture that unfairly diverts responsibility to initiate contact, get involved and navigate an unfamiliar, highly decentralized and often unwelcoming environment to students themselves, rather than the university and its constituents. The majority of researchers have deemed students responsible for initiating engagement. For instance, in Hu and Kuh's (2001) definition of engagement, the onus is placed on students and "the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities" (p. 3). These expectations imply that all students have the dominant forms of cultural and social capital to understand how a university is organized, managed, and operates, and to be able to navigate it strategically. These covert assumptions are ultimately rooted in the majoritarian narrative of a "traditional" college student who is raised by college graduates and has grown up in a college-going culture being exposed to what college is and how to succeed in it (Neri, Zipin, Rios-Aguilar, & Huerta, 2023).

Such beliefs around student engagement ignore the narratives of FGSOC who face multiple barriers to engaging in beneficial educational practices. For FGSOC who are the first in their families to attend college–often the first in their families to even step foot on a college campus–these expectations are unrealistic, classist, and detrimental. Without adequate support systems in place, students can easily succumb into believing they are not smart enough, that they should be able to succeed on their own and that their failures indicate they do not belong at the university. Students often blame themselves when in reality, the university has not done everything in its power to deliver on the promise of supporting, developing, and empowering them to become college graduates. What's more, the "education system [has demanded] of everyone alike that they have what it does not give"-- the valued forms of cultural and social capital to navigate institutional structures not built for FGSOC (Bourdieu, 1977, p.494).

Moving away from a deficit framework that positions FGSOC as lacking and blames them for their lack of engagement, my theoretical framework will instead be informed by Neri, Zipin, Rios-Aguilar & Huerta's (2023) special issue, through which they present a framework that encompasses the three metaphors of Funds of Knowledge (FoK), Bourdieuian analysis of capital and Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), which are commonly used to discuss social-educational justice issues. The authors grapple with the tension between capital (the resources of the wealthy and elite that are valued in our society and used to stratify societies and their institutions) and the wealth, funds, and knowledge that marginalized populations possess, but that do not hold the same exchange value for upward economic, social or cultural mobility. In earlier work, Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar (2018) warn against using the metaphors of funds, capital and wealth interchangeably, since doing so can actually erase the ongoing struggle for power that disenfranchised students and their communities continue to experience. Cultural capital for instance has been multiculturalized by some education scholars who argue that all students possess cultural capital, including marginalized students, and that it can be used to challenge educational, social and racial inequities (Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar, 2018). However, these studies misuse Bourdieuian capital since they typically do not acknowledge the struggle over social power that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds face. Rather than treating these concepts synonymously, Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar (2018), and later in greater detail Neri, Zipin, Rios-Aguilar & Huerta (2023), advice researchers to incorporate them into a complementary framework that addresses: a) larger social ideologies through a culturally relevant and asset-based lens (as Funds of Knowledge does), b) systemic factors that influence educational opportunity such as power structures, domination processes and social reproduction, (as a

Bourdieuian analysis of capital does) and c) race, racism, and multiple and intersecting power axes (as Community Cultural Wealth does).

This complementary framework centers the larger theory of power through capital, habitus and field while also incorporating Funds of Knowledge and Community Cultural Wealth in order to allow "for the advancement of an equity-based agenda in ways not considered before… [and to]...offer scholars the possibility of analyzing arbitrary power structures and social reproduction" (Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar, 2018, p. 21). As such, I will incorporate concepts from Neri et al.'s (2023) comprehensive cultural and social capital and funds of knowledge framework into my study. I will primarily draw from Funds of Knowledge and Community Cultural Wealth since my study is focused on identifying the assets that FGSOC carry and leverage to succeed and persist in higher education. I will detail my theoretical framework and how I will apply it to my study in the section that follows, beginning with a discussion of capital.

Bourdieuian Analysis of Capital

Capital is important to address in order to understand why the narrative pushed forth by student engagement literature is incomplete– it does not acknowledge nor address issues of power in educational institutions. Given that student engagement theory does not accurately represent the multifaceted educational experiences of FGSOC, I will draw upon Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social capital to highlight issues of power and inequality this population faces in higher education institutions (Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar, 2018). Indeed, educational institutions are not neutral environments intended to offer equal opportunities for all students, but rather they reproduce societal structures and class relations and maintain inequality (Bordieu, 1977). The concepts of cultural and social capital have been used to explain educational

disparities among individuals from different social strata. Cultural capital encompasses the high status knowledge and aptitudes that certain people possess; these prized cultural signals allow for the systemic preservation of power and privilege (Neri, Zipin, Rios-Aguilar, & Huerta, 2023). Cultural capital can be objectified (e.g. a luxury brand watch), institutionalized (e.g. a Harvard degree), or embodied (e.g. a firm handshake, steady eye contact, and effortless small talk at a networking event). Social capital describes the resources tied to an individual's network or membership in a group that makes capital accessible to its members and facilitates individual or collective action that can be converted into economic profit (Bourdieu, 1977; Neri, Zipin, Rios-Aguilar, & Huerta, 2023). For instance, a parent calling a friend who works at a law firm asking for an internship for their daughter (as one of the students in this study discussed seeing classmates do in Chapter 4). Therefore, the possession of cultural and social capital allow certain individuals to access power and privilege by belonging to and possessing the cultural symbols of the dominant group (Neri, Zipin, Rios-Aguilar, & Huerta, 2023).

With regard to educational institutions, Bordieu (1985) theorized that the academic gold standard through which students are assessed and selected reflects the cultural and social capital of power-elite groups (Neri, Zipin, Rios-Aguilar, & Huerta, 2023). Thus, students who do not belong to the dominant group are sorted and selected based on the dominant group's academic gold standard, which creates additional barriers to access higher education. Through this systemic sorting and filtering of students based on social and cultural capital, First-Generation Students of Color struggle to access higher education and when admitted, to navigate institutions that were purposely designed to remain exclusionary in order to retain their market value (Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar, 2018). Therefore, the challenges FGSOC experience in higher education institutions are not a result of inherent deficiencies, but rather the direct consequence

of the way these institutions are structured to only reward the cultural and social capital of power-elite groups, such as students from middle and upper class backgrounds.

Community Cultural Wealth

While Bordieu's analysis of capital provides important insights into class-based structural inequalities that perpetuate educational disparities, it lacks an intersectional approach that also addresses racial inequalities. Addressing not only class-based inequalities, but also racial inequalities is fundamental to this study since it focuses on the experience of First Generation Students of Color, who are multiply marginalized through classism and racism as discussed in Chapter 1 (Crenshaw, 1991). Yosso & Burciaga (2016) argue that "through a deficit lens, Bourdieu's critique of how hierarchy reproduces itself is utilized as a 'how-to' model, wherein Students of Color need to acquire the appropriate cultural capital or social capital to achieve academically" (p. 2). Instead, through a Community Cultural Wealth lens, we can identify the range of knowledges, skills, abilities, and networks Communities of Color & FGSOC carry and leverage to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression (Yosso & Solorzano, 2005). By incorporating a Community Cultural Wealth lens, this study will center the experiences of First Generation Students of Color, which are often overlooked or misrepresented. By researching about the cultural wealth these students possess, I will counter deficit perspectives about Communities of Color and People of Color that delegitimize the capital they carry (Yosso & Solorzano, 2005).

The CCW model theorizes six forms of dynamic and overlapping capitals: aspirational, linguistic, social, navigational, familial, and resistant capital. Aspirational capital points to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even when faced with challenges and obstacles. For example, FGSOC develop college aspirations despite financial barriers and

inequitable educational systems. Linguistic capital captures the intellectual knowledge and social skills acquired from being able to communicate in multiple languages, both verbal and nonverbal, such as through art, music, poetry and dance. Other forms of linguistic capital include the ways FGSOC often translate for parents, affirm their ethnic identity by speaking their native language at elite institutions and engage in code switching between languages and within formal/informal interactions (Cuellar, Segundo, & Munoz, 2018). Social capital involves networks of people and resources where People of Color live and work, such as tutoring, afterschool programs, or even learning how to apply to college from a neighbor. Navigational capital refers to knowing how to maneuver through social institutions, such as higher education institutions that were not created with Communities of Color in mind. Familial capital acknowledges the cultural resources and knowledge nurtured among family, which carry a sense of community, history, memory and cultural intuition. Familial capital builds upon prior research, including Funds of Knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) which are "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2023, p.1474). Familial capital also expands on Delgado Bernal's (2001) pedagogies of the home, which describe "practices and learning that occur in the home and community and serve to foster strategies of resistance" (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2023, p.1475). Lastly, resistant capital describes the skills individuals gain when challenging inequality, for instance the resilience of parenting students who are constantly put into "little boxes" and told their educational goals are not possible (O'Shea, 2016, p. 72).

A Community Cultural Wealth perspective has been utilized to explore various topics in higher education. Most relevant to this study, given its focus on a small learning community, is how college preparation and support programs implement a CCW lens to support students'

educational attainment. One study explored a community initiated college preparation program in Los Angeles, Young Black Scholars, and its use of CCW to promote a liberatory college going process for Students of Color (Jayakumar & Allen, 2013). The community program drew upon students' community cultural wealth to promote their success. Through its activities, norms, role models, and lessons, the program countered ways students had been neglected and overlooked by their formal schooling and by society at large. For instance, the program brought in successful community members that represented students' identities to affirm students and show them the realm of possibilities for themselves and their lives. The authors emphasize the importance of schooling practices that draw on students' capital, "We owe students an education that draws on their community capital as opposed to one that extracts it from them. Certainly the first and necessary step in bridging the chasm between the formal schooling lives and the community lives of Students of Color is to recognize marginalized communities as sources of wealth and capital" (p. 573).

Another study offers perspective on how to build upon students' strengths through the liberatory task of critical mentorship (Liou, Nieves-Martinez, & Rotherham-Fuller, 2016). Through a year-long ethnographic case study, the researchers explore a West Coast High School's effort to support Students of Color who face academic challenges. Efforts revolve around critical mentorship in the classroom to "develop students' aspirational, navigational, and informational capital for academic resiliency, high expectations, and success" (p. 104). Informed by a CCW lens, the study focuses on shifting the culture of the school to focus on the assets students bring to the classroom, and developing those assets so they may experience a sense of agency. Authors emphasize the importance of co-mentoring where collaboration and

reciprocation are central to the relationship, as well as recognizing students' strengths in order to establish a non-hierarchical relationship between the student and teacher.

Lastly, other studies have focused on enacting CCW as a protective factor in PK-20 contexts. In acknowledging that SOC will experience everyday forms of racism (microaggressions), CCW can be leveraged as a protective response to these invalidating moments (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2023). For instance, Yamamura et al. (2010) posits that successful college readiness programs must prepare students to enact their navigational, linguistic, and resistant capital in order to prepare students to navigate environments where their culture, means of communicating and ways of knowing will not be validated. As such, having CCW reserves can allow students to protect against feeling like they do not belong or cannot communicate in higher education spaces.

These studies highlight the power of using a CCW lens to support and empower students in the classroom and through co-curricular opportunities. They are fundamental for reimagining how schooling can be done for FGSOC. Most importantly, they corroborate the positive outcomes that result from applying a CCW framework when working with Students of Color. These perspectives will guide this study's exploration of the role of a small learning community in identifying and activating FGSOC's assets and knowledge.

Funds of Knowledge

Congruent with Community Cultural Wealth, and in response to deficit narratives that position Students of Color's backgrounds as detrimental to their college success, Funds of Knowledge, argues that students' lived experiences have actually equipped them with resources that can help them succeed, not fail, in academic spaces (Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar, 2018). In reconceptualizing marginalized students' experiences through a celebratory asset-based

framework however, FoK can inadvertently imply that all students and communities possess valued forms of capital, which is inaccurate for disenfranchised students (Neri et al., 2023). While underrepresented students and their communities do possess lived experiences and bodies of knowledge that are indeed valuable, their capital exists within a system of oppression that creates an ongoing struggle for power (Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar, 2018). Given these shortcomings, it is essential that this study's conceptual framework incorporates the complementary theories of social and cultural capital and community cultural wealth. Together, these complementary frameworks allow for a more complete analysis of First-Generation Students of Color's experiences (Neri et al., 2023).

The Funds of Knowledge framework is based on the simple–yet revolutionary–belief that people's lived experiences equip them with knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti, 2005). This concept was born out of a foundational study that delved into U.S. Mexican immigrant households and the cultural resources they possess (Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg, 1992). The authors of this formative study found that these households' cultural resources, such as farming, animal husbandry, carpentry, masonry, folk medicinal practices, blacksmithing, and a plethora of other working class rural and industrial skills, were not valued, acknowledged or understood in school settings. Yet, this knowledge allowed Mexican families in the Southwest to adapt and survive in the midst of ever changing landscapes. Because the funds of knowledge that Mexican children possessed did not represent the type of cultural capital that schools valued, they remained untapped and unincorporated in the learning process. Even worse, researchers found that schooling practices were actually playing a role in fracturing the knowledge that could be passed down to children from their households, such as Spanish literacy capacities. (Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg, 1992).

Research on funds of knowledge has since been primarily focused on uncovering elementary school children's and their family's funds of knowledge in order to challenge deficit stereotypes associated with low-income, working class, Communities of Color. By challenging majoritarian narratives of Communities of Color, Funds of Knowledge research has been used to equip teachers, in particular, to recognize and utilize the cultural resources and strengths these families and their students bring to the classroom (Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti, 2005). Though the Funds of Knowledge approach was conceptualized with elementary school children in mind, higher education research has begun to adopt the framework and apply it to the experiences of college students from underserved communities, such as Latinx students (Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar, 2018).

For example, one study examined the value of *hacerle la lucha* (taking on the struggle or hard work) as a source of Funds of Knowledge for undocumented, Mexican ivy league students to advance the narrative of resilience, resistance and strength of undocumented students (Montiel, 2018). In exploring the fund of *hacerle la lucha,* Montiel (2018) found that participants' skills of cooking, cleaning and working with children, (which they acquired through lived experiences in their households), functioned as Funds of Knowledge since they allowed participants to contribute to their family's livelihood and everyday well-being, while also teaching the participants the value of hardwork (Montiel, 2018). Even though skills like cooking and cleaning may not be readily associated with academics or have the same cultural capital exchange value as academic skills, they taught students the value of hard work, which they applied to their educational pursuits. Students in the study understood that even in the face of obstacles –including financial and undocumented status barriers–they would have to "hacerle la lucha" to succeed academically. This hardwork Fund of Knowledge led students to take the most

rigorous course load available in their high schools and to earn GPAs well above 4.0s, making them competitive ivy league college applicants. Once admitted into highly competitive ivy league institutions, the students in the study were continuously encouraged by their parents to not give up. By seeing how hard their parents worked to survive–often working long hours at multiple jobs–they continued to apply their hard work Fund of Knowledge to the unique challenges they faced pursuing higher education in the United States as undocumented students (Montiel, 2018). Students drew upon their Funds of Knowledge–their "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills"–to persist and succeed, even in elite, unwelcoming academic spaces (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133).

Theoretical Interconnections

Together, a Funds of Knowledge and Community Cultural Wealth framework guide this study. In pursuit of understanding the experiences of FGSOC in an elite higher education Research I university, this study refutes deficit thinking about Communities of Color, contextualizes the challenges First-Generation Students of Color face in relation to systemic racism and classism, and addresses issues of power, race and privilege. Capital provides important insights into class-based structural inequalities that perpetuate educational disparities. Community Cultural Wealth addresses racial inequalities and reveals diverse assets possessed by Communities of Color. Funds of Knowledge provides an asset-based perspective with praxical strength. Together, these complementary frameworks enable a more complete analysis of First-Generation Students of Color's experiences and the ways a small learning community empowers students to identify and activate their assets to persist, succeed and engage meaningfully in their educational journey.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

This study explores the experiences of First-Generation Students of Color participating in a small learning community during their first year at a R1 university. More concretely, it explores the assets these students bring to the university, and how participating in a small learning community helps them identify and activate their assets. This chapter begins with a description of the study's qualitative methodology, which includes the use of case study and why it is a suitable approach for this study. I then delineate my research design, including the research site, the small learning community and its history, purposive sampling and recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. I end by addressing how I will establish trustworthiness through the use of triangulation, my unique role in relation to the small learning community as well as my positionality, and lastly the limitations of the study.

Case Study

A case study best serves to explore my research questions since the narrow scope and tight focus characteristic of case studies is most useful for forming descriptive inferences and responding to *What?* and *How?* questions, rather than making assertions about causal relationships and answering *Why?* questions (Gerring, 2004). As such, my case study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What assets do First-Generation Students of Color use to persist and succeed in their educational pursuits?
2. How does a small learning community help First-Generation Students of Color identify and activate their assets?

A case study is optimal to investigate how the small learning community works (or does not work) in supporting FGSOC's transitions to the university, since it allows the operational

processes to be traced over time through observations of the events being studied and interviews of the people involved in those events, as well as analysis of relevant documents and artifacts (Yin, 2018). In line with one of the strengths of case study design, its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence, this study will use multiple sources of data, including student questionnaires, online synchronous focus group interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Willemsen et al., 2022), and document analysis (Yin, 1994). In employing a case study, I am employing a research design that reflects a choice to know more about less, rather than to know less about more (Gerring, 2004). Along these lines, an additional strength of a single-unit case study lies in the depth of analysis that it provides. Yet the ability to offer rich, detailed explanations about a single unit, also renders case studies unrepresentative of a larger set of units; that is, "the degree to which causal relationships evidenced by that single unit may be assumed to be true for a larger set of unstudied units" (Gerring, 2004, p. 348). A case study will have broader reach to other units if it is a "crucial" case or one that is especially characteristic of the phenomenon (Gerring, 2004). While they may not be representative, case studies are comparable to cases drawn from the same unit. Additionally, the in-depth analysis of a single unit is itself useful in "elucidating causal mechanisms because its characteristic style of evidence-gathering–over time and within-unit variation–is likely to provide clues into what connects a purported X to a particular Y" (Gerring, 2004, p. 349).

Research Site-SGSU Institutional Context

Selective Golden State University (SGSU), a pseudonym, is a California public land-grant Research I university whose historical roots date back to 1881. Today, SGSU is a highly competitive university with an admission rate of 9% (Freshman Profile, 2023). In Fall 2022, out of 149,815 freshman student applicants, only 12,844 were admitted (Freshman Profile, 2023).

SGSU also boasts over $1 billion per year in external research grants by federal agencies such as the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, NASA, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and DARPA, in addition to several state and private organizations.

In regards to its student population, SGSU enrolls 32,423 undergraduate students, 6% of the students are African American, less than 1% are American Indian & Alaska Native, 35% are Asian and Pacific Islander, 21% are Hispanic, and 26% are white. Additionally, 29% of undergraduates are first-generation college students (Facts & Figures, 2023). There have been several student demonstrations aimed at drawing attention to the inadequate ethnic minority representation at SGSU, which does not mirror the demographics of the city it is located in. The city's demographics consist of 8.6% African American (6% at SGSU), 11.7% Asian and Pacific Islander (35% at SGSU), 48.4% Hispanic (21% at SGSU) and 44.9% white (26% at SGSU) people (United States Census Bureau, 2022). In 2020, SGSU announced its intention to become a federally designated Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) by 2025. As such, SGSU is actively working towards better understanding the needs of Latinx students in order to be able to admit, enroll, and retain at least 25% Hispanic students. Additionally, in order to obtain the HSI designation, SGSU must also enroll at least 35% Pell grant recipients. These efforts point to SGSU's attempt to rectify long standing educational disparities.

With respect to the institution's campus climate, a 2013 report published by the department of Student Affairs conveyed students' experiences by race/ethnicity as represented by their responses to the Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey. The report found that the group of students who reported the most experiences of discrimination and bias were American Indian and Black students, while white students reported the least (SGSU Student

Affairs Information and Research Office, 2013). Additionally, Hispanic and Asian students were found to be the most likely to report lower academic self-concepts; Asian students reported the lowest perceptions of sense of belonging (multi-racial and white students reported the highest); and Black students were the least likely to believe the institution was committed to diversity (white students were the most likely) (Student Affairs Information and Research Office, 2013). As evidenced by this report, Students of Color at SGSU have a vastly different experience and perception of the institution, encountering discrimination and bias more frequently, grappling with a lack of sense of belonging, experiencing lower academic self-concepts, and questioning the institution's commitment to diversity (Student Affairs Information and Research Office, 2013). This macro institutional context is important to understand in order to adequately understand YBH's position at SGSU and the unique components of the micro environment it offers students who participate in the learning community.

SGSU was a suitable research site given my interest in exploring the assets that FGSOC use to succeed in their educational pursuits. Since SGSU is a competitive higher education institution, the First Generation Students of Color admitted to SGSU had to draw on their assets to obtain admission. SGSU is also a historically white university and therefore FGSOC would need to draw on their assets to navigate its marginalizing structures. Lastly, in working as a program coordinator at SGSU, I had greater access to participants and a more thorough understanding of the institutional structures at play.

You Belong Here Program History

You Belong Here (YBH) (a pseudonym) is a year-long small learning community through which students take a customized 2-unit college success seminar taught by graduate students and a 6-unit general education cluster class each quarter. Additionally, students meet

with an assigned academic advisor, peer mentors, and undergraduate writing center peer learning facilitators regularly. The majority of students who serve as peer mentors are YBH alumni who are grateful for their experiences in the program and want to contribute to future cohorts' success and wellbeing. Students in YBH are also eligible for a $450 textbook reimbursement award upon completion of the program. YBH students are encouraged to engage in YBH socials, study sessions, faculty panels, and other academic and professional development events throughout the academic year (see Table 1 for a full list of YBH program components).

At the time of data collection, this learning community will be in its fifth year of implementation; the first year (2019-2020) represented the program's pilot year and during the second year (2020-2021) the program was executed remotely via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In its third year of implementation, YBH operated in a hybrid fashion with the majority of programming and courses offered in-person, with the option of remote alternatives in the event of unprecedented health risks. In 2022-2023 in-person programming and courses resumed.

YBH was created in 2019 as a result of a SGSU Degree Attainment and Student Success Task Force charged by the Office of the Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost to develop, implement and measure initiatives to address a multi-year plan to "increase degree attainment at the undergraduate and graduate levels, improve overall graduation rates and close graduation gaps for low-income, first generation and underrepresented students." (SGSU Office of the Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost, 2019). The YBH learning community was created in response to this call and is housed under the Division of Undergraduate Education at SGSU. YBH was intentionally created to support diverse communities of first-year undergraduate students in the Humanities and Social Sciences in order to rectify academic achievement and

opportunity gaps in retention and four-year graduation rates. To be eligible to participate in YBH, students must identify as 1) first-generation college students, or 2) underrepresented racial/ethnic minorities, or 3) students from financially under-resourced communities and/or high schools, and must be 4) pursuing majors in the humanities or social sciences. Eligible students are filtered by SGSU's Undergraduate Admissions Office and invited to submit an online application during the summer before their first year. The application consists of demographic information and responses to short essay questions such as "What barriers have you faced? How have your communities supported you in the face of these challenges?" and "What do you hope to experience during your first year at SGSU and in YBH specifically?" A team of YBH associated staff review applications and consider various factors in the selection process, including which students would benefit the most from a high-touch, supportive, collaborative environment. On average, each year 150-250 students apply to YBH and 70-80 students are selected to participate.

Researcher's Relationship to YBH

During the 2020-2021 academic year I served as one of two instructors for the synchronous online YBH seminar. In this capacity, I was able to interact with students, read their reflection assignments, observe Zoom classroom dynamics, and gain valuable insight into the administrative nature of the program, as well as access to student YBH applications, quarterly survey responses and other program data. From the Spring of 2021- present, I have served as the coordinator for YBH, overseeing the learning community's various moving parts, assisting students with course enrollment, providing guidance and feedback to peer mentors, collaborating with instructors, advisors, campus partners and other program staff, as well as planning and implementing YBH programming efforts. These experiences have served as a crucial foundation

and inspiration for this study. Throughout the study, I kept a self-reflective journal to consider the impact of my role as the YBH coordinator on the study. I used the analytic memos that arose from my journal as an additional document to inspect during data analysis.

Participant Recruitment

In order to draw a purposive sample of research participants from YBH that are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles & Huberman, 1994), I invited students from previous cohorts to self-select into the study if they met the following eligibility criteria: 1) completed YBH, 2) identify as both first-generation students and students of color, 3) are able to participate in a 60-minute online synchronous focus group interview and 4) are in good academic standing (2.0 cumulative GPA or higher). On January 1, 2024, I sent out an email invitation to graduated students from the 2019-2020 cohort, senior students from the 2020-2021 cohort, junior students from the 2021-2022 cohort, and sophomore students from the 2022-2023 cohort. Given that I have been the program coordinator since 2021, I had a list of student emails from cohorts 2019-2023 in the program's shared drive. I also sent a personalized recruitment email to eligible YBH participants who served or are currently serving as peer mentors for YBH, since their dual role as both participants and peer mentors allow them to share a holistic, insightful, and unique perspective of the program. The email invitation explained the purpose of the study and directed students to a demographic questionnaire they could fill out if they were interested in participating (see Appendix A). The demographic questionnaire asked students to share their race/ethnicity, the city they are originally from, current major, gender, campus involvement/affiliations, housing status (e.g. on or off campus), and how many hours per week they work. Additionally, I also sought out students who did not complete YBH and/or who left SGSU altogether and asked them to fill out

a questionnaire regarding their experiences in YBH and thereafter. I aimed to include these students to provide a nuanced perspective of the program. Unfortunately, out of 19 students I emailed, none of them responded or filled out the questionnaire.

A week after sending out the focus group email invitation, I followed up with 26 students who expressed interest in participating in the study and invited them to schedule an online focus group interview between February and March 2024. Based on scheduling availability, I ended up interviewing 20 YBH participants (4 from the 2019-2020 cohort; 9 from the 2020-2021 cohort, 2 from the 2021-2022 cohort and 5 from the 2022-2023 cohort). I aimed to conduct five focus groups that consisted of four to five participants. However, due to unforeseen scheduling challenges and technical difficulties, one focus group only had 2 participants, one had 3, one had 4, one had 5, and one had 6 participants.

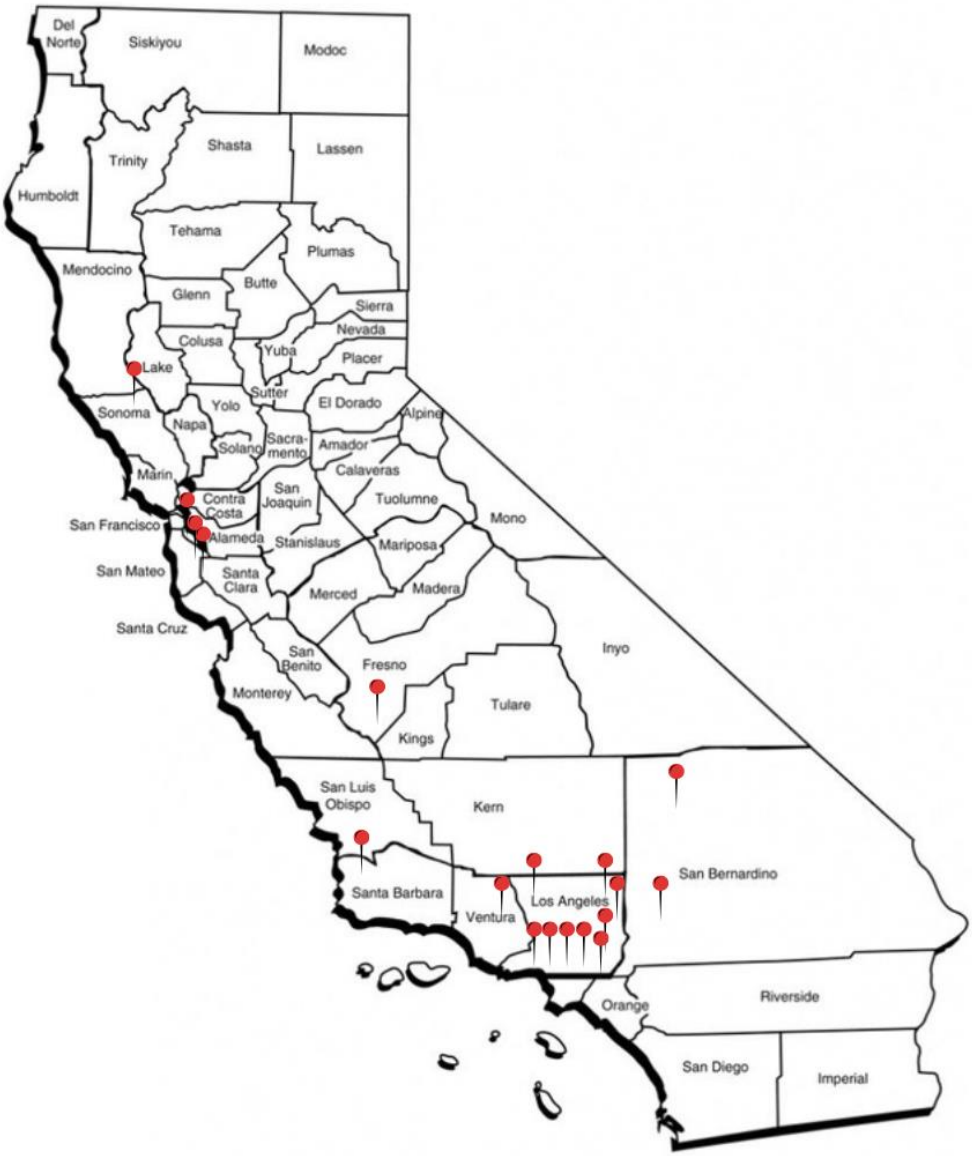
Interviewing 20 participants through 5 focus groups allowed me to obtain a maximum variation sample by including students who varied in terms of major, gender, work hours per week, campus involvements, and living arrangements (Tracy, 2013). Across cohorts, YBH participants are majority female (81%, 93%, 76% and 83% from 2019-2023), majority Latinx (62%, 65%, 68%, and 67%), and most often pursue majors in the following disciplines: Business Economics, Chicana/o Studies, Communication, Education, English, History, Political Science, Public Affairs, and Sociology. As such, I aimed to include students who reflected the attributes most characteristic of YBH participants across cohort years. (Please see Table 2 and 3 for a list of YBH student characteristics and majors across cohorts).

Participant Profiles: First Generation Women of Color

The 20 participants in this study all self-identified as Women of Color and listed their race/ethnicity as: Hispanic/Latina (8), Latina (3), Mexican (2), Chicana/Mexican American (1),

White/Mexican (1), Black/Kenyan (1), Black (2), North African/Moroccan (1), and Native Hawaaian and Other Pacific Islander (1). Their majors and minors represented social science and humanities fields and included: Sociology (9), Education (4), Chicana/o and Central American Studies (4), Public Affairs (4), African American Studies (2), Political Science (2), Applied Developmental Psychology (1), Asian American Studies (1), Digital Humanities (1), English (1), Environmental Systems and Society (1), Gender studies (1), Geography (1), Human Biology and Society (1), and Public Health (1). Participants' cumulative grade point averages ranged from 3.5- 4.0, with 14 students having a 3.8 GPA or higher (See Table 4 for the Participant Chart). Of the 20 participants, 18 traced their roots across the state of California, with one participant identifying Houston, Texas as her hometown and another listing both Long Beach, CA and Casablanca, Morocco as her hometown (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Participant Hometowns



Participants were actively involved in student organizations (i.e. Phi Lambda Rho, Alpha Kappa Alpha, Alpha Gamma, Lambda Theta Alpha Latin Sorority Inc., UniCamp, Thrive Scholars, Alumni Scholars Club, SGSU Sustainability, Resilience in Your Student Experience, HSI Initiative), research programs (i.e. McNair Scholars Program, Keck/Humanistic Scholar Program, Carceral Ecologies Research Lab), extracurricular clubs (i.e. Hooligan Theatre

Company, Grupo Folklorico, Music Medication Club), professional groups (i.e. Sociology Leadership Council, Center for Critical Race Studies in Education, Association of Mexican American Educators, Student California Teachers Association, Black Pre-Law Association, Black Pre-Law Journal, Public Health Initiative: Leaders for Tomorrow, Latinx Pre-Dental Society, SGSU Law Journal of Near East and Islam, and Legal Connection), and affinity groups (i.e. Grupo Estudiantil Oaxaqueño, East African Student Association, Middle Eastern Student Association, Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Aztlán (MEChA), Guardian Scholars Program, Latinx Admit Weekend, California Community Builders, Pacific Islander Student Association, La Gente Magazine, Students for Socialism, Students for Justice in Palestine, and SGSU Democrats). Most participants lived off-campus (11), a couple commuted (2), and the rest lived on campus (7). Lastly, with the exception of 2 participants, the remaining 18 worked, typically 11-20 hours (12), some as many as 31- 40 hours (3) and a few worked less than 10 hours (3). Several worked on- campus as peer mentors, peer counselors, or peer coaches (i.e. Grit Peer Coaching, College Academic Peer Counseling, Latinas Guiding Latinas Peer Mentor, YBH Peer Mentors, EAOP Destination College Advising Corps, Peer Advisor for MEChA, and Peer Counselor for Freshman Summer Program). Others worked in Residential Life as Residential Assistants, through College Corps or AmeriCorps, and as student employees for departments across campus. For a full description of participant characteristics, please see Table 4.

Table 4: Participant Chart

Name	**Ethnicity**	**GPA**	**YBH Cohort**	**Major**	**Involvement**	**Hometown**	**Housing**	**Work Hrs/Week**
Rose	Hispanic/ Latina	3.8	2019-2020	Sociology	YBH peer mentor, academic peer counselor	Hesperia, CA	Off- campus	11-20

Norma	Latina	3.89	2019-2020	Sociology, Education minor	YBH peer mentor, UniCamp, Thrive Scholars	Los Angeles, CA	Off- campus	31-40
Rachel	White/ Mexican	alumni	2019-2020	Education	YBH peer mentor, GRIT peer coaching, EAOP college advising corps	Santa Monica, CA	On- campus	11-20
Fatima	Latina/ Hispanic	alumni	2019-2020	Sociology, Latin American Studies minor	Peer counselor, Phi Lambda Rho, Grupo Estudiantil Oaxaqueño	East Los Angeles, CA	commute	31-40
Thelma	Black	3.828	2020-2021	Sociology, African American Studies minor	California Community Builders, YBH peer mentor, Sociology Leadership Council	San Bernardino, CA	Off- campus	11-20
Evelyn	Latina	3.8	2020-2021	Chican/o Studies and Education	McNair, Keck/Humanistic Scholar Program, Center for Critical Race Studies in Education	Oxnard, CA	On- campus	6-10
Hope	Black/ Kenyan	3.3	2020-2021	Public Affairs, African American Studies & Education minors	East African Student Association, Black Pre Law Association & Journal	Santa Rosa, CA	Off- campus	11-20
Olivia	Hispanic	3.989	2020-2021	Human Biology & Society, Public Health minor	YBH peer mentor, Leaders of Tomorrow Carceral Ecologies research lab, Public Health initiative	West Covina, CA	Off- campus	1-5
Manuela	Latina/ Mexican American	3.88	2020-2021	Public Affairs and Education	HSI Initiative, Latinx Admit Weekend, Grupo Folklorico	San Jose, CA	Off- campus	11-20

Zoey	Hispanic	3.89	2020-2021	Chicana/o Studies, Applied Developmental Psychology minor	Music Meditation Club	Watsonville, CA	Off- campus	0
Monica	Mexican	3.686	2020-2021	Sociology, Chicana/o Studies minor	YBH peer mentor, Guardian Scholars Program	Los Angeles, CA	Off- campus	11-20
Isabella	Hispanic/ Latino	3.9	2020-2021	Sociology, Geography minor	SGSU Sustainability, Belles Service Association	Huntington Park, CA	Off- campus	11-20
Luisa	Latina/ Hispanic	4.0	2020-2021	Sociology, Digital Humanities minor	YBH peer mentor, Latinx Pre Dental Society, Grupo Folklorico, RISE Center	Long Beach, CA	Off- campus	11-20
Stephanie	Chicana/ Mexican American	3.43	2021-2022	Sociology, Gender Studies minor	College Corps, La Gente writer, Students for Socialism, Students for Justice in Palestine	Los Angeles, CA	commute	0
Kassandra	Mexican	3.8	2021-2022	Public Affairs	Academic Advancement Program,	Sylmar, CA	Off- campus	11-20
Noor	North African/ Moroccan	3.8	2022-2023	Sociology	Middle Eastern Studies Association, Middle Eastern & North African Law Student Association, YBH peer mentor, College Corps	Long Beach, CA and Casablanca, Morocco	On- campus	40+
Hillary	Black	3.7	2022-2023	Public Affairs, Environmental Systems & Society minor	Alpha Kappa Alpha, Justice Corps, SGSU Democrats, YBH peer mentor, Diversity Our Narrative	Houston, TX	On- campus	11-20

Jacqueline	Latina/ Hispanic	3.5	2022-2023	English	Freshman Summer Program peer counselor, Lambda Theta Alpha Latin Sorority, Latinas Guiding Latinas peer mentor, MEChA peer advisor	Porterville, CA	On- campus	11-20
Valentina	Latinx/ Mexican American	3.5	2022-2023	Chicana/o Studies, Political Science minor	Latinx admit weekend, Residential Assistant, YBH peer mentor	Watsonville, CA	On- campus	11-20
Leila	Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander	3.976	2022-2023	Political Science, Asian American Studies minor	Pacific Islander Association, Hooligan Theatre Company, Alumni Scholars Club	Solvang, CA	On-campus	1-5

Data Collection

The data for this study consisted of program documents, emails, questionnaires, and online synchronous focus group interviews with students who participated in YBH. The aim of this data is to shed light on the experiences of FGSOC during their first year at a R1 research university and the role YBH plays in helping them identify and activate the knowledge and skills they bring with them to the university, which can allow them to persist and succeed in their educational pursuits. Data was collected across three months during the Winter 2024 academic term, from January through March 2024. I labeled all data collected from participants with a pseudonym to protect participants' anonymity. I used the source of data as a criterion, gathering focus group interview transcripts and the demographic survey of each participant and organizing it by its date and source in order to maintain an organized inventory of my data (Tracy, 2013).

Online Synchronous Focus Group Interviews

All 20 students participated in a one-on-one, 60-70 minute online synchronous focus group interview as part of the study. Focus group interviews offer great value as a data collection method because they feature an inclusive and collective process that can reduce the power imbalance between participants and the researcher and facilitate rapport-building that aids in participants' ability to reflect vulnerably and openly. Focus group interviews were particularly well suited for this study since they allowed me to mirror the community environment of small learning communities and allowed participants to co-create knowledge by building off of each other's recollections, experiences and meaning-making. A key distinguishing feature of focus group interviews is that data collection "occurs in and is facilitated by a group setting" (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015, p. 17) and as such, the data derived is socially constructed through the interaction of the group (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). An advantage of focus groups is that group members are not only able to share their own views, but in listening to the views of others, can further refine and elaborate their own perspective (Hennink, 2014, p. 3). This was the case for several participants, who referenced what other participants had shared when offering their own perspectives. I have chosen to include some of these instances when quoting students in order to highlight the socially constructed nature of this data. Former online focus group participants also note the advantages this method provides in eliminating travel time and providing a more comfortable environment to express their opinions, often from the comfort of their homes or other chosen remote environment (Willemsen, 2022).

Most researchers recommend including six to ten participants per focus group (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), and four to six participants for digital focus groups (Willemsen, Aardoom, Chavannes & Versluis, 2022). My focus groups consisted of two to six students. This number

allowed every participant to have ample opportunity to share their perspectives and ensured that none of the participants' voices were overlooked. In fact, using otter.ai software, I was able to calculate the speaking percentage of each participant and it was evenly distributed across focus groups. For instance, focus group #1 had 6 participants and they each spoke 4-6 times and between 8%-17%. Similarly, in focus group #5, which only had 3 participants, students spoke 6-7 times and between 26%-29%. Keeping the focus groups no larger than 6 participants did in fact allow for all participants to share their perspective fairly evenly. I also observed that participants were mindful of their own participation, often stating that they did not want to take up too much space or that they wanted to let other students chime in. On some occasions I also invited specific participants who had not yet responded to a question to share their point of view.

In order to account for the increased exhaustion associated with an online focus group, the duration of each focus group was 60 minutes. This ensured participants' continuous engagement and reduced chances of distraction and fatigue. Participants received "house rules" via email beforehand as well as at the start of the focus group, which encouraged them to keep their cameras on, use the raise hand button when they wanted to share their perspective, keep their sound on mute to minimize background noise, and log in early on the day of their focus group to resolve any technical issues that could arise (Willemsen et al., 2022). There were only 2 instances of technical issues during focus groups. On one occasion, a student's wifi connection was poor and their audio and video would frequently freeze. This student ended up being dropped from the zoom meeting 15 minutes into the focus group and emailed me apologizing and wanting to reschedule. Thankfully, she was able to join a different focus group and did not encounter further technical issues. A second student's audio was a bit difficult to understand

during the zoom meeting but did not cause any issues when transcribed using otter.ai, as it was able to pick up clearly on everything she shared.

My focus group interview questions were open-ended in order to yield descriptive data and stories about the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These open-ended questions reflected an abridged version of Seidman's three part model, focusing primarily on details of experience and meaning making related to their experiences at SGSU and in YBH specifically (Seidman, 2013). For instance, I asked participants to fill in the blank for statements such as "During my first year at SGSU I felt _____" and "When I think about my time in YBH, I think about _____." I also asked open-ended questions such as, "In what ways were you already prepared when you arrived at SGSU?" (See Appendix B for the full list of questions in the Focus Group Interview Protocol). In addition to the prepared questions, I also used gentle probes to ask for more clarity, maximize an opportunity to gain more information, expand on what had been said, and to encourage participants to continue building on what they were sharing (Tracy, 2013).

Program Documents

I gathered program recruitment emails, program website text, assessment reports, funding proposals and any other available program documents in order to understand the program's goals, efficacy, funding sources, recruitment efforts, hiring processes, curriculum, evaluation metrics and other administrative systems. This background information informed focus group interview questions and also allowed me to position findings within important institutional and program-level contexts.

Data Analysis

My data analysis process for online focus group interviews was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step process of thematic analysis, which consists of 1) becoming familiar

with the data, 2) producing initial codes, 3) identifying themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and finally 6) producing the report. Though they are numbered and suggest a linear process of moving from one step to the next, the authors emphasize that thematic analysis is a recursive process that can require moving back and forth throughout the phases (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Through thematic analysis I identified patterns in how FGSOC navigate a R1 university during their first year and the role YBH plays in their experiences. Given my theoretical framework centered on community cultural wealth and funds of knowledge, and given my research questions focused on students' assets, I was particularly interested in any mention students made of their own assets in relation to their ability to persist and succeed at the university. To analyze documents, artifacts and photographs collected for this study, I employed a context analytic strategy that positions documents as a source of commentary on actions, intentions, and meanings and that reflects a social reality (Miller and Alvarado, 2005).

Becoming Familiar with the Data

Guided by the first step of my thematic analysis, I became familiar with the data by immersing myself in the data throughout the entire data collection process and not simply during the data analysis phase (Nguble, 2015). As such, after conducting each online focus group interview, I set aside time to begin reviewing the data immediately upon collecting it. I jotted down notes about my initial impressions, wrote about participants' body language, facial expressions and overall dispositions, and reflected on any notable responses that related to my research questions.

I used the Zoom audio recording feature to record each focus group interview. I then uploaded each audio file onto otter.ai to generate transcripts of the recordings. I listened to each

focus group audio recording while reviewing the otter.ai transcripts in order to label chunks of text with participants' names and to ensure accuracy by editing the transcripts for any discrepancies or errors (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

I familiarized myself with the data by actively reading each transcript repeatedly, jotting down notes of possible patterns, and writing down questions or ideas for potential coding schemes (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). As I became immersed in the data, I kept track of all my analysis activities in chronological order using a time stamped google document. I also wrote analytic memos in an online research journal as a way to externalize and keep a record of my reflections, questions and hypotheses on the data. (Clarke, 2005; Meriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Given my role as YBH's program coordinator, I had previously interacted with all but one of the participants, Rachel, who was from the 2019-2020 cohort and did not go on to serve as a peer mentor for the program. I had met all other participants either during their participation in YBH or subsequently in their role as YBH peer mentors. As such, remembering experiences each of them shared during the focus group was less challenging than it would have been if I were meeting them for the first time during the focus group. Additionally, 12 of the participants were former or current peer mentors, some having served as peer mentors for two or three years. I was most familiar with participants who had served as peer mentors given my role in guiding them, providing them with feedback, and working with them closely on YBH programming. Overall, familiarity with participants provided important contextual information that allowed me to more quickly become familiar with the data.

Producing Initial Codes

After rereading the focus group interview transcripts, I gathered a list of possible codes and initial patterns I identified. I created a codebook on Dedoose that listed initial codes and their

definitions. I then close-read each interview transcript and underwent several rounds of first-cycle coding. Using Dedoose, I coded segments of text to capture interesting and meaningful features that conveyed the essence of the data (Saldaña, 2011). These first-level descriptive codes were specific and active codes that required little interpretation, since they focused on what was present in the data, such as activities and processes (Tracy, 2013). I also used in vivo codes to label the data with the words and language of the participants themselves (Creswell, 2007). I coded for as many potential patterns as possible, making sure to keep the surrounding context of coding extracts for later use when writing about my findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Through coding the data, I began organizing it into meaningful groups that allowed me to engage in deeper analysis.

I used the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006) to compare data within each code and alter the code definition to ensure the new data fit, expanding and creating new codes when necessary. I then underwent secondary-cycle coding to create second-level analytic and interpretive codes (Saldana, 2011). Through line by line coding, I dug deeper into the data and added greater detail and specificity to my codes. I coded instances related to my theoretical frameworks: community cultural wealth, funds of knowledge, and funds of identity. I also identified codes related to my literature review, including: first generation students of color, first generation women students, faculty interactions, mentorship, community building, peer interactions, and campus racial climate.

Identifying Themes

Once all data were initially coded and I had developed an extensive list of codes, I employed axial coding to group similar codes together into larger prospective themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). I also summarized participants' responses for each of

the same 7 questions I asked during each focus group as a way to further begin identifying themes. I made sure to extract relevant interview data excerpts to use as evidence for each emerging theme. I then compared the summarized responses for each interview question across focus groups to identify commonalities and differences in participants' responses. This process allowed me to identify broad patterns across focus groups, as well as to notice unique responses to each interview question. During this process I also went back to the literature to identify new articles and reread key articles relating to the emerging themes in an effort to continue centering my theoretical framework into my analysis. Themes captured important patterns and meaning about the data in relation to the study's research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I also created matrices and tables that visually displayed the coded data in order to systematically compare the data, reflect on relationships between codes, and explore themes related to my guiding research questions.

Reviewing Themes

Once I gathered potential themes and sub-themes and coded data to support them, I reviewed and refined the themes in two steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, I examined the coded data extracts for each theme to ensure they cohered meaningfully (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I then evaluated each individual theme in relation to the data set to ensure it was valid and accurately reflected the meaning of the data set as a whole. I also revised initial hypotheses by seeking out deviant data through negative case analysis, which ensured the fidelity and credibility of themes and explanations (Tracy, 2013). By considering and detailing rival explanations, I was able to address and reject important competing explanations, which ultimately strengthened my findings and bolstered my study (Yin, 2018).

Defining and Naming Themes

With a finalized list of systematically produced themes, I identified the essence of each theme and what aspect of the data it captured. I refined each theme's working title to clearly and concisely communicate its essence and contribution to the data set. I corroborated that themes do not overlap too much and added sub-themes to large and complex themes that needed more structure (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I also conducted and wrote a detailed analysis of each theme, weaving together the story that each theme recounts and how it contributes to the larger narrative of the data set as a whole.

Producing the Report

Finally, the last step in Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step thematic analysis consists of selecting data extracts that best portray each theme. I pulled coded data extracts from Dedoose, provided a description and context for the data extracts, and used them to develop arguments in response to my study's guiding research questions. I choose vivid examples that best represent each theme's essence and provide a concise and coherent account of the story the data tell within and across themes. I included this thematic analysis in the findings section of the study.

Document Analysis

I conducted document analysis before I collected focus group data since these pre-existing documents were already accessible to me. The goal of the document analysis was also to gain important contextual information about YBH that could inform the types of questions I asked participants during the focus group interviews. Subsequently, document analysis elucidated findings garnered from participants' narrative experiences since they often referred to specific aspects of the program, such as assignments or topics covered during YBH seminars.

In order to analyze the documents collected for this study, I drew from Miller and Alvarado (2005), who outlined three approaches to analyze documents: for their content (content

analytic), documents as commentary (context analytic), and documents as actors (context analytic). For this study, I adopted the context analytic strategy that views documents as commentary that provide insight into actions, intentions, meanings, organizational dynamics and institutional structures to interpret the social reality reflected in the documents (Miller & Alvarado, 2005). This approach is especially helpful in identifying social phenomena that are not readily observable, such as organizational hierarchies.

Examining YBH documents provided important context, allowed me to further refine my research questions, served as secondary data for triangulation, and informed the refinement of my interview questions (Sankofa, 2022). Keeping in mind that "documents must be examined for what they *do* as much as what they *say*" (Prior, 2008), I examined how documents related to YBH are used functionally, exchanged between different constituents, and widely disseminated (Sankofa, 2022).

Trustworthiness through Triangulation

I ensured my study's trustworthiness and internal validity by engaging in triangulation across my data sources: online focus group interviews and document analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Having these sources of data allowed me to cross-check my findings to verify that I was observing the same patterns across data sources. Additionally, I addressed and rectified any questions that remained from the collected data through member checks. Using member checks (also known as respondent validation) allowed me to share preliminary findings with participants to confirm that the emerging findings were consistent with the experiences they conveyed during our online focus group interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This step made certain that I had interpreted participants' words in ways they intended and allowed participants the opportunity to provide any corrections or clarifications.

Positionality

In light of the reality that I am the primary research instrument for this study, given that my mind and body are absorbing, sifting through, and interpreting the world around me through observation, participation, and interviewing, I believe it is fundamental to engage in self-reflexivity at the outset of this study and continually throughout its development (Tracy, 2013). Looking back at when I first began my own higher education journey at a research institution as a first-generation, low- income Student of Color, I have come to realize that a large contributing factor to my success was my participation in academic programs and learning communities of sorts. Participating in academic programs allowed me to be part of a community of scholars who came from similar backgrounds as me, with whom I could reflect about being *ni de aqui ni de alla* (*neither from here nor from there*) in Spanish and about our favorite home-cooked meals in the same *platica* during a late night study session in the dormitory lounge (Flores, Delgado Bernal and Hassan Zareer, 2021). These learning communities made me feel like there was a place for me at such a large institution, even though I often occupied various spaces in which I was the only one who embodied all of my intersectional identities. It also gave me a sense that my success was tied to that of my peers, my successes were their successes and vice versa. Participating in these programs was fundamental to my development as a scholar and to the discovery of my professional aspirations; it allowed me to know that what I aimed for was possible and that I would not have to fight alone to achieve the ambitious goals I dreamed of. Experiencing the transformational power of academic programs first-hand has instilled within me a deep commitment to advocate and support these initiatives, particularly through critical praxis-based research that can contribute to learning communities' growth and continual refinement.

Limitations

Case study research has some notable limitations, including not being able to generalize from a single case study, given the importance of the contextual information. Yet, case studies are generalizable to theoretical propositions, rather than populations or universes (Yin, 2018). Thus, the value of this study will be in its contribution to expanding theories. The generalizability of this study is also limited as a result of being focused on First-Generation Women of Color at a single institution type, a public R-I research university in California. Though this centering is intentional and significant given its need in the literature, future studies should explore the experiences of sub groups of FGSOC at varying institution types (i.e. the experiences of Black students in small learning communities at Community Colleges). Another limitation is the inclusion of students who participated in YBH 4 years prior. Though their experiences in YBH may not be at the forefront of their minds as with the students who have participated in the last year or two, I believe their inclusion in the study is still significant since the distance from their participation in the program can allow for more program effects to be visible. That is, they have had more time to apply some of the knowledge gained in YBH, such as connecting with professors, finding research opportunities on campus, and even graduating and embarking on their professional journeys. Additionally, their vivid memories are in themselves a testament to the impact YBH had in their lives, so much so that they could recount them with detail and passion even four years later. Lastly, as aforementioned, a final limitation is the lack of response from students who did not complete YBH and/or who left SGSU altogether. Not having access to their full narratives is limiting, however I still sought to include their nuanced perspectives by including the emails they sent notifying me of their discontinuation from YBH in my document analysis.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is twofold, first, to document the assets and knowledge that First Generation Students of Color bring with them to a R1 Research University, and second, to identify how their participation in a small learning community allows them to utilize these assets and knowledge. This study uses a case study methodology that features a narrow scope and tight focus into FGSOC's experiences within the learning community in particular and the university at large. Through online synchronous focus groups and document analysis, this study explored the following research questions:

1. What assets do First-Generation Students of Color utilize to persist and succeed in their educational pursuits?
2. How does a small learning community help First-Generation Students of Color identify and activate their assets?

I analyzed the data for this study using thematic analysis and centered an asset based framework rooted in community cultural wealth and funds of knowledge. In this chapter, I present findings from 20 students who participated across five online synchronous focus groups. I begin by describing the challenges participants experienced at SGSU and their resilience in overcoming obstacles they faced. I then juxtapose their negative experiences at SGSU with the positive experiences they described through participation in YBH, from forming friendships to finding a safe space to belong to. Next, I describe the assets students carried with them (aspirational, familial, social and navigational capital) and the ways YBH helped students identify and activate their assets (by helping them refute imposter syndrome, cultivate their voices, and affirm and develop their identities). The final section of this chapter features document analysis of YBH

seminar curriculum materials, students' class projects, and assessment reports, in an effort to provide additional context of students' experience in YBH.

Challenges at SGSU

The resounding theme among participants when describing their first year at SGSU was feeling isolated and lonely. Students also described feeling unsure navigating SGSU, out of place, scared, nervous and academically challenged for the first time. The participants in this study were high achieving valedictorians, student body presidents, leaders of student organizations, community advocates, avid athletes, talented artists and musicians, daughters, sisters, friends, mentors, tutors, volunteers, and a host of other identities, characteristics and positionalities that made them desirable, competitive college applicants who were successfully admitted to several of the most prestigious universities in California. How then, did these very same students, competent, accomplished, and self-assured, describe their feelings stepping foot on their new college campus, as unsure, out of place, scared, nervous, lonely, isolated and overwhelmed? What in their new environment did they perceive as a threat? What did they believe they needed to possess or embody to succeed there, and what did they conclude they did not possess or embody that made them feel inadequate?

As first-generation students, part of their hesitation lied in not knowing what to expect on their college journey and not having someone to turn to for direct guidance. Norma voiced, "I was really scared and nervous because I didn't know what to expect." Jacqueline also captured the group's sentiments well, sharing, "I just felt like I was on this journey by myself because I was the first in my family to go to college." Not only did students feel alone, but they also felt behind compared to their peers. Jacqueline discussed, "When I entered [SGSU] I knew people who were like 'oh I took this many APs,' like they're already so ahead and I felt so behind and

just really lost as a first-gen, low-income Latina from the middle of nowhere in the Central Valley." Even though the participants in this study were some of the most high achieving students in their respective high schools and communities, at SGSU they encountered students who possessed and had accumulated the types of social and cultural capital that afforded them advantages. For instance, the number of AP courses offered at a high school is often determined by the funding available at that school, as well as its college-going culture. Taking AP courses and exams can provide students with advantages in college, such as increased academic preparation and the ability to satisfy degree requirements. Jacqueline perceived the unspoken advantage her peers had over her by taking more AP courses. She tied feeling lost and behind to her identity as a first generation, low-income Latina from the "middle of nowhere," alluding to the literal and symbolic distance of her community to SGSU.

Participants also felt isolated and overwhelmed in realizing their identities represented the exception, rather than the "norm" of SGSU students. Hope described being surprised by how rare her identity was, "I didn't realize like how many people… how uncommon being a first generation student really was." Hope's observation highlights the need for a place to belong for first generation students, who represented 29% of the student population in 2023, namely 9,402 out of 32,423 SGSU students. The representation further decreases when taking into account race/ethnicity, with only 1% of SGSU students being American Indian & Alaska Native, 6% Black, 21% Hispanic, and 35% Asian & Pacific Islander. Given the lack of representation of first generation students of color at SGSU, it is no surprise that students felt out of place. Stephanie described her experience at SGSU,

> Coming from South Central LA, where demographics are predominantly black and brown, going into SGSU demographics completely changed for me. But I think I felt it

> even more when I was in classes and there weren't that many people that looked like me, spoke like me, or were very similar to me. I noticed the different levels of education. I think it just made me feel out of place, and I began questioning if I even belonged at SGSU; there were just so many emotions that came up...it was also really hard to make connections with professors, there aren't many professors that resemble my experience or look similar to me.

Stephanie identified the multiple marginalization she experienced as a result of the way she looked, how she spoke, her educational background, and her prior experiences. Interestingly, Stephanie was aware of the "different levels of education" simply by observing her classmates, from the way they spoke to presumably other unspoken indicators of higher levels of education, upper social class, and other forms of cultural capital. Her observations highlight the often covert power dynamics that occur in college classrooms, which can ultimately contribute to students' feelings of inadequacy and negatively impact their academic performance. Not only did Stephanie feel disconnected from her classmates, but from her professors as well, who did not represent her identities. Stephanie's experience demonstrates the need for first generation students of color to be affirmed in their identities through representation in the classroom of peers and faculty who share and understand their racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

When reflecting on their first year at SGSU, most students shared how hard it was to find a community, connect with people like them, and find their place and purpose within the institution. Some students were unsure what to major in, and for others they were being truly challenged academically for the first time. Students described that at SGSU they experienced their first fail on an exam, low grade on a paper or having to drop a class well into the term to ensure they did not fail it. These demanding academic experiences led students to question

whether they belonged at SGSU and whether they could truly succeed there. When asked if they ever considered not continuing their education at SGSU, 17 out of the 20 participants responded with an iteration of yes, “every single day,” “I thought about dropping out of SGSU a lot,” “I definitely had that moment where I was questioning if I wanted to continue being in higher education, or questioning if SGSU was really the institution for me.”

For Manuela, she not only wrestled with whether she could succeed at SGSU, but she experienced debilitating anxiety and physical panic attacks that put her wellbeing at risk; she explained:

> My first year at [SGSU], I felt like I was constantly trying to keep up… in the midst of trying to, you know, go through the process of transitioning, being first gen, being Latina… I thought that I had found the perfect recipe for success in high school because I had this idea in my head that if that got me this far to [SGSU], then it was gonna get me through…I didn't realize during my first year that it was because of who we are as individuals and our dispositions…And I thought that I had to constantly legitimize myself by what I was doing…in all transparency, my first year was really challenging for me mentally. I don't think that I've ever had such a terrible experience with my anxiety, it was actually translating into physical panic attacks.

Manuela describes transitioning to SGSU and trying to use the same formula for success that she had used previously to succeed. Seeing that she was not obtaining the same positive outcomes, Manuela realized that her success was not the result of a formula or certain strategies, and she instead realized it is a result of who she is. Such a realization allowed her to step back and reevaluate her commitments, especially in light of the ongoing pandemic that marked her first year in college and brought with it additional stressors. She recognized that in trying to establish

a community and prove that she deserved to be at SGSU through countless involvements, her own well being had greatly deteriorated. Though Manuela was able to make effective changes to improve her mental health and continue at SGSU, a vast number of college students grapple with mental health challenges every year. The number increases even more significantly when taking into account students' first-generation status and racial/ethnic identity.

It was evident that during their first year, First Generation Students of Color could greatly benefit from validation, community and support. As they navigated an institution that did not reflect their racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, or cultural background, students felt out of place and isolated. In the classroom, they did not see peers or classmates who spoke like them, looked like them, or shared their experiences. Coupled with the increased academic rigor of a prestigious institution, students naturally questioned whether they could succeed at SGSU, some seriously considering transferring to a community college or withdrawing from higher education altogether.

Students' Resilience

In reflecting on what to do, some students considered transferring to a community college or to an institution where more people looked like them. Others like Rachel reached out to trusted mentors and received sound advice that jolted them back to reality. Rachel describes a conversation she had with her high school mentor after failing her first midterm,

> I had called him and I was crying. And I had told him, I can't do this. I studied for a whole week, and I can't even pass a basic midterm. I'm not going to make it here, I need to drop out. And he essentially gave me the cold truth. He was like, 'You're in college now…you can't just let these small bumps get in the way…you got in for a reason and you keep trying to convince yourself that you shouldn't be there, when everything else is

> pointing that you should.' And that really kind of slapped me in place because I realized… in high school I was a 4.0 student….president of a lot of things, so I was used to succeeding and exceeding expectations. … I think that kind of finally helped me establish like, okay, I am supposed to be here, but I can't just not put in the work or not be willing to adjust.

Rachel's experience represents a pivotal moment in her transition to college, the first time she failed an exam. Up to that point, she was used to not only meeting, but exceeding expectations. Therefore, when she was not able to do the same at SGSU, she convinced herself that she was not capable of succeeding there. Since it was her first quarter at SGSU, Rachel had not yet established a supportive community or a trusted mentor she could lean on during such a challenging time. However, she had established a strong enough relationship with her high school mentor, that he continued to support her during her transition to college. Had she not had the social capital of someone to turn to who knew her, cared for her, and understood what she was going through, Rachel's outcome could have been entirely different. Rachel's decision to stay and persist at SGSU was unsupported by SGSU itself. The university has a responsibility to do more to support its students, especially during crucial moments that can have lasting consequences. Rachel's story is all too common, her outcome unfortunately, is more rare than it should be.

Though SGSU does provide resources for first generation students and Students of Color, there is an expectation that students will be able to identify these resources, recognize that they need them, and utilize them effectively with little to no guidance or support. There are less structures and policies in place to ensure that students who need these resources will have access to them. Valentina, for instance, sought out resources for first-generation students, including

living on a first-generation specific floor in the dorms in order to have a built-in community. Other students in the focus group were not aware that a first-generation specific floor existed or that they had the option to live there. Valentina also pursued an internship with Residential Life during her first year that allowed her to form valuable relationships with campus staff who later became mentors for her. Valentina emphasized the importance of reaching out to her mentors, "I had a lot of mentors that I could reach out to from my internship I had my first year. So just being comfortable with reaching out to them and realizing that they wanted to help, it really altered the way that I viewed SGSU and the way my experience first began versus how it ended my first year. It definitely changed for the better." Valentina demonstrated navigational capital in seeking out resources, opportunities, and mentors who could support her higher education journey. None of the people or opportunities that supported her reached out to her, rather, Valentina had to find them and utilize them. This can present a barrier for some students who are less confident in communicating with faculty and staff or have not yet developed the navigational capital needed to identify suitable resources.

Like Valentina, Noor also shared having to move past the fear of attending new events and asking for help in order to find community and receive support,

> The biggest thing that I did that kind of helped with everything was just asking for help. And putting myself out there, especially in like uncomfortable settings… going to the socials that YBH was holding or socials that my floor was holding, any organizations that I resonated with… I found a lot of comfort in organizations of people that looked like me or practiced the same religion as me. And then I think asking for help, like, I connected a lot with my YBH instructor especially, and certain professors and mentors, like Valentina touched on, and not being scared to tell them like hey, how do I take classes? Or how do I

> find this on campus? Or like, do you know what this *even* is? Those were the two biggest things for me…just putting myself out there and not being scared to ask for help.

Both Noor and Valentina touch on an all too common experience among FGSOC, being afraid to ask for help. They describe moving past this fear by surrounding themselves with supportive people, from mentors who truly wanted to help, to instructors they connected with. Reaching out to individuals they had grown comfortable with made asking for help less intimidating; they knew these individuals were supportive and would not judge them for not knowing everything about navigating SGSU.

The YBH Community: A Safe Space for FGSOC

Students talked at length about their positive experiences in YBH. They discussed the negative emotions of feeling isolated, lonely, and overwhelmed at SGSU, while juxtaposing them with the positive feelings of belonging, inclusion, support and guidance associated with their participation in YBH. Norma shares this sentiment, "YBH helped relieve a lot of nerves I carried. It provided a safe space for me to find comfort in seeing people every quarter and meeting people I became really good friends with and am still friends with to this day." Similarly, Kassandra expressed:

> YBH is one of the reasons why I was able to feel excited, because initially when I first got to campus I was feeling similar to what others shared, isolated, unsure, challenged. But YBH helped me not feel those things as strongly and that enabled me to have a more positive outlook on things and also have a lot of community and connections.

Norma and Kassandra highlight the importance of a program like YBH, that can support students as soon as they step foot onto campus and are met with multifaceted challenges. Both students

highlight how the community, connections, and friends they made through YBH allowed them to feel comforted, relieved, and excited.

Forming Friendships

Across focus groups, students discussed how challenging it was to make friends. Some students began their college experience remotely due to the COVID 19 pandemic, which added an additional layer of difficulty in establishing a community. While students described making friends as more challenging than they had anticipated, several credited YBH with providing opportunities for them to connect, engage and talk with other students in the YBH community. Access to the built-in YBH community allowed students to make some of their closest friends, which they stayed in touch with even after the program finished.

For instance, Evelyn shared, “I automatically thought of one of my best friends here in college. She's like my ride or die. I see her every week, and we met through YBH. And we will see each other outside of other spaces." Other students described the relationships they forged in YBH with words and phrases such as, “kinship,” “relating to people on a deeper level,” “being surrounded by people I felt comfortable with,” “everyone understood each other,” and “people understood where I was coming from.” Additionally, when asked to fill in the blank to the statement, “When I think about my time in YBH I think about _____,” several students discussed friendship. Thelma shared,

> Another thing that I really liked about YBH was the ability to see the same faces throughout the whole year. And that really helped to strengthen the friendships that I made. Even to this day, some of the friends that I made in YBH are some of my closest friends now.

Thelma appreciated how YBH provided a unique opportunity for students to see each other throughout the entire academic year, rather than just in a singular class. The increased contact among YBH students through shared year-long classes and YBH programming, as well as their shared background as FGSOC, allowed students to more easily build meaningful connections as early as their first week at SGSU. Fatima described the impact the YBH community had on her,

> Even though SGSU is pretty big, YBH made it a lot smaller, I liked being together throughout our first year, I made great connections, it didn't feel like just a program that you were in and that was it, there were actual meaningful, tangible connections I made and they were long-lasting because I'm still in contact with a large amount of people from YBH.

Part of the reason students were able to forge such strong ties was because of the environment YBH created. It invited students to be vulnerable, authentic, and proud of their backgrounds, by fostering a safe space that celebrated who they were and where they came from.

Safe Space

In addition to discussing the friendships and connections they made, students also characterized their time in YBH with finding a safe space to discuss what they were experiencing at the university. From sharing challenges they were actively encountering, to seeking advice on navigating the university, simply feeling heard and connected to students like themselves made a positive difference in their experience at SGSU. Stephanie discussed this sentiment:

> I had a challenging time incorporating myself into the institution and still feel very othered, but YBH really helped me find that collectiveness with others. I came to understand that I wasn't the only one feeling that sense of oppression but there were other people who felt the same way.

Stephanie describes her experience at SGSU with feeling othered and oppressed, conveying the lack of support and belonging she experienced. She shares about the underrepresentation of students of color from low-income backgrounds at SGSU and the institutional culture that reflects its predominantly white institution (PWI) status. Through YBH, Stephanie was able to find other students who shared her background and were undergoing similar challenges at SGSU, which provided some respite and a safe space in the midst of an oppressive environment for her.

Evelyn also talked about feeling lost as a first generation low-income Latina in the larger SGSU campus but finding a place to belong in YBH:

> I felt lost as a first gen low income Latina and I loved being able to share that space with people who also had the same identities as me. I feel like in this big, white institution it's really hard to find those spaces so it helped me feel grounded.

Like Stephanie, Evelyn also acknowledged SGSU's PWI status and the ways it made her feel lost, disoriented, misplaced, and like she did not belong. In contrast, at YBH, she felt grounded by being around others who shared her identities.

Several other students also referred to YBH as a safe space; Kassandra stated, "There is a shared experience within the cohort, everyone understood each other, it was a good safe space." Similarly, Valentina described YBH saying, "It was a place where I could just go in and feel supported by everyone there, it was a safe space for me to be in." Hillary also shared, "It was a very safe space for me to air out all my concerns and have good conversation with people that I knew would understand where I was coming from."

In the midst of a campus climate that made students feel isolated, out of place, nervous, and scared, having a safe space in YBH to express themselves freely and be affirmed, made a positive difference in students' experiences. Through YBH students felt seen and cared for as

individuals. Zoey expressed this view stating, “I realized YBH doesn’t just care about the education of students, which is incredibly important, but they also care about the people themselves; YBH remained a great sense of community for me.”

The Assets/Knowledge FGSOC Brought to SGSU

The students who participated in this study possessed incredible resilience, aspirational capital, navigational capital, social capital and familial capital. These assets and knowledge allowed them to maneuver through inequitable education systems, where they did not have access to all the resources and information needed to apply to or prepare for college. Yet, despite numerous obstacles, students forged a path to be admitted to SGSU. They may not have arrived with copious financial resources and the advantages they afford, or with prominent social connections with far-reaching networks, yet these students possessed valuable assets and knowledge that if recognized, affirmed and leveraged, could significantly advance their educational trajectories at SGSU.

Aspirational Capital

Several students experienced culture shock upon interacting with students at SGSU that came from a wide array of backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses. Hope was discouraged in seeing nepotism in action when searching for law internships and witnessing how effortlessly her classmates received opportunities from their family’s distinguished networks. She explained:

> It was all I grew up in and I really just went around thinking most people are first gen, most people know what it's like to have a single parent household or like dysfunctional families or to be system-impacted. And so to come to this school and realize you're the minority and the mass of people don't relate to those experiences…I didn't realize how much, I don't want to say nepotism exists, but like yeah…I did my first cover letter for

> my internship that I did this past summer, and it was probably the best law internship I could have gotten. And so many people were like, 'Oh, my mom just knows someone, and they put me in contact so I got this internship,' oh and then someone else's parent is a doctor and they just texted this person and they got their internship there, or their parents are helping them with cover letters and all this stuff…And I feel like because of that I just felt really behind for a long time. And I was just like, gosh what's the point of pursuing these resources if I always feel like I'm thirty steps behind everyone else.

Hope described being stunned to learn that her experiences growing up in a single parent household in the south side of Los Angeles, being system-impacted, first-generation, and coming from an immigrant family background were not common experiences for students at SGSU. She began to notice that the majority of her classmates had parents who were doctors, lawyers, or professionals, which afforded them great advantages. She realized the playing field was not even and that if First Generation Students of Color are able to access prestigious universities like SGSU with less resources, it is an incredible feat to be proud of. She elaborated:

> …as a first gen student, I always say, I feel like we should be so much more proud than we are, we didn't have any of the resources….people come here off of private school tutoring and the best of the best yada yada yada and all these extra resources and opportunities that we didn't have, and we still were able to get to the same place that they were. And I feel like it just took me a long time to be like, if you are judging yourself off of opportunities that you weren't born into, you're just never gonna win…it just took me a long time to realize, I've done a lot with the resources I was given… and now I'm just trying to work out my last two years and pursue everything that I can before I graduate.

Despite disillusionment with the inequitable systems in place and feeling "thirty steps behind everyone else," Hope's aspirational capital allowed her to continue pursuing her dreams to graduate college and go to law school. She came to terms with the reality she was born into and learned not to judge or compare herself to her peers. Instead, she realized that she has done a lot with the limited resources she had and that she should be incredibly proud of herself. Hope was able to preserve hope for her future, even in the midst of palpable barriers, demonstrating the aspirational capital she carried and continued to utilize to persist.

Zoey also discussed drawing upon her aspirational capital to overcome disillusionment with the university. She describes how being required to take a midterm two days after a surgery led her to take some time off of school to deeply question her purpose at an inhumane institution that did not seem to care for her. Zoey reflected:

> I had a very, it was a minor surgery, but it was enough for me to realize that sometimes this institution lacks a lot of compassion for people, for students. And so I remember two days after I had my surgery, I had to go and take my final exam because the professor was just so adamant…that was kind of like my, wow, if they don't care about me, then why, why am I here? And why am I dedicating so much of my time and all my efforts and making so many sacrifices to be here? If there's not… there's like no sense in living in a place like this. And so I decided that I wasn't going to be at SGSU, and I would rather, you know, go home and figure out a plan there.

Zoey was deeply affected by her professor's lack of compassion toward her. This experience led her to take two quarters off to question whether she wanted to continue being a student at SGSU. She began to consider all the effort, time, and sacrifices she was making to be at SGSU and wondering what she was gaining in return. She also describes her mother disapproving of her

decision, since she valued education and knew SGSU could provide Zoey with opportunities for social and economic advancement. Zoey goes on to describe the people and motives that influenced her to return to SGSU:

> I relied on the YBH staff so much, they were so supportive, and I was amazed because I had just had this experience…even my own academic counselor was really like, Are you sure? You shouldn't, like very discouraging…But the YBH staff was very much understanding of my circumstances. I knew that I was not certain that I would come back. And when I came back, I knew that there had to be a reason because it was going to be difficult and there's going to be so many sacrifices I'm going to continue to make. So there has to be one reason that will keep pushing you, and that reason cannot waver, cannot change under the circumstances.

Zoey credits the YBH staff with being supportive and understanding of her circumstances. The YBH staff even allowed Zoey to continue working as a YBH peer mentor remotely during her leave of absence, supporting her financial wellness. Zoey also describes thinking deeply of a reason to keep going, a reason that aligns with her values, is more sustainable, and does not waver with changing circumstances. Through follow up email correspondence, Zoey shared that this reason was related to her participation in SGSU's meditation club. She described meeting club leaders and members whose kindness and open heartedness made a lasting impression on her. During her time away from SGSU she delved deeper into the club's written materials and began practicing meditation. She explained:

> It became clear to me that this path was special, and the only way to deepen my understanding was to connect with these people. This experience brought me back to LA, providing the answers I was looking for and strengthening my relationship with God,

whom I refer to as Krsna. He, along with his devotees, is the reason I returned to LA and continue to stay.

Zoey's narrative highlights the multifaceted experiences students encounter during college. Apart from engaging in their studies, students also engage in meaning-making, defining and redefining their beliefs and values, and discovering their place in the world. In Zoey's case, returning to SGSU was supported by the YBH staff, as well as her interest in learning more about meditation and being part of the community she discovered there. Zoey's account also highlights the power of aspirational capital, which she leveraged to return to SGSU to finish her degree, even though she was disappointed by the institution's lack of compassion and care. As a result of her hopes and dreams for her future, Zoey was able to reframe her decision to return to SGSU in order to better align with her values.

Several other students also shared about moments when they considered leaving SGSU, and in fact, only 3 out of the 20 participants said they never considered leaving SGSU: Valentina, Rose, and Denise. All three students participated in different focus group interviews, so they each had unique perspectives compared to the other participants in their group. Valentina reflected on not giving herself the option to leave SGSU because she was raised to have big dreams and aspirations and because she longed to make her family and community back home proud. She reflected:

> I never gave myself that option of considering either dropping out or transferring, just because my parents didn't *get to* go to college, they literally just graduated high school. And growing up in a Mexican household, like you're raised to have these big dreams and aspirations…In my eyes, I saw getting my degree as a way to be able to take care of my family and myself in the future...I needed to make my parents and my family and

> community proud of me…like Hope mentioned, I was in a similar situation where I was the only person from my high school to come here. So everybody back home was like, oh Valentina is living in LA. It's a really big deal because my community, Watsonville, is super small too and everybody knows each other. So their encouragement really helps me to be able to push through the hard times.

Valentina's community expected big things from her and she used their hopes as fuel to persist even when she got lower grades than she desired or felt lonely and homesick. She describes the familial capital instilled in her, to dream big and carry a sense of collective responsibility for the wellbeing of her family. Her purpose in pursuing a degree at SGSU was not out of selfish ambition or conceit, but rather to ensure she was well positioned to positively contribute to her family members' lives. Valentina's aspirational capital was deeply rooted in her identity as a daughter, sister, and Watsonville community member, and had been nurtured long before she ever stepped foot onto SGSU.

For Rose, she adjusted her expectations when entering college, and knew that she would not be getting straight A's like she had in high school. She also decided that she was there to graduate, and so leaving SGSU was never an option she contemplated. Denise did not consider leaving SGSU either. In her case, she pointed to the intentional affirmation she received from professors, department advisors and YBH staff and peers:

> I think I've just been really lucky honestly, and not just lucky, but through the efforts of a lot of people before me, that a lot of my professors, a lot of my departments, and YBH, I've always felt affirmed. I never was questioned by those professors. They believe in me, they talk about things that are relevant, pertinent to me. So in that case, the institution I never felt was knocking me down, until later (laughs), but at least from the direct

> connections I had and YBH as a peer support group, I was constantly getting affirmations. And so I didn't think at any point that I couldn't do it.

Denise acknowledges that feeling affirmed by faculty and staff at SGSU is a result of the intentional efforts of people who came before her, such as those who participated in a hunger strike so that SGSU could have a Chicana/o Studies Department or more recent ongoing efforts to hire more Latinx staff and faculty in an effort to become a Hispanic Serving Institution. Receiving constant affirmations from professors, advisors and other university staff solidified Denise's belief that she was capable of succeeding at SGSU. It should be noted that Denise had the highest GPA of participants in the group, a 4.0. Yet, she did not attribute her confidence in succeeding at SGSU to her impressive academic performance, but instead to the affirmation she received from her SGSU community. Denise's account underlines the weight validation from institutional agents carries for FGSOC.

Familial Capital

When asked if they were prepared in any way before they arrived at SGSU, several students referenced their families and drawing upon their familial capital. Kassandra considered it a privilege to have an older sister who had attended college first, since it was helpful to hear about her experiences, and getting to visit her on campus made college feel less daunting and more familiar. Thelma also discussed having a sister and cousins who had gone to college, which contributed to her "knowledge bank" and allowed her to know what to expect by the time she stepped foot onto campus. Denise also reflected on her older sister who attended UCSD and vulnerably disclosed being disillusioned with the university experience and lack of support. Denise credits her sister's openness with preparing her to have realistic expectations and not romanticizing college or holding SGSU on a pedestal. She explains:

> I was already introduced at least to the idea that it's actually not this golden dream and I think that was really valuable to have because I didn't necessarily go through the disillusionment while I was here.

Norma describes the motivation and comfort she felt as a result of having older siblings who had already completed college:

> I also had older siblings who went to college and I remember just asking them a million questions, they were helpful and knowing that they could do it, I was like I can do it too. It was nice having that comfort in reaching out to a sibling, to have someone to turn to, I'm really grateful for that.

Knowing that people she shared so much in common with had managed to graduate from college, breathed hope and confidence into Norma. She was also able to ask her siblings unhindered questions and be met with raw and honest answers. Familial capital was not only exemplified through older siblings who had wisdom to share from having navigated college themselves, but also through the support of family members who did not have any experience with the college environment, yet abounded in wisdom, love and support. Rose shared:

> My parents don't speak English either so I was not able to relate to people who you know, whose parents were kind of more actively involved in their experience, but having family support is what really kept me going because I just remember being a really scared freshman...having my family support and knowing that they believed in me and especially calling my mom every single day and telling her about my day or looking forward to that really made me feel like I could do it.

Even though her family could not offer detailed guidance, being able to share her struggles with them and having them validate and motivate her was a huge fountain of support for Rose; she expanded:

> Every time I would tell them about the struggle instead of invalidating me for it, even if they didn't think it was hard, they still made me feel better, like saying okay it's hard but you can do it, you got this, keep going...that support, them being there, even though they didn't know what was going on, but still hearing me out, just reminding me that I was smart and capable… that's what really helped me.

Rose's account refutes deficit narratives that paint the families and particularly parents of first generation students of color in a negative light, assuming that they are not involved or invested in their childrens' educational attainment. On the contrary, despite direct access to higher education, first generation families of color continue to champion their childrens' success and provide crucial emotional support that fuels students' persistence. Acevedo & Solorzano (2023) explain how, "once in college, students also resort to the aspirational capital instilled by their family so as to maintal levels of self-determination to navigate higher education," which was the case with Rose and several of the aforementioned participants in this study (p. 1475). Rose's familial capital also extended to her siblings and cousins in her desire to be a trailblazer in her family so that they would not have to experience the hardships she had. On the brink of tears, she emotionally recounts:

> Being first gen made me really proud…it really gave me the resources that I needed to help my little brothers go to college or just navigate their way, my cousins. It's something that I feel really proud of. And oh my god, I'm getting… I'm getting emotional…but although there were difficulties (begins to cry)... I'm just glad...I'm just glad I was the

> one...(pauses to cry)...I'm just glad I was the one to go through difficulties so that they don't have to go through them.

Rose found great value in being able to lead her younger siblings and cousins along their educational journey, so that they would not have to endure the challenges she did. She reframed the hardships she endured in her own college journey as a source of knowledge she could pass down to those she loves. Her sense of community and family were central to her identity and aspirations.

Familial capital was also exemplified through the educational expectations parents had for their children; for instance Rose shared:

> Coming from an immigrant family really played a role into what I thought success was, and to them, it was, you know, going to college. And I would always hear my dad say that they moved to the United States so that we could have a better future and a better education. So that was something that I knew I had to pursue, and it was just default for me…So I feel like it was expected for me to go to college.

Rachel's parents also expected her to go to college and her love of learning allowed her to embrace that dream as her own; she explained:

> I mean, very similar, it was an expectation for me but I also kind of just adopted it myself…it was something that I wore with honor, even though I didn't fully understand and even to this day I don't think I'll ever fully understand the actual difficulties that my family went through in order to get to where we are now…I think once I made the connection that I could take my love for learning to the next level and also honor my family in a sense, I think that sealed the deal for me.

Rachel reflected on having an innate love for learning at an early age and how her dedication and commitment to advancing her education grew all the more when she connected it to her desire to make her family proud and honor her parents' dreams for her. Even though her parents had high expectations for Rachel's education, they were not able to help her navigate college. As a result, Rachel describes developing a hyper independence that she had to grapple with during college in order to seek help, something she was not accustomed to doing. She reflects that being a first-generation student "added a whole new layer of difficulties, but also beauties because it helped me be so much more grateful and content with what college means." She goes on to describe that to her and her family, graduating from SGSU is a tremendous accomplishment that they continue to cherish and celebrate to this day. What's more, her experience navigating SGSU as a FGSOC informs the work she does now as a high school college counselor; she passionately declares:

> And that's also why I work in this field, because I remember feeling like no one understood me or had been through the same thing, just having a person be able to hear you out, just believe in you, makes a world of a difference.

Social Capital

In addition to familial capital, students also described activating their social capital to prepare themselves to apply and attend college. Several students discussed reaching out to mentors and participating in college preparation programs. Rachel described how her high school counselor, a SGSU alum, connected her to the Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP) and the Academic Advancement Program (AAP) at SGSU. Through these connections, Rachel accessed her first student job and was provided with an instant built-in support system at SGSU; she elaborates:

> Knowing about EAOP and AAP from the get go gave me a lot of security because I knew where to get a job opportunity, or just like a career opportunity, and where I could get academic and emotional help. Had I not known those things, I probably would have been a lot more stressed out than I already was…especially because I'm very hyper independent sometimes, so it can be pretty hard for me to willingly reach out for support…But going back to EAOP, it's a job that I continued all throughout my undergraduate years and now I work with a sister program…so I'm really, really grateful that I got to connect with a program and with individuals even before I got to college.

Rachel's narrative exemplifies the role her social capital played in her educational journey through the support of a trusted mentor. Her high school mentor's guidance during high school helped her apply and be admitted to SGSU. Once at SGSU, her mentor supported her transition by connecting her to student support programs. Her participation in these programs during college allowed her to discover what she wanted to focus her career on and even provided her with employment post-college.

Other students described participating in college preparation programs that facilitated their journey to SGSU. For instance, Thelma participated in Gear Up, a high school college preparation program that guided her through the entire college application process and exposed her to the reality of college life through college field trips and discussions around topics like office hours and time management. Norma also described her participation in a college access program called Thrive Scholars, saying it changed the game for her because they talked about real things she could potentially face in college like culture shock, imposter syndrome, and needing to build new study habits. Norma explained:

> When I got to SGSU it helped me in terms of my mindset, knowing I'm going to experience this and I already know how I can potentially deal with it…I know I can look for certain resources, talk to certain people. Knowing that there are things I am going to experience but I've already been prepared for them, that definitely helped.

Fatima also described the positive difference her participation in Upward Bound made in her college preparation:

> What I really, really enjoyed was that my advisor specifically, he was from the community that I was from. So I had someone that had gone through this, like he had gotten his bachelor's, he had gotten his master's and having someone that looked like me, came from my community…it was like a full circle moment kind of a thing to be like wow, like, I could really do it.

In addition to gaining knowledge of the college system, Fatima was also paired with a counselor who affirmed her identity and instilled in her the belief that she too could attend and succeed in college. Fatima also went on to describe receiving college application fee waivers, participating in visits to colleges in the East Coast, and being encouraged to submit her SGSU application, even though she was hesitant to do so because she did not think she would be admitted.

Students' social capital allowed them to access college preparation programs, which many learned about by asking counselors or upperclassmen. Others were recommended to participate by teachers and staff who perceived their potential.Through these programs, students' high school educations were supplemented and they received valuable information about applying to college and navigating college that FGSOC often do not have access to.

Students continued to draw upon their social capital once at SGSU. Evelyn discussed the role of social capital as she navigated the patriarchal structures of academia as a low-income, first-generation woman of color; she compellingly articulated:

> I applied to grad school…but before I even applied I talked to this male professor…and essentially, he was very discouraging about it and it just made me feel really bad about myself, like maybe I'm not doing enough or I should be doing something else in order to get into grad school. But later I talked to this femtor that I have and she basically said, ignore him, I'm here, so you could do it too. So it's because a Woman of Color that I even thought of applying to graduate school, and that I'm even pursuing a PhD now. So for me, it's definitely just surrounding myself with mujeres. Mujeres are the main people that have really uplifted me and elevated me and put me into like these social circles. So I'm very, very, very grateful for Women of Color. They do a lot.

Evelyn had the courage to seek a second opinion after being discouraged by a male professor from applying to graduate school. The fact that she was in touch with a current SGSU graduate student demonstrates her ability to navigate through academia and find ways to access important information. She reflects on the important role mujeres, Women of Color, have played in her educational trajectory by serving as femtors and providing encouragement through their own experiences.

Olivia also drew upon her social capital to persist at SGSU. She discussed knowing that her identity as a FGSOC would make her feel lonely, but growing to recognize that she is not alone and leaning into communities of support like YBH; she wholeheartedly shared:

> To me being first-generation just means that I'm going to feel lonely, but I've also recognized that I'm not alone, especially in being in YBH. And I said it earlier, constantly

> being surrounded by people that think like me, that look like me, that talk like me, that have similar experiences, no matter how isolated I feel, I know I'm not alone and that has always meant so much to me.

Olivia not only participated in YBH as a student, but she became a peer mentor during the remaining three years of her time at SGSU. She passionately supported cohorts of YBH students, sharing the wisdom she garnered through her own experiences.

Navigational Capital

Other students activated their navigational capital by searching for opportunities through online resources. Evelyn describes using social media to find scholarships and drawing upon her networks to gain guidance about a summer preparation program. She explains:

> Someone who's older than me from my community was accepted here, and when I got accepted, I knew she had done a summer program [Freshman Summer Program through AAP] and that they gave her a refund and I texted her about it…and she guided me through the process. But even before coming to SGSU, I started following other social media accounts on Instagram, just trying to see all the different resources that they had available…I feel like I prepared myself the best way that I knew how, through platforms that I felt very comfortable or I guess savvy with…And then also just looking it up online…I had some experience with scholarship writing and I was winning these small little scholarships, so I knew that I was doing something right in my essays. So I started looking up scholarships at SGSU too.

Evelyn was proactive in seeking resources through all means available to her. She connected with a SGSU student from her hometown and learned about a helpful summer transition program she could apply to. She also prepared financially by applying to scholarships she found by

searching online. Her skills in maneuvering through obstacles that often hinder low-income Students of Color from accessing higher education demonstrated the navigational capital she possessed.

Thelma also used social media to connect with Black SGSU students through the Black Student Group Me. She shares:

> Another thing too, the Black community at SGSU is pretty small and I would say, I was very intentional about wanting to get close to the Black community my first year. And so I would take a lot of African American Studies classes or there's a Black Student Group Me that I would always be chatting in and stuff, just to feel that sense of community my first year so by the time that I moved on to campus my second year, I felt like I already had a little bit of community. YBH too, like in that similar note, it was a learning community that I also made friends in. But definitely also being in contact with other Black [students] helped me a lot, to feel like more at home, by the time I moved in here.

Thelma's account reflects her intentional efforts to seek out racial representation within SGSU since its student population consists of only 6% Black students. Even in YBH, Thelma did not find the Black community she was seeking and leveraged her navigational capital to connect with the Black community at SGSU by taking African American studies courses and joining a GroupMe message thread for Black SGSU students.

Another way students navigated SGSU was through their strong work ethic. Several students described feeling prepared for the SGSU workload because they were used to working hard. Hope described her work ethic as characteristic of first generation and immigrant students; she explained:

> A lot of first gen and immigrant students like we're just willing to work so much harder...that drive to always want to do more and like always be looking for resources and always doing X, Y, Z things… I think it will get you really far. That's a skill that I'm really happy that I came to SGSU with.

Rendon et al. (2014) describes this type of work ethic as ganas/determination and proposed it as an additional form of capital students of color (specifically Latinas in her study) possess.

Other students referenced their former busy high school schedules filled with AP classes, clubs, sports and leadership involvement as preparing them to work hard at SGSU. Jacqueline voiced this sentiment stating:

> I felt like going into SGSU, I really thought I was prepared just because a lot of us like in high school we were doing all of these clubs, I was actually doing sports, I was managing my time really well, and I felt like okay, if I'm doing this now, once I go to SGSU, it's gonna be so good.

Noor and Valentina echoed similar experiences with taking AP and honors courses during high school and learning to study for different subjects simultaneously. They credited their full schedules in high school with preparing them for the fast-paced quarter system. Hillary also described being prepared for the workload, but not as a result of her high school experience, rather as a result of who she is:

> I was prepared in terms of like, my work ethic, I think just the ways that I do a lot of things. I realized more recently that I do way too much. I tend to sign up for things and do it if I have time available, but other people don't necessarily see free time and think it's time to do something else, like other people might take that time to relax. I'm trying to give myself more time to relax, however with coming into SGSU that did prepare me…I

> felt comfortable, I planned my schedules and I planned my daily tasks, it made it super easy for me to prioritize, and like time manage course loads and all that stuff.

Hillary's time management skills allowed her to efficiently make the most out of her time, by using up every moment. Having experience balancing a variety of responsibilities and competing tasks allowed her to effectively manage her time at SGSU and know how to prioritize her most important commitments.

Valentina shared a unique response, describing her emotional intelligence and empathy as strengths that have allowed her to navigate SGSU successfully. She elaborated:

> I think one aspect that I'm glad I came into SGSU with was my emotional intelligence, in terms of choosing to use empathy…when I'm speaking with others…because I feel like being at SGSU, there's this play hard work hard mindset. Which, I mean, I completely understand but I also feel like there's sometimes that lack of kindness towards people…I just noticed that sometimes there isn't a sense of people's humanity…I've heard instances with professors where they wouldn't grant a student an extension because they were having issues with their mental health and things like that. So I'm glad I came into SGSU, with kindness and being understanding of others' situations.

Valentina currently serves as a Resident Assistant and a peer mentor for YBH. Through both of these roles she interacts with students, supporting them as they navigate SGSU and face a variety of challenges. Her empathy and emotional intelligence have allowed her to excel in these positions and find a greater sense of purpose at SGSU.

Students' familial, social and navigational capital allowed them to apply and be admitted to SGSU, despite the educational inequalities and socioeconomic challenges they experienced. Once at SGSU, their capital allowed them to continue pushing past barriers they experienced on

campus, including lack of representation, imposter syndrome and feelings of loneliness and isolation. Yet, navigating these deeply embedded inequities should not be left to students alone. The university certainly has ethical, fiscal and historic responsibilities to acknowledge these barriers and do everything in its power to alleviate and altogether remove them.

YBH Helping Students Identify & Activate Their Knowledge & Assets

YBH played a crucial role in helping students identify and activate their knowledge and assets by creating a safe and inviting environment for FGSOC navigating the institutional barriers of a PWI. Through candid and vulnerable discussions in their YBH courses, students were able to confront challenges and find support to overcome them. Having a safe space in YBH also allowed students to show up as their full authentic selves instead of feeling pressured to present compartmentalized versions of themselves. In openly sharing intimate aspects of their experiences and identities, and receiving validation from the YBH community, students began to identify and utilize the assets and knowledge they acquired from their families, communities and previous experiences.

Refuting Institutionally-Produced Imposter Syndrome

In speaking about YBH's role as a safe space, a supportive community, and a place to belong, students discussed the imposter syndrome they experienced at SGSU and how YBH helped them address it, in order to feel more empowered and capable of succeeding. Rose discussed feeling imposter syndrome as a result of being surrounded by so many high-achieving students. She explained, "I oftentimes felt imposter syndrome being in YBH around such high achieving people, but at the same time the topics we covered healed that sentiment and made me realize that I was also high achieving in my own ways." Openly discussing imposter syndrome in her YBH seminar allowed Rose to realize that she was not alone in comparing herself to her high

achieving peers. She was also empowered to recognize her own strengths and the areas she excelled in.

Through in-depth discussions around topics like imposter syndrome, YBH fostered students' growth and allowed them to activate their assets and knowledge. For instance, Kassandra discussed the ways her YBH seminar instructor helped her recognize her value and strength. In turn, Kassandra's confidence increased and she began trusting in her ability to take on challenges; she shared:

> My YBH professor was talking about how only 11% of applicants were accepted during your year, and she kept reiterating that throughout the course. That helped me realize that it wasn't just by chance, like you were selected out of a lot of people, and that helped with my confidence. It encouraged me to not shy away from the challenge and just learn to work with it.

Having an institutional agent affirm her place at the university allowed Kassandra to believe that she had earned her place at SGSU since she was carefully selected from a large pool of competitive applicants. Her YBH instructor's affirmation allowed Kassandra to begin recognizing that she was capable of overcoming the challenges presented to her at SGSU and that she could truly succeed there. Norma also reflected on feeling validated through YBH; she stated:

> It felt really nice to be able to talk about some of the different topics that I was encountering, that my peers are encountering, like impostor syndrome you know, or how we felt underprepared because of our high schools. Being able to relate to all of that, and seeing other people feeling the same thing eased that stress because I felt like, okay I'm

not the only person who feels this way, they're also feeling similarly. That was very validating to how I felt and it just helped me feel like maybe SGSU can feel like home.

Knowing that other students were feeling the same things allowed YBH students to not blame themselves, and to instead begin identifying the institutional barriers in place that impacted them. Openly discussing their challenges also allowed students to develop a shared understanding, demonstrate empathy for each other and meaningfully encourage one another. Students shared how rare it was to be able to share their feelings vulnerably and discuss topics like imposter syndrome in a university class. They did not experience the level of vulnerability or the safe space YBH fostered in any of their other classes at SGSU. As a result, YBH provided a safe space where they could feel supported and empowered to identify and activate the assets and knowledge they carried with them.

Cultivating Students' Voices

YBH affirmed students' identities and the unique knowledge they brought with them to SGSU. It sent students the message that who they are, where they come from, and what they already know matters and is valued. Olivia shared how through YBH she began to use her voice to speak up and voice her perspective, something she was not used to doing in high school; she noted:

> YBH was the place where it was the easiest for me to speak up. I was somebody who in high school, I didn't really like to speak up that much, but a lot of the conversations in my YBH seminars were conversations I wanted to be a part of, so I was challenging myself to speak up and take up space, which is one of the biggest takeaways that I've had from YBH and it's really impacted me to this day, so I'm really grateful for that.

Olivia was moved to share her thoughts during YBH seminars because the conversations were meaningful and relevant to her. She also felt comfortable and safe to express herself among peers and instructors who cared for her and respected her. Being able to openly voice her opinions and perspectives in YBH allowed her to foster her communication skills and feel comfortable taking up space in the university classroom. She was later able to do the same in other university settings, including as a media director for a SGSU student organization and as a peer mentor for YBH.

For Hope, not having in-person social interactions for nearly two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted her social skills. Through YBH she was able to strengthen this important skill once more; she shares:

> If I want to thrive socially, academically, anything, I have to talk to people. And so I know at least in our YBH classes, I think for the first 10 or 15 minutes of class we were just randomly paired up with someone else in class, and we would just be told, okay, like leave, go and talk…and through that I ended up meeting a lot of people who grew up in a lot of similar situations to me, and that was really cool because I didn't meet that many people outside of YBH who grew up in those types of areas. It definitely just helped me with the social aspect, and just being able to create a whole conversation and just find those social skills again after the pandemic.

Similarly, Valentina described feeling nervous about interacting with others at SGSU following the pandemic, but regaining social skills through the safe space YBH created; she explains:

> I think honestly, just interacting with others in YBH was very helpful, especially after the pandemic because at least on my end, I was very nervous…it definitely helped with the

> ease of collaboration between students, because at the end of the day at SGSU you are interacting with students who may have different lived experiences and things like that. So it definitely allowed me to be more comfortable with collaborating with others, especially as a first year…I think that sense of socialization was probably the biggest takeaway and the one that ultimately helps me in the future, or even now actually.

Norma credited YBH's safe space with helping her develop the confidence needed to speak to professors and teaching assistants; she explained:

> …because we had that YBH cluster and seminar, we really got to know our TA and it normalized the concept of, you know, you can talk to your TA, they're very helpful and it eliminated that sort of dynamic of oh someone above another…it didn't feel like there was any power dynamic, it felt really comfortable and safe just asking my TA questions, you know. And that made me feel more comfortable even with other classes when I've had to go talk to the TA or even to the professor. I feel like okay, well YBH initiated this space for me to talk to them and not be afraid….to comfortably reach out if I had a question about the assignments or anything. And you know, staff will respond to students very differently, but I think it did help, I think YBH helped with my confidence building.

The initial first impression Norma had of SGSU faculty and staff was positively impacted through her YBH courses. Because she had positive experiences with professors and TAs in her YBH courses, she felt comfortable reaching out to other SGSU members, expecting them to also be supportive. Unfortunately, oftentimes students are negatively impacted by unsupportive or even discouraging interactions with faculty and staff, which taint their view of the institution and their place in it.

Noor describes losing her natural inclination to speak up and communicate openly because of the pressure she felt at SGSU to prove she deserved to be there; she shared:

> I like to think I'm an extrovert…but I feel like once I entered college, I definitely lost a lot of that. I just felt like I had to talk a certain way…a lot more professionally in these environments, and use such insane vocabulary in class spaces in order for people to accept me…Even though I'm already here, I still felt like I didn't belong here. And compared to everyone else who either had just crazy statistics or crazy SAT scores. I just felt like I had something to prove for some reason. So I think the biggest thing that YBH gave me was socializing, because when you're talking to each other, we were more laid back and definitely didn't have to put up a persona…even with the professors, I felt like I could be so real with my YBH instructors…and I was able to talk to professors and TAs outside of YBH because of the confidence and speaking abilities that I learned in YBH.

Noor's experience sheds light on the types of conversations that occur between students and the covert power dynamics at play. For instance, SAT scores are not publicly available information, and in order for Noor to know her peers' scores they would have had to disclose this information. Noor also references the "insane vocabulary" and professionalism with which her peers carried themselves at SGSU. These behaviors whether intentionally or unintentionally are used to establish dominance at SGSU, which favors and rewards students who possess this capital. In contrast, Noor describes the dynamics in YBH where she did not feel the need to prove herself or put up a persona, and instead could candidly share how she was truly feeling, without fear of being judged or seen as unfit to be at SGSU. Like Norma, Noor's positive experiences in YBH also equipped her with confidence to communicate with professors and TAs outside of SGSU even despite her initial apprehensions.

Several other students also attributed gains in their communication skills to their time in YBH. They valued learning the importance of communication and how to communicate effectively through increased opportunities for interaction and collaboration with YBH peers, staff and faculty. As a result, students indicated increased confidence when talking to staff and professors during office hours or in the classroom. Stephanie expressed the ways YBH helped her learn the value of communicating her ideas:

> There were certain times that I just felt I should stay out of the conversation or that it's not my part, or like I just can't really contribute to it. But through YBH and meeting with like, peer mentors, I think I really learned how to communicate with others and to see the importance in communication, even if it's a minor thing or something that I find trivial, but it's still important.

Learning early on that her voice matters, allowed Stephanie to feel comfortable taking up space in her university classrooms, instead of undermining her contributions. Through her one-on-one meetings with YBH peer mentors, she was affirmed and reminded that she is as worthy as any other student to share her thoughts, ask a question, and engage with her professors.

Isabella also reflected on how YBH helped her expand upon her thoughts, which ultimately led her to better understand her own interests. She explained:

> I think what YBH did really well…if I had a thought, to just kind of expand on it. I have a tendency to not really go deeper into what it is that I need…and so I think the discussions that we had helped, and allowed me to elaborate on the thoughts that I have, elaborate on why I think a certain way. Which then I think helps a lot with figuring out my own interests, academically and professionally, and then helps explain why I liked

> research and why I liked getting into things that really had to do with questioning things and really go into the why of things.

Through YBH seminar discussions, Isabella cultivated her critical thinking skills and learned how to effectively expand on her thoughts. It was common for YBH instructors to have students share their thoughts to a question with a peer first, before allowing them to share with the larger group. Students like Isabella appreciated having a low-stakes opportunity to unravel their thoughts with one person, before being asked to articulate their point of view with an entire classroom full of students. Being able to pair-share also allowed students to ask each other clarification questions and give each other feedback. These types of intentional interactions that characterize YBH seminars, allowed students to actively foster their communication skills and reflect on what they actually believed about a broad range of topics. Through these critical reflections, Isabella was able to better understand her own academic and professional interests, and take steps to achieving her goals. For instance, Isabella pursued a research opportunity in the environmental justice field, which was personally meaningful to her having grown up in a food desert and being directly impacted by industrial pollution.

Similar to Isabella, Denise also shared about YBH's impact on her critical thinking skills and helping her question why things are the way they are; she reflected:

> One of the things that started getting my mind working in a different way was with YBH when they were explaining the differences between universities [California Master Plan]. It strengthened the skill of asking questions about why things are the way they are…It made me start to think critically about, why is my experience at SGSU different from my now boyfriend, who's at a state school, where their motto is learn by doing? Here I've never done anything, we're a research school you know. So it just made more sense and it

> started the practice of asking real questions and knowing that there's actual real answers for why your experiences are different.

Through one of the YBH seminar classes focused on explaining the California Master Plan to allow students to understand the consequences and opportunities of being at a research institution, Denise began to think more critically about "why things are the way they are." She was able to recognize the intentional design behind institutions, like colleges and universities, and realize that they were not neutral sites, but rather had a specific mission and purpose. She was then able to relate what she learned to her own life, comparing her experience at SGSU to her boyfriend's experience at a state school. Denise's inherent critical thinking was fostered through the topics discussed in YBH seminars and gave her the confidence to share her own thoughts, opinions and passions, even those she did not previously perceive as valid for academic settings. She shared:

> I remember for the first [YBH] project that we did for Fall quarter about sharing something we were passionate about, I was talking about anime. And (laughs), after that I was so affirmed, because it kind of introduced and reaffirmed the idea for me that college is really about whatever you want it to be... And YBH was the first place that confirmed that for me. And so in a later class we were supposed to analyze different languages in some setting, and I ended up analyzing the speech patterns and chats of a twitch drag streamer. And I was writing some words in that essay that are not appropriate for professional college, but just because it's not professional, doesn't mean it's not part of the experience…and that first experience with YBH affirmed confidence in sharing thoughts and opinions, whatever they might be, and that a lot of things that I didn't really consider to be valid university topics, *actually are.*

YBH gave Denise permission to make her college education relevant and personally meaningful by affirming that her passions and interests were valid and welcomed in a university setting. As a result of her positive experience in YBH, Denise felt assured in passionately pursuing her interests through other university assignments, instead of filtering them to be appropriate for a normative university setting.

Identity Affirmation and Development

Another theme that arose in response to what personal strengths YBH helped students cultivate was identity affirmation and development, which included self love and acceptance, vulnerability, having personal empathy, and learning how to advocate for oneself. Kassandra reflected on the e-portfolio project she did in YBH and the ways doing an assignment focused solely on who she is helped her define her individual identity and gain a sense of collective identity as a first generation student of color, since not many spaces on campus reflected her Hispanic identity. She explained:

> …I went back, and I found my [YBH] e-portfolio, and I just reviewed it and I realized that it was a page about me, and I feel like nowhere else are we encouraged to just like, be ourselves and define our identity and just put it all on a page. So I think that's one of the things that YBH really helped with, especially the first year, it's not only individual identity, but also collective identity, because it's kind of a joke that I make that like demographically LA is pretty Hispanic, but I feel like I don't really see that reflected on campus…So knowing that YBH happens annually, and there's other people who are also coming from shared experiences…I think there was comfort in that.

Kassandra felt validated through a YBH assignment that required her to create a google site showcasing who she is, what her goals are, and what her interests and involvements are. Being

able to self-reflect provided Kassandra with an increased sense of self. By seeing her peers' projects, she also gained a sense of community since other students shared her identities, values and interests. Kassandra addressed the ironic under-representation of Hispanic students at SGSU, given that its surrounding city is largely Hispanic. Through YBH, Kassandra's ethnic identity was affirmed and validated; she felt comfort in knowing that other Hispanic students at SGSU could access a safe and affirming space like YBH.

Stephanie also reflected on her identity affirmation and developing self-acceptance through the topics discussed in YBH. She shared:

> I wrote self-love…I think that's a really hard thing…but I think through YBH, and I said this earlier, the fact that they do a lot of workshops that cater to understanding yourself and understanding like your interests and goals and why you're feeling what you're feeling…it caters to the self love that you find in the process. Maybe self acceptance might be a little better, but YBH really helped me with that.

Through YBH, Stephanie learned to be more self-aware, and in turn to better care for herself. Having a designated space to reflect on her goals and how she was feeling allowed Stephanie to prioritize her well-being along her higher education journey and realize all that she had overcome and achieved. Similarly, Hillary discussed the way YBH allowed her to cultivate self acceptance, specifically by helping her see her empathetic nature as a strength, rather than a weakness. She contemplated:

> One of the things that YBH helped me realize I need to cultivate is my own personal empathy. Just like Valentina was saying, sometimes that's one thing that people just don't take into consideration, like other people's situations…So I feel like knowing that empathy can be considered a strength, as opposed to a weakness, because I tend to view

> myself as really sensitive…But YBH was the first time where I was even told that my empathy was a strength, as opposed to a weakness. Like I always saw it as a weakness, as hurting me or hurting others, as opposed to me having more understanding for people's situations and like compassion for others' experiences.

Hillary experienced a powerful reframing of her inherent empathetic nature. She had never before been told that her empathy was a strength and had learned to view it as a weakness. YBH allowed her to show herself empathy and compassion and to cultivate an area of her personality she had previously felt guilty for having.

Zoey also reflected on how YBH helped her prioritize her wellbeing by fostering her ability to advocate for herself. She discussed:

> I learned advocacy skills...it can be a very layered response, because advocating for myself and being more in touch with what I need and what my capacities are, and how to be more honest in communicating that. And then advocacy skills more generally for my communities…the first step is advocating for yourself before you can advocate for others. So YBH was encouraging in that sense to always tell your story, tell your narrative, where you're coming from, and really, *really* valuing everyone's perspective…so through that I was able to gain a bit more practice with being able to advocate for myself and then for others…YBH helped me realize that it starts with you first. And that's not a selfish thing, and it's not like a self-centered thing, but it starts with you.

One of Zoey's motivations for pursuing higher education was being able to give back to her small, agricultural community. As a high school student, she actively participated in community organizations and was an advocate for social justice and equitable educational opportunities for marginalized communities. She even participated in a school walk out her senior year to protest

teacher pay cuts. During her time in YBH she learned that in order to be an effective advocate for her community, she also needed to advocate for herself and prioritize her own needs. YBH allowed Zoey to foster her desire to give back to her community by providing her with a safe and affirming place to share her story and be reminded that she matters beyond what she can contribute to her community, SGSU, or society at large.

Similarly, Manuela also reflected on gravitating to YBH because it was a community-oriented program, and how through participation in YBH she strengthened that aspect of her identity. She explained:

> I think that I unconsciously gravitated towards YBH in the first place because I was already somebody that was very community oriented. Like the whole reason why I came into SGSU is because I had smaller college access groups that supported me along the way…And then I remember there was this one activity that we did our fall quarter and it was kind of like a Myers Briggs test [Clifton Strengths Finder Assessment] and connectedness was the number one for me. And so I think, in a really funny way, a test was able to just provide a sense of again, like legitimization that this is a part of who I am. And so because of it, I think I shy away even less now from communicating that and putting it out into the world.

Norma talked about cultivating confidence in herself and her growth journey, so much so that she was inspired to return as a peer mentor for YBH the following year. She shared:

> I also think YBH helped with confidence building, it allowed me to just be comfortable with my growth and allow myself to feel like, okay I can do this. I can do these activities, I can be vulnerable in these spaces, and it made me, you know, even want to come back the following year as a peer mentor for the following cohort and know that I can share

this knowledge, which I hadn't thought about in the beginning. But I think that was really nice.

Students candidly discussed the growth they experienced through YBH. Their accounts demonstrate unique aspects of their identities that YBH, through its activities, topics, people, culture and environment, helped them view as valuable. Whether it was being empathetic, or valuing connection, being an advocate, or their identity as a first-generation student of color, through YBH students learned to see their identities as a strength, not only better preparing them to navigate SGSU, but also allowing them to feel affirmed, valued and empowered as individuals.

YBH Program Document Analysis

As several students mentioned, YBH affirmed students' identities and interests and empowered them to identify and activate their knowledge and assets through YBH seminar discussions, assignments and projects. Using document analysis, I analyzed YBH seminar syllabi, seminar assignments, newsletters, participants' final projects, a YBH infographic, the YBH commitment agreement that students sign, a YBH assessment report and emails from students choosing to withdraw from YBH.

The You Belong Here Seminar

The year-long YBH seminar is a central part of the small learning community since it is where students spend the most time together. The seminar is typically taught by current graduate students of color, who are often first-generation students themselves and/or from low-income backgrounds that reflect the demographics of YBH students. While the YBH seminar curriculum is modified year to year to reflect the current instructors' teaching philosophies, at its core, the vision and goals remain the same. In analyzing the seminar syllabi, the values of community

building, collaboration, and student empowerment are evident. The course description indicates the goal of creating a space for YBH scholars to "cultivate community and support, as well as develop critical strategies to achieve undergraduate excellence at a top-tier Research I Institution." Moreover, it also states the aim to:

> Engage students collaboratively with a diverse community of scholars, support their understanding and application of effective learning learning strategies, guide students in the practice of growth mindset, aid students in navigating the complex structure of the University, empower students to think critically about diversity and their identity, and equip students with the knowledge to be fully aware of their value to the intellectual fabric of the institution as contributors to innovative research scholarship.

Some of the topics covered week to week include: academic self management and communities of support, social identities and what motivates you to be at SGSU, the value of mentorship in your undergraduate experience, major and career exploration, growth mindset, exploring your strengths, community based research, and self care. In observing the seminar topics, it is apparent why students were able to develop strong relationships among each other and with the YBH seminar instructors and peer mentors, since the topics invite students to reflect on their experiences at SGUS, identities, and interests.

I also analyzed the instructors' powerpoint class presentations and lesson plans and noticed ongoing opportunities for students to journal during class, share their thoughts with a partner or in a small group, participate in ice breaker activities, participate in panel discussions with invited speakers, and engage in an active, multimodal learning experience. Affirmation and validation were embedded throughout the curriculum as well. Instructors often began class with an affirming quote and several activities involved helping students recognize and identify their

strengths, reflect on the value of their identities, and connect students with successful individuals who reflected their identities. Assignments and projects were also geared towards validating students, for instance, an I Am From poem assignment in which students reflected on cherished parts of their backgrounds and identities. The YBH Talk project also gave students an opportunity to choose a topic that was meaningful to them and present it in front of the class in a "Ted-Talk" format.

YBH Legacy Projects

Students' final assignment in the Spring term seminar consisted of a Legacy Project through which students passed down advice and wisdom to the following YBH cohort. I analyzed four of the participants' Legacy Projects: Clara, Stephanie, Noor, and Zoey's. Clara's project organized her advice into a presentation about what students could do before arriving at SGSU, how to use the online platform where all their classes are housed, appreciating YBH, academic tips, and the importance of self care. Her presentation was riddled with encouragement and advice on preparing mentally, not being afraid to ask for help, acknowledging imposter syndrome, and focusing on what personal needs while at SGSU.

Stephanie's project consisted of a collection of poems that she describes as highlighting key lessons she learned. Her introduction states, "I was never able to simply be. I was always on the go, overwhelmed with anxiety and constantly doing something. This year I was able to learn to stop, belong, ground myself, take up space." Her first poem is titled "Belong" and is accompanied by an image of a young woman looking dazed, with a mask covering her nose and mouth. An excerpt of her poem reads: "The girl who fought to belong. Covered her mouth to be liked, Prayed to be forgiven, Watched to fit in. The girl who was taught she wasn't enough, But was too much." Her second poem is titled "Being" and is paired with a line drawing of three

abstract faces. A portion of the poem includes: “Afraid to be a disappointment/ Afraid to fail/ Just breathe/ You’ve proudly watched and claimed your rebirth/ Reclaim your name Reclaim your story.” Her last poem is titled “Take Up Space” and includes an image of two children embracing a mother figure; a portion of it states: “But as hard as it is, learn to be/ Unapologetically take up space/ Embrace every space and make it your own.” Stephanie’s project revealed the inner turmoil she experienced and had begun to overcome. Themes from her project included shame, belonging, fear, reclaiming power and self-identity.

Noor created her project in collaboration with two other students; it was titled, “Hack Your Way Through SGSU.” It consisted of slides with an early 2000s computer game theme. Their first slide included images of each group member along with a caption detailing their major, hometown and the activities they participated in at SGSU. Their second slide was titled “Why are we doing this” and provided a short introduction stating:

> Your first year in college, often in a new city away from your family, can be incredibly difficult. It’s a big change! But you are not alone. Everyone around you here is also new to this, and you’re all experiencing this milestone together. You will make it through, we promise. These are a few tips of things we wish we knew before our first year based on our experience!

Their remaining slides covered the following topics: extracurriculars, academics, social, law/career, and miscellaneous, and were filled with tips and strategies for enrolling in classes that often get filled up quickly, accessing practice exams from a test bank on campus, ways to study abroad, how to research and join clubs, and even a map with activities, restaurants and sites to visit in the neighboring towns.

Lastly, Zoey co-created her project with her twin sister, Zara, who was also part of YBH. Their project consisted of a collection of poems written by Zoey with accompanying hand drawn pictures by Zara. The poetry collection was titled *The older sister to the older sister: una colección de consejos* and its front page featured an image of a young woman with flowing dark hair, bushy eyebrows, pronounced lips and a neck shaped by an image of two mountains coming together with a patterned sun in the middle. Zoey's poems included stanzas in English and in Spanish. The first poem was titled "Este es tu Canto" and read:

Make it a big deal

You, a student at SGSU

They're privileged to have you

Your mere presence is a contribution

A threat to some/ A pleasure for others

No time to doubt

But that's okay, it's in your blood to be adaptive

Make your presence known

Own your classrooms

Be assertive in your speech

Ya no estás bajo la garganta de la cultura

Tu contribución es importante, it matters

The themes of the other poems include: grappling with feelings of loneliness, independence, freedom, nature, internal strength, self love, and protecting yourself by not feeling the need to always share your stories of suffering. Zoey and Zara's project reflected the pride they took in their Mexican heritage, including speaking Spanish and connecting to ancestral wisdom and

nature. They depicted themes reflective of FGSOC's experiences in college and demonstrated their empowered selves by taking pride in their accomplishments, recognizing the value of their presence and their voice, and not being afraid to establish boundaries to protect themselves. Some quotes are long and I suggest using some smaller parts of them with your analysis.

Student Learning Outcomes Infographic & Assessment Report

In addition to YBH seminar curriculum materials and students' YBH legacy projects, I also analyzed some of the program's assessment materials, including an assessment report and and accompanying student learning outcome infographic. The assessment report was published in 2022 by the YBH Assessment Specialist and the Executive Director of the Academic Center where YBH is housed. The accompanying infographic was also created in 2022 with the help of the YBH steering committee. Both documents were disseminated widely to YBH staff, advisors, and upper level academic administrators who fund YBH. The goal of the assessment was to determine whether or not YBH was accomplishing its goals. The program assessment concluded that YBH "has a highly positive impact on URM and first-generation students in regard to SLOs positively associated with undergraduate academic success as well as areas of high importance to the University, such as retention and timely progress toward degree."

The double-sided YBH infographic depicting what students can expect to gain from participating in YBH lists 7 Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs): 1) Feeling academically supported, 2) Academic engagement, 3) Knowledge & use of campus resources, 4) Relationship-building with peers, staff, advisors and faculty, 5) Sense of belonging, 6) Identity affirmation & development, and 7) Resilience. On the back side it lists past YBH participant quotes organized under each of the SLOs. These infographics are included in recruitment letters that are mailed to students invited to apply to the program. They are also used at tabling events, shared with

campus partners, and disseminated to relevant stakeholders to learn more about the program. These SLOs are supported by student survey data discussed in an assessment report of YBH cohorts from 2019-2022. The report indicates that "SLOs for the program were also developed in alignment with higher education literature pointing to the importance of each area in supporting URM and first-generation students." It also states that each SLO "was properly supported by program curriculum and components." The report goes on to discuss findings of statistical tests that show "stronger gains in all SLOs" for YBH students compared to a control group:

> For Knowledge and use of campus resources, participants' average gain from pre- to post-test was 1.65 whereas the control groups' was 0.41 (on a scale of 1-5). This pattern held true for Relationship- building with peers, staff, advisors, and faculty (1.29 vs. 0.28), Sense of belonging at SGSU (1.15 vs. 0.25), Feeling academically supported (0.80 vs. 0.11), Identity affirmation and development (0.79 vs. 0.23), Academic engagement (1.03 vs. 0.33) and Resilience (1.04 vs. 0.35).

The findings from the assessment report corroborate the findings from this study, particularly for the student learning outcomes of relationship building, sense of belonging and identity affirmation and development.

YBH Commitment Agreement

Another program document that was helpful in contextualizing YBH students' experience in YBH was the commitment agreement. YBH students are given a commitment agreement they must review and sign with their YBH advisor at the beginning of the academic school year. The agreement outlines both what is expected of students, as well as what YBH commits to support students with. The student commitments include enrolling into the required YBH courses each term, meeting with YBH Peer Mentors twice per term, meeting with an Undergraduate Writing

Center Peer Learning Facilitator once per term, attending at least one YBH social event per term, meeting with their YBH Advisor at least once per term, communicating with program staff if they cannot attend a class, workshop, or event, and being respectful of themselves, their peers, faculty and staff at SGSU. In return, the agreement states that YBH commits to providing spaces and opportunities for students to explore their personal growth, connect to additional resources, receive mentorship, and be empowered to become independent and self-motivated, as well as a $400 textbook reimbursement.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Through this study I explored the experiences of First Generation Students of Color at a prestigious RI University. My goal was to capture the assets and knowledge they utilized to persist and succeed in their educational pursuits, and to investigate how a small learning community aided them in this purpose. I used an asset-based theoretical framework informed by Community Cultural Wealth and Funds of Knowledge to guide this study. This theoretical framework allowed me to analyze participants' experiences and identify the assets they carried and leveraged. In this chapter, I discuss findings derived from the study and their significance in light of existing theoretical frameworks and bodies of literature. In particular I explore three key findings related to institutionally produced imposter syndrome, ethical costs of pursuing higher education for FGSOC, and insights on reverse transfer strategizing. Lastly, I also address this study's implications for research, policy and practice as it relates to supporting First Generation Students of Color's access, success and persistence in higher education and beyond.

A Vignette of FGSOC's Lived Experiences

This study provides a window into the lives of First Generation Students of Color as they begin their higher education journeys. On paper, these students are high achieving. They have managed to take countless AP & honors courses, rack up high enough SAT scores without private tutoring, lead their former high schools as student body presidents, excel in sports, art, and music, make a positive difference in their communities through service and activism, all while providing support to their families as sisters, cousins, aunts, and daughters. These seem to be the baseline qualifications to be considered a competitive college applicant nowadays. In

striving to merit college admission, these students begin to see themselves through the eyes of the university and reduce themselves to numbers and letters. It is no surprise then, that upon finally achieving their long hoped-for dream, they look around in dismay and realize they are far from home, do not have any friends, feel out of place, and may fail their first midterm. They sit quietly in class, jotting down terms to look up after lecture as their peers confidently offer their thoughts using eloquent academic jargon. After class they strike up a conversation with a classmate who feigns embarrassment over getting a 1450 on the SAT, while all their friends were in the 99th percentile. Meanwhile back at home, their mom just lost her job and is worried about making next month's rent payment on time. As they walk back to their dorm, they see a banner that reads, "SGSU welcomes your 1st gen background, citizenship status, ethnicity, national origin, race." This vignette combines accounts participants shared in this study in an effort to illuminate the discrepancies FGSOC experience on prestigious college campuses that actively recruit diverse students, yet fail to enact true *servingness* (Garcia, 2017).

Institutionally Produced Imposter Syndrome

While existing research would typically label students' feelings of doubt, inadequacy, and illegitimacy as imposter *syndrome*, this medical term denotes that something is wrong with students themselves (Clance & Imes, 1978). Early foundational studies on imposter syndrome did in fact blame the individual for experiencing this feeling, linking imposter syndrome to early child-rearing practices, gender, introversion, fear of failure, dread of evaluation and a host of other personal attributes (Kolligian, & Sternberg, 1991). On the contrary, this study garners evidence that these feelings are induced by the institution, and therefore I coin the term *institutionally produced* imposter syndrome to reflect this important nuance. I argue that institutionally produced imposter syndrome is a symptom of the institutional racism and elitism

embedded within our higher education system (Museus, Ledesma & Parker, 2015). While racism and elitism are often covert and invisible, this study demonstrates the ways the invisible becomes visible and seeps into students' experiences. Students blatantly referred to SGSU as a predominantly white institution and referenced how challenging it was to find other students who looked like them, spoke like them, and shared their backgrounds. They discussed the pressure they felt to perform academically, reflected on not meeting cultural and socioeconomic norms, mourned the lack of faculty of color teaching their classes and pointed to moments of invalidation by faculty, staff and peers. Experiences such as these combined and resulted in students' institutionally produced imposter syndrome.

Ethical Costs of Pursuing Higher Education for FGSOC

Even though students grappled with institutionally produced imposter syndrome, they in no way assumed the role of a passive victim and therefore should not be thought of as such. As students wrestled with overwhelming emotions, they began to actively strategize and perform a cost benefit analysis. My data demonstrate that students not only weighed the financial costs of remaining at SGSU, but also considered non-monetary costs, particularly psychological and ethical costs (Morton, 2019). Jennifer Morton (2019) introduced the idea that strivers (students from underrepresented backgrounds who seek upward mobility through education) must not only deal with the staggering financial costs of college, but with an arguably even greater cost that is rarely discussed: an ethical cost. Ethical costs comprise the painful sacrifices strivers must make in their educational pursuits, such as having to choose between being present for their family or remaining focused and diligent in their academic studies in order to succeed. These sacrifices are considered ethical because they should not have to be made, since "relationships with family and friends, connections to one's community and one's sense of identity" give life value and

meaning and no one should have to sacrifice them in order to obtain an education (Morton, 2019, p. 8). Yet, this is a choice too many First-Generation Students of Color have to make during their time in college because of the institutional structures in place.

Insights on Reverse Transfer

This study contributes to Morton's (2019) initial research by unveiling students' thought process as they weigh the ethical costs of remaining at a prestigious RI university. In realizing the psychological and ethical costs at stake, students considered leaving SGSU and reverse transferring to a community college where they would be closer to their families and in an environment that better understood and supported them. Noor, for instance, shared that nearly every day during her first year she considered transferring to a community college in the East Coast where more people looked like her. She also reflected on being able to save money by attending a community college for two years and then transferring back to a baccalaureate-granting institution. Zoey also realized the ethical costs of remaining at SGSU upon not receiving an extension for an exam after undergoing surgery. Her professor's complete disregard for her wellbeing and lack of empathy led her to take two terms off to carefully consider whether or not she wanted to continue her education at SGSU. Similarly, Fatima shared feeling like a failure aftering having to drop a class and pondering all summer long on not returning to SGSU in the fall and instead transferring to a state school where she would be much closer to home. Norma also reflected on whether she wanted to be at SGSU and considered enduring one year and then transferring to a community college closer to home.

This data not only reveals the ethical costs students grapple with, but centers the ways they critically strategize about reverse transferring, an area in the literature on decision making that is rarely discussed. The limited research that explores reverse transfer typically attributes

students' decisions to academic problems, unclear academic goals or financial costs (Kajstura & Keim, 1992; Lee, 2022). What's more, these studies rarely center FGSOC, whose unique experiences in college require specialized attention. This study contributes important insights about high-achieving First Generation Students of Color whose motives for considering departing from the institution are a result of the institutionally produced imposter syndrome they experience and the ethical and psychological costs associated with pursuing a higher education degree at a prestigious university.

Small Learning Community Counterspace

In the midst of institutionally produced imposter syndrome wrought on by institutional racism and elitism, FGSOC pointed to the YBH learning community as the primary reason for continuing at SGSU even after weighing the ethical costs of doing so. By welcoming students into a safe space where they could discuss their challenges, fears, and insecurities, YBH empowered students to identify and activate their assets, cultivate their voices, validate their identities and reflect on and reframe who they are. While most research on small learning communities has focused on white students and explored quantitative outcomes, such as academic performance through grades, retention, and graduation rates (Love, 2012), this study contributes to the literature through its qualitative documentation of the experiences of FGSOC. Additionally, this study offers a new perspective on small learning communities by viewing them as potential counter spaces for marginalized students. The concept of a counter space is theorized as an academic and social site where deficit ideas about People of Color can be problematized and challenged in order to create a positive campus racial climate for FGSOC (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Viewing small learning communities like YBH as counter spaces highlights the

potential they have to foster an environment where students feel validated, supported, and can form important social connections that can positively impact their college experience.

Implications

This study invites us to imagine a different reality for FGSOC in prestigious higher education institutions, one in which pursuing academic advancement does not come at such high ethical and psychological costs. Small learning communities are one of the viable solutions to begin addressing the challenges this study sheds light on. Undeniably, more must be done to alter the way higher education institutions operate and who they serve. We must center the experiences of FGSOC and ensure institutions are serving their needs intentionally.

Institutional Validation

Indeed small learning communities can be effectively leveraged to provide targeted institutional support to FGSOC. These initiatives must not be implemented in place of campus-wide reform efforts, since the number of students impacted is constrained. However, when designed and implemented with intentionality, small learning communities can have a lasting impact on a campus' institutional culture. Important lessons for institutions that want to implement or improve existing small learning communities can be learned from the YBH model. In the words of Kassanra, one of the students in this study: "These types of programs are really important for students with our backgrounds; I feel like there should be more and they should get more funding or credit because I think there's really important work to be done and it's really good for retention rates. I don't know what our experiences would have been like had we not had the opportunity to grow and learn in this space our first year."

A key component of YBH was incorporating validation from institutional agents such as instructors, peer mentors, staff, advisors and other campus stakeholders. Validation is especially

important during students' first year enrolled in a university as they navigate a new environment that sends them one of two messages: you belong here and are capable of succeeding here or you do not belong here and you cannot succeed here. These messages are sent subtly, covertly, consciously and unconsciously and through various messengers. Through these messages, and the agglomeration of collected experiences at the university, students engage in the important process of negotiation, creation, and reinvention of their identities. Validation theory (Rendon, 1994) corroborates the positive impact intentional validation of students' agency, identities and self-worth has on their college success.

For example, the way a first-year student makes sense of and experiences obtaining an unexpected low grade will be influenced by other experiences within that campus. If for instance, the student has observed that they are one of few students from their racial/ethnic background in their classes, if they are not able to form relationships with peers as effortlessly as others seem to do, if they do not see their race/ethnicity represented among the professors they are learning with, they can come to interpret the experience of receiving a low grade as an indication that they do not belong and cannot succeed within that environment. The experience of getting a low grade can shape the way a student sees themselves and they can come to see themselves as unintelligent, incapable, fraudulent, and unable to complete college, as was the case for some participants who experienced institutionally produced imposter syndrome in this study. Indeed, identity is negotiated, co-constructed, and connected to people, social institutions, cultural beliefs, activities and contexts, and as such, experiences within the college campus will directly influence how college students perceive and present themselves, for better or for worse (Esteban-Guitart, 2012). If the student, on the other hand, has experienced positive interactions and validation within the college environment, these will serve as protective factors, such that when

the student receives a low grade, the student will not interpret the experience as an indication of their inadequacy, but rather as separate from their identity. The student can resort to attributing the low grade to the environment, such as the professor not reviewing the material thoroughly enough, or not getting sufficient sleep the night before the exam. Experience is subjective after all, as Vygotsky (1978) reminds us, and therefore the way a student experiences, perceives, and interprets all of the micro and macro instances that make up a college career will vary greatly.

The example above is based on literature on FGSOC's experiences in higher education. It illustrates the way lived experiences powerfully shape students' identities, and as a result the role the environment (i.e. college campus) can play in shaping students' identities. This reality highlights the value of intentional validation, which was a key component of YBH programming. Through the YBH seminar, curriculum, and programming, participants not only received external validation from institutional agents but were also guided in validating themselves by recognizing their assets. Importantly, students participated in YBH during their first year and therefore began receiving validation early on during their first week of the term and throughout their entire first year of college. Validation must occur early on since students' first year in college is especially challenging and consequential to their wellness, success and persistence. The YBH learning community was also predicated on the understanding that the institution and its institutional agents are responsible for proactively and intentionally supporting students and being the initiators. YBH instructors, advisors, and staff reached out to students instead of waiting for students to go to them. Through the YBH model, the institution's role shifted from being passive to being proactive, and not only offering student services but taking proactive measures to ensure students actually took advantage of the services. For instance, several YBH assignments and class seminars involved students researching campus resources, visiting student

resource centers, and having representatives from different student support offices join class sessions to engage with students directly. These initiatives allowed YBH to bridge the gap between services students paid for and students who were unaware these services existed or unsure how to access them effectively.

While YBH had a positive impact on students' college experiences, it did not prevent them from encountering the effects of institutionally produced imposter syndrome. Therefore, it is also critical for higher education institutions to reflect on the covert means of validation or invalidation that occur as soon as students step foot onto their campuses. Validation can occur for students when walking around campus and seeing culturally relevant symbols, interacting with advisors who express belief and confidence in their hopes and dreams, seeing themselves represented in the curriculum, and being involved in research labs where faculty scaffold learning opportunities for students to witness their own growth. Students may experience validating moments when entering classrooms where professors call them by name and pronounce their names correctly, or when interacting with faculty and staff who become mentors and offer to meet with them outside of the classroom, in cafeterias or patio areas, in an effort to acknowledge their shared humanity and dismantle power dynamics.

On the other hand if students arrive at the university and are met with an environment that does not represent them and overlooks the assets they bring, they can experience cognitive dissonance, an uncomfortable mental state of conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviors that leads to changes in an effort to reduce or eliminate the discrepancy (Festinger, 1957). For instance, a FGSOC who has dedicated at the very least the last several years preparing to gain admission to a university they deem their "dream school," and arrives to the campus only to find that what they are studying, who they are interacting with, and what is valued on that campus, does not

reflect any of their personal interests, values, history, culture and background, will have to make a change to resolve the dissonance between who they are and who they perceive the university to be. The student formerly believed that who they are and who the university is aligned, and as a result that continuing their education at that institution would be congruent. Upon discovering a discrepancy between their identity and the university's identity, the student can: 1) give up their identity and assimilate to the institution, as some researchers erroneously deem necessary in order to succeed or 2) give up the institution by departing from the academic goals they had set for themselves in order to preserve their identity. Indeed representation matters and an institution is responsible for how it presents itself to students. When students depart from an institution they are mistakenly viewed as incapable, when in reality they are all too often pushed out of the university because the assets they bring are not valued.

Future research should investigate the internal and external ways higher education institutions validate or invalidate FGSOC. Careful attention to campus infrastructure, symbols, messaging, and artifacts can reveal subtle forms of validation or invalidation that contribute to dismantling or upholding institutionally produced imposter syndrome. Researchers should also explore the ways FGSOC experience validation through higher education initiatives such as small learning communities geared towards this population. Exploring different types of learning communities across diverse higher education institutions (in terms of public, private etc.) can further elucidate key components of learning communities that should be implemented as a means of supporting FGSOC's success. Such accounts can richly inform programs and policies established to support this student population by portraying their needs and indicating effective ways institutions can champion their success.

Asset-Based Curriculum

Validation can also occur for students through the curriculum taught in their college courses. The curriculum taught in YBH reflected the asset-based frameworks used in this study and can provide important insights. By helping students identify and activate their community cultural wealth, institutions, small learning communities, and even college preparation programs can ensure FGSOC have community cultural wealth "reserves" that can serve "as a form of protection from encounters with microaggressions and marginalization" (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2023, p. 1479). Knowing that FGSOC will experience institutionally produced imposter syndrome, institutional racism, and elitism, intentional efforts to equip students with the knowledge of this reality and asset based frameworks to combat it are fundamentally significant. Learning communities should also intentionally equip students to face the psychological and ethical costs that will accompany their educational journey. Facilitating discussions around the constant negotiations they must make between advancing their educational objectives and remaining present and supportive in their family and community environments will allow students to name their experiences, realize they are not alone, and navigate difficult decisions with the support of a community.

Enacting Servingness

For institutions like SGSU that are in the process of becoming Hispanic Serving Institutions, it should be troubling to read that students referred to their campus as a predominantly white institution even though 21% of SGSU students are Hispanic. Beyond Latinx and low-income student enrollment, in order to truly be a Hispanic *Serving* Institution, institutions like SGSU must demonstrate servingness through organizational outcomes (producing equitable graduation, graduate school enrollment and job placement outcomes for its Latinx students) and through organizational culture (community engagement opportunities, a

positive campus climate and support programs) (Garcia, 2017). Servingness must also be characterized by empowering First Generation Students of Color to believe in their capabilities, draw on their cultural assets and engage in the process of "gaining resources and competencies that allow for control over one's life and achieving one's goals" (Cuellar, Segundo, & Munoz, 2018, p. 86).

Faculty of Color Mentorship

An additional important aspect of servingness and empowerment for FGSOC, and WOC specifically, is mentorship from female faculty of color. Research confirms that ethnic and gender matching in faculty-student mentoring relationships is correlated to more enrolled semesters, more units completed, higher GPAs, higher graduation rates and a higher percentage of students entering a campus graduate program (Campbell & Campbell, 2007). The literature has also established the positive benefits of increasing diversity in faculty positions for FGSOC, including higher graduation rates (Stout, Archie, Cross & Carmen, 2018). Yet, hardly any change in increasing faculty diversity has occurred since 2013 (Aguirre, 2023) and 81% of professors at U.S. colleges are white (Davis & Fry, 2020). With knowledge that FGSOC are more likely to establish and benefit from mentorship relationships with faculty of color, it is imperative that institutions proactively recruit, hire and support faculty of color, who must often navigate hostile workplace environments, unvalued scholarship, and barriers to promotion in the tenure process (Settles, Jones, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2021).

Evelyn's account of being dismissed by a white male faculty underscores the importance of culturally competent faculty of color representation. Through a single conversation, this faculty member was able to cast doubt and fear into Evelyn's aspiration to apply to graduate school. Instead of recognizing her goals as aspirational capital and commending her for

overcoming countless barriers to be at SGSU, he only made surface-level assumptions based on his limited perception of her intellectual abilities. Faculty must undergo cultural competence and implicit bias training to avoid making broad assumptions based on faulty stereotypes. They must be taught to recognize and identify diverse assets FGSOC carry and the ways these can be used to stimulate their success. Oftentimes a student's first introduction to the university is through the classroom and therefore faculty must take seriously the weight they carry as ambassadors of the institution for students. Faculty must carefully navigate their interactions with students, especially with students from communities that have historically been marginalized from higher education.

Graduate Student Mentors

Evelyn's narrative also sheds light on the pivotal role even just one supportive mentor can have. In turning to a current woman of color graduate student, Evelyn's graduate school aspirations were reaffirmed. Her femtor dispelled the doubt the faculty member had cast on her and propelled her to apply and be admitted to several doctoral programs. More university programs should focus on strengthening connections between undergraduate and graduate students of color, who can serve as mentors. In light of the regretful reality that not many faculty of color occupy RI institutions, and those who do are often overworked, graduate students of color can play an important role in supplementing undergraduate students' access to academia. Through their mentorship, students can gain a realistic understanding of what graduate school entails and be better prepared to not apply but navigate academia once they enter graduate school programs.

Supporting FGSOC's Mental Health

In navigating SGSU, students disclosed experiencing mental health challenges including anxiety and physical panic attacks. Students described at length the mental and emotional strain that being far from their families had on them during a stressful period in their lives marked by numerous changes. They were also transparent in mentioning how challenging it was to make friends and connect with the SGSU community, leaving them without an immediate support system and more susceptible to feelings of loneliness and sadness. Moreover, students discussed continuously feeling pressure to perform or justify their presence at the university. Coupled with increased academic rigor, time constraints, financial stressors, institutionally produced imposter syndrome, racism and elitism, students were highly susceptible to deteriorating wellness.

In light of research that documents the reality that First-Generation Students of Color report experiencing depression, anxiety and stress at more frequent rates than non-first-generation students of color (Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014), institutions must provide targeted mental health resources for FGSOC. At SGSU for instance, limited mental health resources for the student body result in students often having to wait weeks on end to receive counseling and psychological services. Students' health care plans may also limit the amount of counseling sessions they can receive before no longer being financially covered. Creating awareness and spreading information about mental health is especially important for FGSOC, who may be hesitant to access counseling services because of cultural stigmas related to mental health and help-seeking (Camacho, 2016). Studies have found that minority students may view psychological counseling as a last resort, demonstrate higher levels of self-reliance, and anticipate encountering therapists who are racially biased or who do not understand their needs (Goldston et al., 2008). With this knowledge, institutions must find ways to make mental health services more culturally responsive and accessible to FGSOC. For instance, Camacho (2016)

suggests drawing upon "word of mouth advertising and testimonies from minority students who have had positive experiences" in order to portray counseling and therapists in a more inviting light (p. 48). Widely promoting preventative workshops and health fairs focused on student wellness may also contribute to reducing the stigma associated with accessing mental health services for FGSOC. Increasing racial and ethnic diversity in counseling centers, especially among therapists on campus, can also greatly contribute to FGSOC's comfort in accessing services, as well as overall comfort during counseling sessions, which increases the service's efficacy (Camacho, 2016).

Centering Students' Voices in Research

Lastly, more research should center students of color's voices through focus groups, especially research on small learning communities and similar programs. Focus groups provide an ideal environment for program participants to voice their opinions while mimicking the dynamics of learning communities and other support programs for students. Additionally, students may greatly benefit from the opportunity to participate in focus groups. Students who participated in this study's focus groups expressed profound appreciation for the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and advocated for other students to have similar opportunities in the future. Students believed it was incredibly valuable to be able to pause and reflect on what they had experienced. They also appreciated being able to hear other students' stories and found that their peers' perspectives provided them with a great sense of encouragement and empowerment. Students themselves have profound insights and candid feedback to share about their experiences and what they need. We must facilitate such conversations through research by creating a safe and comfortable environment that invites them to share candidly and freely. We must listen

closely to what they share, cherishing their vulnerability and honoring it by working towards addressing their needs.

Research centering the voices of FGSOC should also be constructed on asset-based frameworks like Community Cultural Wealth and Funds of Knowledge, which recognize the assets FGSOC bring to the university. Through these lenses, researchers can see FGSOC's presence in higher education as an asset and move away from deficit-based thinking about who they are and what they need to succeed. The ways of knowing FGSOC develop and bring to the college campus will shape their experiences, influence their identity development, affect the way they navigate college, mediate their aspirations and determine how they understand their place in the university and in society at large. Ultimately, we must seek to understand how FGSOC make sense of the world (particularly their experiences at the university) based on their identities and vice verse, how their worldview ultimately shapes their identity construction (Esteban-Guitart, 2016).

Conclusion

The students who generously shared their stories for this study carried a wealth of aspirational, familial, social, and navigational capital. These assets and knowledge forged a path for them to enter SGSU and allowed them to succeed and persist once there, despite the institutional barriers they quickly encountered. These students proved to be resilient and strong; they took initiative and found a way to advance their dreams. However, 17 out of the 20 students shared being one decision away from leaving SGSU, a goal they had long worked for, a dream firmly founded on the hopes of their families and communities. Their doubts arose from a lack of validation, doubts that flooded their minds after not getting the grade they worked so hard to obtain on an exam, and the isolation they felt looking around their class and not seeing anyone

who resembled them. The university has a responsibility to validate the FGSOC they actively recruit because what the university says holds power and weight for students. If the institution declares that growing up in a single parent household, being the first in their family to attend college, coming from an immigrant family background, being system-impacted, or being a caretaker for siblings is an asset, is valuable, and can actually help, not hinder, students' academic trajectories, then the student body and campus community will begin to believe this as truth. Currently, the message institutions like SGSU communicate is that students' value and their ability to succeed at SGSU is contingent on them receiving straight As, 4.0+ GPAs, and top percentile SAT scores. The assets and knowledge that FGSOC bring to the university need to be acknowledged, affirmed, validated and rewarded, not disregarded or punished. Afterall, institutions pride themselves in being diverse and attracting students from all walks of life, but diversity without a concrete commitment to serve these students well is an empty promise. Serving students well is indeed a tall order, it involves changing policies on how students are admitted and how they are assessed once they are learning in these ivory towers. It involves training the existing faculty and staff that interact with students on a daily basis to view students through an asset-based lens. It also entails prioritizing faculty and staff that already recognize FGSOC's valuable assets and knowledge during hiring and promotion decisions. While small learning communities are a great place to start because of their proven success in supporting students, by nature of being *small* learning communities, they are limited. Even though every student who is impacted by a small learning community matters and makes a difference, we must do more. SGSU *can* do more for Rose, Norma, Rachel, Fatima, Thelma, Evelyn, Hope, Olivia, Manuela, Zoey, Clara, Isabella, Denise, Stephanie, Noor, Hillary, Jacqueline, Valentina, and Leila. Higher education institutions can do more for students like these. We must help students

like these not only succeed and persist, but have meaningful and fulfilling experiences during their time in institutions students and their families sacrificed so much to be able to even attend. Institutions like SGSU are fortunate to have First Generation Students of Color make up their student body. They bring with them rich histories of surviving and thriving, they carry assets and knowledge that cannot be taught in a classroom, and they are driven by a purpose far beyond individual advancement and recognition. Supporting these students ensures supporting a better tomorrow because their contributions will continue to positively shape our society.

Table 1

YBH Program Components

Assigned Academic Advisor	$450 Textbook Reimbursement	Program Socials (in-person and virtual)
Access to 10 Peer Mentors	Panels with Deans, Faculty, and Academic Advisors	Program Study Sessions (in-person and virtual)
Year-Long Enrollment in University Success Course	Campus Partner Presentations	Access to Writing Center Peer Learning Facilitators
Year-Long Enrollment in General Education Cluster Course	Strengthsfinder Assessment and Workshop	Access to Peer Learning Tutoring Services

Table 2

YBH Participant Characteristics Across Cohorts

	2019-2020 (n = 48)	**2020-2021** (n = 60)	**2021-2022** (n = 54)	**2022-2023** (n = 63)
Race/Ethnicity				
Latinx	62%	65%	68%	59%
Black	13%	20%	26%	23%
API	13%	7%	4%	11%
American Indian	4%	2%	2%	3%
White	8%	3%	-	4%
Gender				
Female	81%	93%	76%	83%
Male	19%	7%	22%	17%

First Generation				
yes	73%	70%	50%	34%

Table 3

YBH Participants' Majors Across Cohorts

	2019-2020 (n = 48)	**2020-2021** (n = 60)	**2021-2022** (n = 54)	**2022-2023** (n = 63)
English	1	3	5	5
Business Economics	1	1	3	15
Political Science	6	13	9	16
Sociology	9	16	4	4
Undeclared	1	0	5	3
Psychology	2	3	2	3
Public Affairs	2	4	1	3
History	1	1	2	1
Chicana/o Studies	0	6	0	1
Communication	2	5	0	1
Education	1	3	1	0

Table 4

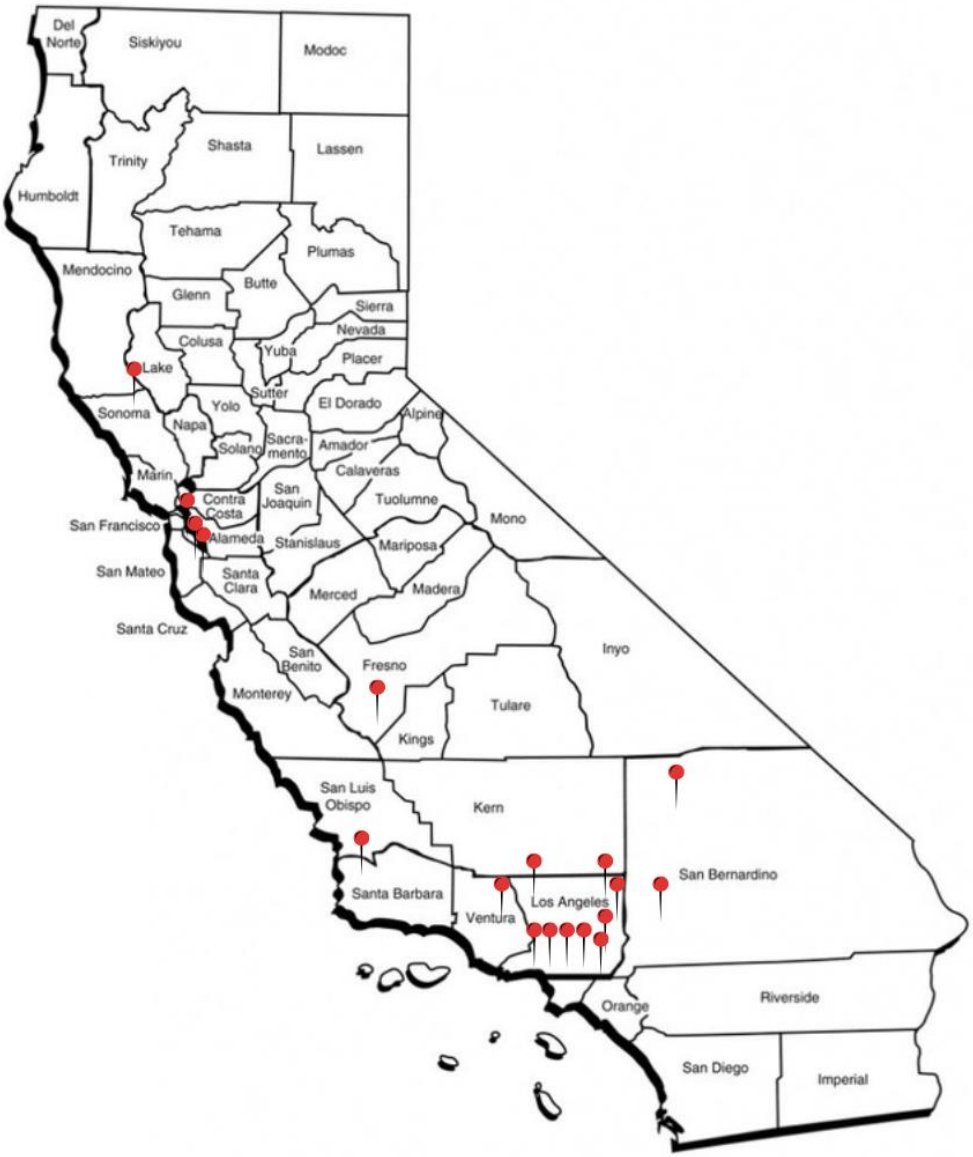
Participant Chart

Name	Ethnicity	GPA	YBH Cohort	Major	Involvement	Hometown	Housing	Work Hrs/Week
Rose	Hispanic/ Latina	3.8	2019-2020	Sociology	YBH peer mentor, academic peer counselor	Hesperia, CA	Off- campus	11-20
Norma	Latina	3.89	2019-2020	Sociology, Education minor	YBH peer mentor, UniCamp, Thrive Scholars	Los Angeles, CA	Off- campus	31-40
Rachel	White/ Mexican	alumni	2019-2020	Education	YBH peer mentor, GRIT peer coaching, EAOP college advising corps	Santa Monica, CA	On- campus	11-20
Fatima	Latina/ Hispanic	alumni	2019-2020	Sociology, Latin American Studies minor	Peer counselor, Phi Lambda Rho, Grupo Estudiantil Oaxaqueño	East Los Angeles, CA	commute	31-40
Thelma	Black	3.828	2020-2021	Sociology, African American Studies minor	California Community Builders, YBH peer mentor, Sociology Leadership Council	San Bernardino, CA	Off- campus	11-20
Evelyn	Latina	3.8	2020-2021	Chican/o Studies and Education	McNair, Keck/Humanistic Scholar Program, Center for Critical Race Studies in Education	Oxnard, CA	On- campus	6-10

Hope	Black/ Kenyan	3.3	2020-2021	Public Affairs, African American Studies & Education minors	East African Student Association, Black Pre Law Association & Journal	Santa Rosa, CA	Off- campus	11-20
Olivia	Hispanic	3.989	2020-2021	Human Biology & Society, Public Health minor	YBH peer mentor, Leaders of Tomorrow Carceral Ecologies research lab, Public Health initiative	West Covina, CA	Off- campus	1-5
Manuela	Latina/ Mexican American	3.88	2020-2021	Public Affairs and Education	HSI Initiative, Latinx Admit Weekend, Grupo Folklorico	San Jose, CA	Off- campus	11-20
Zoey	Hispanic	3.89	2020-2021	Chicana/o Studies, Applied Developmental Psychology minor	Music Meditation Club	Watsonville, CA	Off- campus	0
Monica	Mexican	3.686	2020-2021	Sociology, Chicana/o Studies minor	YBH peer mentor, Guardian Scholars Program	Los Angeles, CA	Off- campus	11-20
Isabella	Hispanic/ Latino	3.9	2020-2021	Sociology, Geography minor	SGSU Sustainability, Belles Service Association	Huntington Park, CA	Off- campus	11-20
Luisa	Latina/ Hispanic	4.0	2020-2021	Sociology, Digital Humanities minor	YBH peer mentor, Latinx Pre Dental Society, Grupo Folklorico, RISE Center	Long Beach, CA	Off- campus	11-20
Stephanie	Chicana/ Mexican American	3.43	2021-2022	Sociology, Gender Studies minor	College Corps, La Gente writer, Students for Socialism, Students for Justice in Palestine	Los Angeles, CA	commute	0
Kassandra	Mexican	3.8	2021-2022	Public Affairs	Academic Advancement Program,	Sylmar, CA	Off- campus	11-20

Noor	North African/ Moroccan	3.8	2022-2023	Sociology	Middle Eastern Studies Association, Middle Eastern & North African Law Student Association, YBH peer mentor, College Corps	Long Beach, CA and Casablanca, Morocco	On- campus	40+
Hillary	Black	3.7	2022-2023	Public Affairs, Environmental Systems & Society minor	Alpha Kappa Alpha, Justice Corps, SGSU Democrats, YBH peer mentor, Diversity Our Narrative	Houston, TX	On- campus	11-20
Jacqueline	Latina/ Hispanic	3.5	2022-2023	English	Freshman Summer Program peer counselor, Lambda Theta Alpha Latin Sorority, Latinas Guiding Latinas peer mentor, MEChA peer advisor	Porterville, CA	On- campus	11-20
Valentina	Latinx/ Mexican American	3.5	2022-2023	Chicana/o Studies, Political Science minor	Latinx admit weekend, Residential Assistant, YBH peer mentor	Watsonville, CA	On- campus	11-20
Leila	Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander	3.976	2022-2023	Political Science, Asian American Studies minor	Pacific Islander Association, Hooligan Theatre Company, Alumni Scholars Club	Solvang, CA	On-campus	1-5

Figure 1: Participant Hometowns



APPENDIX A

Student Questionnaire

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study. This study will focus on understanding the experiences of first-generation students of color participating in small learning communities. Please answer the demographic questions below and know that your responses will remain confidential. Your name will not be tied to your responses, but rather to a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Feel free to reach out to me if you have any questions (Ana K. Reis) at agomez0925@ucla.edu

1. Name
2. Gender
3. Race/Ethnicity
4. What city are you originally from?
5. What is your current major?
6. What is your housing status? (On or off campus)
7. Do you work? If so how many hours per week?
8. What on-campus clubs or organizations are you involved in?
9. What off-campus clubs or organizations are you involved ?
10. What year did you participate in YBH?

APPENDIX B

Online Focus Group Interview Protocol

Participants will bring an artifact that represents who they are. We will begin our online focus group interview with participants describing the item they brought and its significance. As we continue the focus group interview, I will ask participants the following questions in a semi-structured format, choosing to add or omit questions based on the trajectory of each conversation.

Life History

1. Could you please describe where you grew up and the people who helped shape you?
2. How would you describe your K-12 journey?
    a. Did you face any challenges? If so, who supported you?
3. What communities supported you as you prepared to apply to college?
    a. How did you learn about different college options and how to apply?
4. What were you doing when you received your SGSU acceptance notification? Who were the people you first shared the news with?
    a. How did they react?
5. What were your hopes and fears starting off your college journey?
    a. Did you share those with anyone?
6. What experiences helped prepare you for college?
    a. Did you participate in any programs, have any mentors or people who helped prepare you?

Details of Experience

7. Did you feel welcome at SGSU during your first year?
    a. How so? Do you feel welcome now?
8. Did you ever think of not continuing at SGSU?
    a. If so, why? What allowed you to continue?
9. What experiences stand out to you when you think about your time in YBH?
    a. Did you connect with other students in the program?
    b. What was it like meeting with your assigned advisor?
10. What aspects of YBH did you find most and least helpful?
    a. What did you think about the required classes?
11. What type of support did you need during your first year in college?
    a. Emotional? Financial? Academic? Etc.
12. What are some of the challenges you have faced during your time in college?
    a. How have you addressed them? Who or what has helped you?
13. What communities did you rely on during your first year?
    a. Community back home? YBH? Affinity groups? Other programs?
14. What communities are you a part of now?
    a. Clubs or organizations?

Meaning Making

15. What advice would you give to a student who is beginning their first year at a university like SGSU?
16. What spaces on campus made you feel like you belonged during your first year? And now?
    a. What does community mean to you?

17. What aspects of your identity are most important to you? Why?

18. What made you want to pursue a college education?

    a. What does it mean for you to be a student of color at SGSU?

    b. What does it mean for you to be the first in your family to pursue a college education?

19. What do you think has allowed you to succeed at SGSU?

    a. What personal qualities, skills, or abilities have helped you?

20. Is there anything else you would like to share?

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