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Understudied and Underserved: A Phenomenological Exploration of How First-Generation  
Students of Color Perceive Challenges and Supports During Law School

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

by

Jeb David Butler

2024

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Understudied and Underserved: A Phenomenological Exploration of How First-Generation  
Students of Color Perceive Challenges and Supports During Law School

by

Jeb David Butler

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Diane Durkin, Co-Chair

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First-generation (FG) students comprise an increasing population that has been studied at the undergraduate level. Extensive empirical research is available on FG undergraduate behaviors, challenges, and support programs. However, little research traces their experiences through to graduate study, a line of inquiry especially needed for FG students of color whose intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) suggests an increasing need for support across all disciplines. Because of the varied degrees and disciplines that comprise graduate study, investigators are encouraged to focus on specific disciplines (Miner, 2021). This phenomenological study illuminated the lived experiences of 12 first-generation law graduates of color (FGSOC) and how

they made meaning of their most significant challenges and the institutional and non-institutional supports they accessed during their studies. Framing the investigation using Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth theory made clear the community-based assets participants accessed to succeed during law school. Participants experienced a rough social transition upon enrollment. This period was marked by impostor syndrome and a heightened awareness of racial and class differences between participants and their classmates. Affinity groups helped smooth the social transition to law school, but intra-group stratification resulted in participants' alienation within these spaces. Participants' rocky academic transition forced them to contend with complicated faculty relationships and the intense, unfamiliar rigor of the law school classroom. Outside of their law schools, participants encountered changes in family dynamics. With the realization that their families no longer understood their path, participants became more self-reliant while understanding their future family financial obligations. Unable to find consistently effective services within their institutions, participants felt mostly unsupported by their law schools and described their overall experience as "self-directed." Recommendations are made for practice and future research to improve the law school experience for FGSOC and expand the body of literature on FG graduate students.

The dissertation of Jeb David Butler is approved.

Sylvia Hurtado

Diane Durkin, Committee Co-Chair

Mark Kevin Eagan Jr., Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

## DEDICATION

For my brother, Mike. You left us when I started my doctorate, and your spirit guided me to the end. Your memory is a blessing.

For the FGLI kids. Keep pushing. Keep fighting. Keep taking up space.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As of the most recent ABA data reports (2023), there were 2,969 Black students enrolled out of 38,891 total first-year law students. Black students make up approximately 8% of first-year law students yet constitute one of every six law students who do not complete their degrees (Williams, 2021). These attrition rates directly impact post-law school outcomes and contribute to the comparatively low rates of practicing attorneys of color in law firms, legal academia, and the judiciary (Williams, 2013). Despite higher attrition rates, the number of law students of color only continues to increase (Krinsky, 2021). This increase becomes more nuanced when applying an intersectional lens: a considerable proportion of law students of color simultaneously identifies as first-generation (FG) (LSSSE, 2023).

The law school experience for FG students of color (FGSOC) differs greatly from that of their mostly white, wealthier peers (Bodamer, 2020). I sought to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of these students as these experiences relate to the students' unique challenges (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This phenomenological study investigated how first-generation law school graduates of color describe both their most significant challenges during law school and their experiences with the institutional and non-institutional supports they used during their studies. By amplifying the voices and lived experiences of this understudied population, this study yielded the generation of specific support programming, intervention tactics, and policy changes that will improve the law school experience for first-generation law students of color.

## Statement of the Problem

### Background of the Problem

By 2027, graduate enrollment is expected to surpass 3.1 million students, a 41% increase over graduate enrollment in 2000 (Cadenas et al., 2022). While this growth portends well for college and university enrollment, between 23% and 39% of master's, doctoral, and professional degree program students do not complete their degrees (Baum & Steele, 2017). Research suggests that first-generation students have higher attrition rates at the graduate level (Seay et al., 2008). Determining an exact rate proves challenging, as the definition of first-generation varies. Broadly, first-generation students' parents never pursued postsecondary studies (Padgett et al., 2012). Some researchers, however, consider students first-generation if their parents attended college but never earned a degree (NAPSA, 2017). This study employs the former definition.

Roughly one-third of FG undergraduates do not complete their degrees (Cataldi et al., 2018). Data reveal that FG graduate students pursue graduate degrees at slightly lower rates: 41% compared to 46% of their peers (Cataldi et al., 2018). However, it is unclear if FG graduate students attrit at the same rate as FG undergraduates. The possibility of FG graduate students not completing their degrees nevertheless raises concerns, but little research on this population exists (Carlton, 2015; Collins & Jehangir, 2021; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Hutson et al., 2022; Miner, 2021; Seay et al., 2008; Tate et al., 2014).

### *Institutions May Be Unprepared to Support First-Generation Students*

First-generation graduate students likely face specific challenges that amplify the challenges they faced as undergraduates. While FG students were exposed, as undergraduates, to attitudes and behaviors contributing to college success, these students may lack the cultural capital of their non-FG classmates, despite being motivated toward academic success (Holley &

Gardner, 2012). Their undergraduate exposure to social and cultural capital may have provided only some of the coping mechanisms necessary to proceed to graduate-level study. They may have, for example, developed behaviors associated with success at the graduate level, like engaging directly with faculty and staff and deliberately seeking assistance when needed (Yee, 2016). Unfortunately, the combination of FG undergraduates' tendency to avoid faculty engagement (Yee, 2016) and the often weak departmental advising they receive (Lunceford, 2011) limits opportunities for FG students and faculty to collaborate. Faculty mentors serve as a resource for FG students by disseminating graduate school knowledge and provide crucial services, like writing recommendation letters, facilitating introductions to other colleagues in the field, and helping cultivate a passion for the discipline (Lunceford, 2011).

Despite their motivation and preparedness, FG graduate students find that they lack access to a social and cultural referent. They are pioneers in their own families, once again facing academic, social, and economic challenges. Support services like academic and psychological counseling, career management, and disability services provide resources that make students' educational experiences more manageable (Crosier et al., 2007). However, institutions typically offer even less support at the graduate level than the undergraduate; universities continue to grapple with FG student persistence and performance due to the population's socioeconomic oppression (Cadenas et al., 2022). Once enrolled, these students, many of whom are students of color, face difficulty with departmental integration and a lack of support systems that offer them access to information and community resources (Collins & Jehangir, 2021).

### ***First-Generation Students' Graduate Enrollment Similar to Non-First-Generation Peers***

Graduate enrollment rates between FG and non-FG students have remained relatively comparable over the past decade. Data from a longitudinal study of 2012 bachelor's degree

recipients show that within four years of completing their undergraduate degrees, 29% of FG graduates enrolled in master's degree/post-master's certificate programs compared to 27% of their non-FG peers (Cataldi et al., 2018). FG students outpaced their peers in master's degree enrollment, but their non-FG peers enrolled in doctoral/professional degree programs at a higher rate of 10% to 4% (Cataldi et al., 2018). More recent data show similar graduate enrollment rates for FG and continuing-generation students. Among bachelor's degree recipients from 2015-2016, 23% of FG students enrolled in another post-secondary program within a year of graduation, compared to 24% of their non-FG peers (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, n.d.). The same data confirmed that among these enrollees, more first-generation students matriculated in master's degree programs than their continuing-generation counterparts.

### ***FG Graduate School Challenges***

Despite enrolling in and completing some graduate programs at similar rates to their non-FG peers, FG students' journey to graduate school is not necessarily an easy one. These students come from families that imbue them with knowledge, skills, and abilities rooted in survival (Yosso, 2005). They may not, however, benefit from the social and navigational capital that might come from families that have navigated college and/or graduate school (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Moreover, their hidden identity as FG students follows them to graduate school and to their transition into the professional sphere. This lifelong experience exposes these students to a series of transitions in which they must start over repeatedly, and the skills they gained previously may not prepare them adequately for their next steps.

From their undergraduate experience, FG graduate students may continue to contend with financial stress, identity-based marginalization, lack of access to information and resources, and pressure from shifts in family expectations (Collins & Jehangir, 2021; Tate et al., 2014).

Specifically at the graduate level, these students may encounter troubled social and departmental integration (Collins & Jehangir, 2021; Tate et al., 2014). This challenge is exacerbated by the emphasis on departmental socialization as a crucial aspect to student success (Clark & Corcoran, 1986). Nevertheless, these students have leapt over significant hurdles not only by completing their undergraduate degrees but also by pursuing graduate study (Collins & Jehangir, 2021). Levin (2022) describes their achievements as “remarkable.”

### ***Little Research on the Challenges***

Graduate students generally have not been the focus of first-generation student scholarship. As several researchers have claimed, undergraduate FG students have been studied extensively, while little has been reported on FG graduate student persistence, retention, and degree completion (Hutson et al., 2022; Miner, 2021; Tate et al., 2014). Likewise, scholarship regarding FG graduate student support programs is lacking (Collins & Jehangir, 2021). The comparatively limited studies on FG graduate students, however, affirm that FG graduate students continue to be at a disadvantage in navigating graduate school (Miner, 2021). These students face issues like those they faced as undergraduates: identity-based prejudice and marginalization, financial stress, a dearth of social network support, and a shift in family expectations (Tate et al., 2014).

### ***Varied Graduate Programs***

The varied degree types and academic subjects available for graduate students further complicate attempts to investigate the population as a homogenous group. Treating FG graduate students as homogenous would not allow researchers to understand and appreciate the distinctive FG graduate student experience (Miner, 2021), but scant research has delved into the experience of FG graduate students in specific disciplines. On an individual basis, graduate disciplines

function as unique cultural microcosms in which faculty and students develop their own social mores and community values (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). This study attempts to focus on one such discipline.

### ***First-Generation Law Students***

As with the greater first-generation graduate student population, research on FG law students is limited (Dallinger-Lain, 2016; O'Bryant and Schaffzin, 2018). FG law students face some similar issues that they did as undergraduates: navigating financial concerns related to higher amounts of loan debt, using more time outside of class than their peers to prepare, working one or more jobs to afford tuition, and spending less time participating in extracurricular activities (LSSSE, 2023). Institutional norms tend to provide advantages to students who enter law school knowing the value and process of developing and sustaining relationships, particularly with faculty; such networks have proven critical to enhancing students' sense of belonging (Bodamer, 2020). Some research suggests an even more urgent situation, painting law schools as hostile environments that subject disadvantaged students to direct discrimination and microaggressions (Dallinger-Lain, 2016). Simultaneously growing, understudied, and underserved, this student population merits closer attention.

### ***First-Generation Law Student Racial Intersectionality***

Though not specific to law students, a limited body of research on graduate student persistence focuses on students of color (Cadenas et al., 2022) exists. Collins and Jehangir (2021) suggest an overlap between the graduate students of color who also identify as FG. The available data on law students reflects this overlap. According to the Law School Survey of Student Engagement (LSSSE, 2023), FG students make up 26% of the law school population, and a significant percentage of this population identifies as students of color. Of the law students

surveyed, 53% of the Latinx respondents and 36% of the Black/African American respondents also identified as FG. White respondents who identified as FG were listed at 21% and Asian American respondents at 28%.

The fact that the highest proportions of students of color also identify as FG is indicative of an overrepresentation of students of color who simultaneously identify as FG, but these students are underrepresented in law schools. Based on reported data for first-year law student matriculants, 8% identify as Black/African American, and 14% identify as Latinx (ABA, 2023). When compared to their white classmates, Black law students are almost three times as likely not to graduate from law school (Dallinger-Lain, 2016) and comprise 15.5% of first-year law student attrition (Williams, 2021). At first glance, this percentage may appear low, but Black students are underrepresented in law schools. These data make clear the need for FGSOC student support.

### **FGSOC Law Student Support Availability and Utilization**

Research reveals that some support programs are available for law students who identify as first-generation and/or come from communities of color (Cabrera & Zeman, 2000; Devine & Odom, 2004; McClain, 2018; O'Bryant & Schaffzin, 2018; Suni, 2004). Many law schools offer tutoring/writing support, mental health services, and student affinity groups based on both racial and socioeconomic identity. The other most common support programs are designed for FG and/or students of color and cover the pre-law school experience. Select students have the opportunity to complete pre-law summer programs through third-party organizations like The Council on Legal Education Opportunity (CLEO), whereas some law schools facilitate summer bridge or admission by performance programs, like the Tennessee Institute for Pre-Law (TIP) at the University of Memphis.

These support programs have proven efficacious in some instances (O’Bryant & Schaffzin, 2018). However, in-house support programs for FG and/or students of color are not consistent across all law schools. Outside support programs can be limited by space restrictions and geography and often focus on gaining admission to law school instead of assisting these students once they are enrolled. These limitations coupled with scant research underscore the unevenness of support programming for FGSOC law students.

### **Research Questions**

To recommend improvements that will enhance the FGSOC law student experience, this study answered the following research questions:

1. How do FGSOC law school graduates describe their most challenging experiences during law school?
2. How do FGSOC law school graduates describe their experiences with the institutional and non-institutional supports they utilized during their studies?

### **Gaps in Current Research**

Despite having completed undergraduate degrees, first-generation law students of color largely lack the same social, cultural, and financial capital as their non-FGSOC classmates (O’Bryant & Schaffzin, 2018). Much of the research on FGSOC graduate students mirrors the research on FG undergraduate students and examines self-efficacy, coping barriers, attrition risks, persistence, and retention. Through this study, I gathered data on what other unique problems these students face and the institutional and non-institutional supports that are effective but mostly unreported. The synthesis of my findings, though specific to law students, serves as a template for other graduate programs/disciplines moving forward as they seek to change policies and implement support programming that will benefit FGSOC.



## **Study Overview**

### **Research Design**

Through this study, I filled a gap in the research focused on the specific challenges faced by FGSOC law students and the supports they utilized while enrolled. FGSOC students are among the most marginalized, so empowering these students and centering their voices in my study was vital. A study that amplifies the uniqueness of the participants' voices and perspectives is necessarily qualitative. An inductive data gathering and pattern finding process allowed the participants' voices to guide the responses to my research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Research Methods**

Through phenomenological methodology, this study investigated the participants' lived experiences and sought to understand how they make meaning of the challenges they faced and the supports on which they relied during law school (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Peoples, 2021). As such, I conducted in-depth individual interviews as the primary means of understanding and gathering firsthand accounts of the subjects' lived experiences as they relate to the significant problems they encountered and the institutional and non-institutional supports they utilized in law school (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study relied on open-ended questioning that allowed the subjects' experiences to serve as the building blocks for the study's findings.

With the amplification of marginalized voices as a chief concern, this study was informed by a theoretical framework rooted in critical race theory (CRT) through a community cultural wealth lens. Yosso's (2005) conceptualization of community cultural wealth calls for leveraging "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (p. 77). A theoretical

framework that centers students of color, community cultural wealth complements phenomenological inquiry, as the participants' lived experiences anchor the study (Peoples, 2021). Further, a study that implements community cultural wealth eschews the deficit framing that results from reliance on Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) interpretation of social and cultural capital that prizes the white middle class (Yosso, 2005). Deductive coding through a community cultural wealth lens made clear the ways in which the study's participants accessed these assets to find success in law school.

### **Study Inclusion Criteria and Participants**

Participant inclusion criteria for this study included graduates of two ABA-accredited, U.S.-based law schools that have acceptance rates of 30% and lower, a student of color population greater than 40% but less than 60%, and are not affiliated with an Historically Black College/University (HBCU). The schools also had institutionally recognized clubs or organizations specific to FG students, as these organizations initially served as the conduit for my study's sample selection.

Initial outreach efforts to secure study participants included emails to established FG law student groups with an outline of the study, participant criteria, and contact information to inquire about participation. Emails were also sent to law school affinity organizations and relevant law school administrators. As a final outreach measure, a LinkedIn ad was posted in addition to the dissemination of direct messages to possible participants from the two law schools selected for the study. As a safeguard, I employed snowball sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) in my email outreach and encouraged potential participants to share with alumni friends who may have met the study criteria, as well. I interviewed 12 participants who, in

addition to identifying as FG and Black/African American, Latinx, and/or Native American, completed law school within the last six years.

### **Study Significance**

Legal education is at a critical juncture, especially for FGSOC students. The Law School Admissions Council (LSAC) indicated that the 2021 law school admissions cycle was marked by the highest applicant volume in a decade and affirmed a noted increase in applicants of color (Krinsky, 2021). Considering this jump in applicants of color, LSAC made clear its position on anti-racism (Testye, 2022) and revealed the launch of a pilot program designed to offer a more holistic path to legal education (Griffith, 2022). These overtures have been echoed by an American Bar Association (ABA) panel that considered rendering law school admissions tests optional (ABA, 2022). FGSOC students traditionally score lower than their white, wealthier classmates (Dallinger-Lain, 2016; O'Bryant & Schaffzin, 2018; Williams, 2021). FG students in the 2023 entering class averaged a 154 on the LSAT compared to the non-FG student average of 157 (LSSSE, 2023). The ABA panel ultimately did not recommend making test scores optional. Nevertheless, conversations around the removal of this barrier remain important and, if enacted in the future, may inspire more of these students to apply to law school.

These students and, ultimately, attorneys, have the capacity to diversify the profession, thereby shaping legal discourse and laws that are not designed solely for those who are white and wealthy (Williams, 2013). The data I gathered and synthesized from this study will benefit law schools that not only want to increase the number of FGSOC students in their schools but also mitigate the challenges these students have faced in the past.

Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature on FGSOC students, with more attention focused on general graduate and law students. In addition to exploring FGSOC student attributes,

I examine the known challenges of the population and the institutional support programs they may have at their disposal. Finally, I include a synthesis of Yosso's community cultural wealth theory (2005) as a framework that not only permitted an asset-based approach for this study but also revealed the ways in which participants accessed these forms of capital to succeed in a less than ideal environment.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

First-generation (FG) students comprise a growing population that has been extensively studied at the undergraduate level, including studies examining their undergraduate behaviors, challenges, and support programs. Limited research traces their experiences through to graduate study, a line of inquiry especially needed for students of color (SOC), whose intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) suggests an increasing need for support across all disciplines. Using phenomenological methodology, this study illuminates the lived experiences of first-generation law graduates of color (FGSOC), specifically their most significant challenges they faced and the institutional and non-institutional supports they used during law school.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature pertinent to FGSOC students, briefly covering undergraduates and specifically focusing on general graduate and law students. I will first unpack the demographics, common behaviors, and coping strategies of FGSOC students. Next, I examine the challenges this population frequently faces and then consider the institutional support programs commonly offered by colleges and universities. Finally, I conclude the chapter with the study's theoretical framework..

### **Study Context: Who Are First-Generation Students?**

#### **First-Generation Students Defined**

Despite the prevalence of the term “first-generation student” in higher education lexicon, researchers use varying definitions of the term that are, in some instances, discordant with one another (Levin, 2022). Some researchers define first-generation students are those whose parents have no college education (Padgett et al., 2012). The definition is sometimes expanded to include students whose parents attended college but never earned a bachelor's degree (NAPSA, 2017). If the former definition is used, then 24% of college students are FG; but if combining the former

and the latter, then 56% of college students are FG (Nunn, 2019). For the purposes of this study, I maintain a clear delineation between the two categories and consider FG students those whose parents never attended college (Padgett et al., 2012).

## **First-Generation Students Are Mostly Students of Color at All Postsecondary Stages**

### ***Undergraduates***

When considering the raw numbers, FG students are more racially diverse than continuing-generation students. In terms of racial identity, 49% of FG undergraduate students are white, followed by 27% Latinx. Black students make up 14% of this population, while Asian American students represent the smallest proportion at 5%. Taking these percentages at face value does not accurately represent first-generation students relative to the actual U.S. population. Almost half of the first-generation student population is white, but white people make up approximately 76% of the U.S. population (Census Bureau, 2023). Accordingly, white people are actually underrepresented in the first-generation student population (Nunn, 2019).

Conversely, while Black and Latinx students make up a smaller proportion of first-generation students in terms of pure numbers, they are actually overrepresented when considering the overall college student population (Nunn, 2019). More specifically, Black students appear to represent a small percentage of first-generation students at 14%, but the Black population of the U.S. is approximately 14% (Census Bureau, 2023). Latinx students account for approximately 20% of first-generation students but make up about 19% of the U.S. population. Unpacking these percentages illustrates clearly that educational attainment rates differ depending on racial group (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

## ***Graduates***

Aggregated data on the racial and ethnic breakdown of the collective population of graduate students is lacking. As such, we must rely on the data we have at our disposal and extrapolate cautiously. Results from a doctoral graduate survey (National Science Foundation, 2022) reveal that 14.9% of 2021 graduates' parents come from families in which the highest educational attainment of either parent is high school or less. The majority of these graduates (72%) have a parent who earned at least a bachelor's degree. When racial identity is considered, the survey data show that of the 6,675 recipients whose highest level of parental education is high school or less, 45.8% identify as Black or Latinx; the percentage of Native American graduates was not included (National Science Foundation, 2022).

Compared to their classmates of color, only 23.1% of white and Asian PhD recipients have parents whose highest level of education is high school or less (National Science Foundation, 2022). Pipelines to graduate education are improving, but degree enrollment and completion for Black and Latinx students have not improved (Piatt et al., 2019). Despite increases of 23% and 43% of undergraduate degrees awarded to Black and Latinx students, respectively, these students make up a mere 11% of doctoral degree recipients (National Science Foundation, 2022). The racial breakdown of first-generation students proves to be useful information, but an intersectional explication that simultaneously considers socioeconomic status provides a more nuanced understanding of the FG student population.

### **First-Generation Undergraduate Students Come from Lower Income Families**

The potential for both higher lifetime earnings and socioeconomic mobility increases when one earns an advanced degree (Collins & Jehangir, 2021). FG students' families, however, largely do not enjoy these benefits. These students' families make well under the median U.S.

income of \$75,149 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). More specifically, approximately three quarters of first-generation undergraduate students are from families of lower socioeconomic status with 27% from families making under \$20,000/year and 50% from families making under \$50,000/year (Nunn, 2019). These facts, coupled with the rising costs of attending college each year, contribute to FG undergraduate students taking out loans at a higher rate and in higher dollar amounts than their classmates (Nunn, 2019). Student loans, however, do not solve financial strain for first-generation college students, as they are generally unable to rely on their families to bolster a budget shortfall. To afford non-tuition and living expenses, FG undergraduate students are more likely to work – sometimes more than one job – while enrolled in school (Nunn, 2019; Schelbe et al., 2019).

### **First-Generation Graduate Students Continue to Navigate Financial Challenges**

Continuing from the undergraduate experience, class and economic factors impact first-generation students hoping to undertake graduate study. FG students mostly come from families who earn under the U.S. median (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023) and are often unable to assist with educational costs. Therefore, these students are more likely to accrue loan debt (Nunn, 2019). The prospect of accruing additional loan debt tends to discourage many FG students from pursuing graduate study (Ortagus & Kramer, 2022).

In addition to student loan debt, one-third of FG doctoral degree earners used their own financial resources while enrolled, compared to 20% of their continuing-generation peers (Holley & Gardner, 2012). Holley and Gardner also report that 21% of first-generation students had \$30,000 or more in student debt upon completion of their degrees, compared to 16% of their continuing-generation peers. These students tend to be older, are more likely financially independent, and must balance lower amounts of financial aid with significant financial



obligations, like families of their own (Cadenas et al., 2022). This demographic information about FG graduate students gives us a general understanding of the population, but gaining a more in depth understanding of these students proves challenging.

### **Scant Research Limits Understanding of First-Generation Graduate Students**

Although researchers have extensively studied FG undergraduate students, scholars have given much less attention to FG graduate students (Carlton, 2015; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Hutson et al., 2022; Miner, 2021; Tate et al., 2014). The scant research available on FG graduate students may result from views that the disadvantages of being an FG undergraduate have been erased by the graduate level. On the contrary, the challenges FG students face as undergraduates likely intensify at the graduate level (Lunceford, 2011). Perhaps the limited data on FG graduate students can explain the more limited attention given to FG graduate students. Overall, FG students matriculate into graduate programs at lower rates than their continuing generation counterparts (Cataldi et al., 2018; Collins & Jehangir, 2021). Within four years of earning their bachelor's degrees in 2008, FG students enrolled in graduate programs (master's, doctoral, or professional) at a rate four percentage points lower than their continuing generation peers (Cataldi et al., 2018). These lower matriculation rates, however, may be short-lived.

### **Employment Landscape Shifts Likely to Yield More First-Generation Graduate Students**

An upsurge in graduate student enrollment hardly qualifies as novel information, as data over a decade old predicted this increase (Soria & Stableton, 2012). Specifically, graduate student enrollment is expected to increase from an estimated 2.2 million students as of 2000 to 3.1 million students in 2027 (Cadenas et al., 2022) and will likely include an influx of FG students. More first-generation undergraduates may also pursue graduate study in the future as the bachelor's degree loses value due to market oversaturation. With both access to

undergraduate education and recent college graduate unemployment rates increasing, bachelor's degrees no longer offer the guarantee of stable employment that they once did (Carlton, 2015). Accordingly, students increasingly pursue graduate study to bolster their future employability prospects. A graduate degree can improve both lifetime earnings and quality of life (Ortagus & Kramer, 2022). However, the expectations of graduate study are not necessarily compatible with the unique needs of FG graduate students.

### **First-Generation Graduate Student Transitional and Navigational Challenges**

#### **First-Generation Students Struggle in Graduate School**

First-generation students have overcome barriers by both completing an undergraduate degree and pursuing a graduate degree (Collins & Jehangir, 2021). The presence of FG students in graduate programs contributes to the diversification of graduate enrollment in the U.S. (Collins & Jehangir, 2021). Despite these benefits, these students navigate yet another unfamiliar paradigm in graduate study: they must figure out post-secondary education independently. Admittedly, if FG students are successful at the undergraduate level, then they have likely accessed some level of social and cultural capital that leads them to pursue graduate study (Hutson et al., 2022; Miner, 2021; Tate et al., 2014). However, even with this knowledge and the motivation to succeed at the graduate level, FG students continue to lack the social and cultural capital to which their non-FG classmates already have access (Holley & Gardner, 2012). Merely because a student enrolls in graduate school does not mean that they understand the expectations of their degree program and/or discipline (Lunceford, 2011).

FG graduate students, like FG undergraduates, are at a competitive disadvantage prior to matriculation (Miner, 2021). Because institutions are not currently structured to support the navigational needs of FG students sufficiently, these students often problem solve via

independent strategies, in some cases to their own detriment (Yee, 2016). Similarly, FG graduate students aim to persist in their studies through self-motivation and taking responsibility for their own missteps (Gardner & Holley, 2011). Further, FG students' socioeconomic status adversely impacts class performance and persistence (Cadenas et al., 2022), often resulting in isolation (Gardner & Holley, 2011).

Data for graduate student attrition likewise paint a concerning picture. Collectively, between 23% and 39% of master's, doctoral, and professional degree program students do not complete their degrees (Baum & Steele, 2017). It is likely that FG students comprise a sizeable portion of the attrition rate, as FG students have higher attrition rates than their non-FG counterparts at the graduate level (Seay et al., 2008). However, reports on FG graduate student experience, retention, and degree completion are limited (Hutson et al., 2022; Miner, 2021; Tate et al., 2014). Despite these known challenges, colleges and universities have not smoothed out the graduate school transition for FG students.

### **Colleges and Universities Struggle to Support First-Generation Students**

Unsurprisingly, colleges and universities collectively struggle with FG student enrollment, persistence, and graduation (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). Research shows that FG grad students continue to experience, among other problems, financial stress; identity-based marginalization; troubled social and departmental integration; lack of access to information and resources; and changes in familial expectations (Collins & Jehangir, 2021; Tate et al., 2014). Because graduate programs are often connected with professional communities beyond university walls (Miner, 2021), FG graduate students must also contend with deciphering how they engage with the stakeholders within their chosen fields (Collins & Jehangir, 2021).

## **Socialization Poses Challenges for First-Generation Graduate Students**

Expectations vary widely across departments and/or disciplines (Gardner & Barnes, 2007), but most graduate programs emphasize socialization as a key element of successful student experience (Clark & Corcoran, 1986; Levin, 2022). Consistent and productive interactions with faculty and peers prepare graduate students to understand and enact the norms and expectations relevant to their specific disciplinary communities (Miner, 2021). When FG graduate students cultivate and sustain positive relationships with other successful community members, they gain access to valuable discipline-based information (Miner, 2021) and increase their likelihood of degree completion (Gardner, 2010). However, the added expectation of socialization forces FG students to reconcile their undergraduate tendency to avoid interactions with their professors (Yee, 2016) and engage both directly and regularly. Failure to socialize influences access to mentorship (Miner, 2021) and increases graduate program attrition (Collins & Jehangir, 2021; Levin, 2022).

Within graduate programs, the students, faculty, and staff within a degree and/or discipline deliberately create cultural microcommunities with unique values, intellectual goals, and behavioral rules (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). These microcommunities inculcate students with the values of their chosen discipline and profession (Miner, 2021). This process may challenge FG graduate students. These students may not have an understanding of the often tacit ways of navigating information channels (Bell & Santamaría, 2018) that faculty assume they already have (Lunceford, 2011).

## **A Cultural Mismatch Between Graduate Study and First-Generation Students**

Research reveals an incompatibility between the lived experience of FG students and the experiences common to graduate study (Collins & Jehangir, 2021; Levin, 2022). This

inconsonance is unsurprising given the white and middle/upper class norms that laid the foundation of most U.S. colleges and universities (Collins & Jehangir, 2021; Levin, 2022; Miner, 2021). Collins and Jehangir (2021) report that FG graduate students (Wallace et al., 2020) experience limited representation within their departments and a lack of formal support. These impediments result in feelings of impostor syndrome (Collins & Jehangir, 2021), often forcing FG students to feign a sense of belonging to reduce feelings of isolation (Jensen, 2004; Miner, 2021). In response to these challenges, many FG students implement coping mechanisms to persist in their degree programs (Collins & Jehangir, 2021). For example, research suggests that some graduate students employ cognitive mapping, a process by which students create internal mental models to assist in adjusting to graduate study (Collins & Jehangir, 2021; Griffin et al., 2016, Lovitts, 2001).

Despite having awareness of FG graduate student coping mechanisms, we still know relatively little about how this population successfully navigates graduate study (Collins & Jehangir, 2021). This lack may be attributed to the fact that graduate programs are more specific and discipline-focused by design. Citing doctoral programs, Gardner and Barnes (2007) assert that academic disciplines function as the locus of the graduate student experience. They further posit that to understand the student experience, we must also understand the discipline (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). Accordingly, research on the varied facets of the FG graduate student experience needs to limit the investigation to a phenomenon within a degree and/or discipline (Gardner & Barnes, 2007).

### **First-Generation Law Students Comprise Sizeable Law School Population**

First-generation students in graduate law programs (J.D.) present a compelling case for closer examination. As with the general FG graduate student population, scant research focuses

on FG law students (Dallinger-Lain, 2016; O’Bryant & Schaffzin, 2018). Almost 40,000 law students matriculated in the fall of 2023 (ABA, 2023), but determining an exact number of current FG law students proves challenging.

Unlike other data collected for federal purposes, like race and gender, FG status is not collected (IPEDS, n.d.) Law school class profile websites reveal an unevenness among schools that report the percentage of FG students in an incoming cohort. Similarly, the opportunity to self-identify as FG in an admissions application is neither consistent nor mandatory. *The Law School Survey of Student Engagement* (LSSSE, 2023) provides the most recent approximation of FG law students at 26%. With over an estimated 10,000 students in every incoming class, FG law students are worth a closer look.

### **First-Generation Students’ Challenges Follow Them to Law School**

FG law students carry their struggles from their undergraduate studies into law school (O’Bryant & Schaffzin, 2018). As undergraduates, these students deployed different coping mechanisms than their non-FG classmates (Strayhorn, 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996; Yee, 2016). Once they matriculate in law school, they continue to reiterate how different their experience is compared to their non-FG peers (Bodamer, 2020). FG law students contend with higher student loan amounts (LSSSE, 2023; O’Bryant & Schaffzin, 2018). FG students are often precluded from earning high-value merit scholarships, often awarded to students with high GPAs and LSATs, usually non-FG students (O’Bryant & Schaffzin, 2018). FG law students are continually seeking part-time employment (LSSSE, 2023), spending 25% more of their time than their non-FG classmates working to cover attendance costs and less time engaged in campus life (O’Bryant & Schaffzin, 2018).

FG law students have fewer opportunities for social and extracurricular engagement (LSSSE, 2023). Compared to their non-FG classmates, FG students spend approximately 8% more time preparing for class (O’Bryant & Schaffzin, 2018). This extra class preparation time results in FG students’ diminished involvement in extracurricular activities that generally augment law students’ resumes, like law journals, moot court, and research assistantships (LSSSE, 2023). Consequently, they struggle with developing relationships with faculty members and peers, thus undermining their sense of belonging during their studies (Bodamer, 2020; Dallinger-Lain, 2016). Heightening these struggles is a law school environment defined by hostile interactions, often in the form of microaggressions and overt discrimination based on affinity (Dallinger-Lain, 2016). As there exists a frequent overlap in FG students and students of color (Collins & Jehangir, 2021), this subgroup navigates significant challenges during their studies.

### **Lower Completion Rates of First-Generation Law Students of Color**

Most diversity studies concentrate on one identity, like gender or race (Bodamer, 2020). However, research suggests that the class-based marginalization of first-generation students intensifies when intersecting social identities, like race, enter the picture (Cadenas et al., 2022; Tate et al., 2015). Just over one-quarter of incoming law students identifies as first-generation, and most of this group identifies as students of color (LSSSE, 2023). Of the law students who identify as FG, 36% also identify as Black/African American, and 53% identify as Latinx, outnumbering their Asian American and white classmates at 28% and 21%, respectively (LSSSE, 2023). This data clearly confirms a higher proportion of Black and Latinx students who also identify as FG, but in the aggregate, these students are actually underrepresented in U.S. law

schools relative to their representation within the broader U.S. population: 8% identify as Black/African American, and 14% identify as Latinx (ABA, 2023).

These students' low matriculation numbers become even more problematic when looking at first-year attrition data. In comparison to their classmates, Black and Latinx law students have higher attrition rates among first-year, non-transfer students relative to their overall enrolled population (Devine & Odom, 2004; Thomas & Cochran, 2018; Williams, 2021). For the 2016-2017 academic year, Black and Latinx students comprised 9% and 11.6% of first-year law students, respectively; they also comprised 15.5% and 15.9% of first-year, non-transfer attrition, respectively (Thomas & Cochran, 2018). At first glance, these numbers may seem fairly low, but these students are severely underrepresented compared to their white classmates; white students made up 61.5% of first-year law students and 49.7% of the first-year, non-transfer attrition rate (Thomas & Cochran 2018).

These figures cause concern, as Black and Latinx students are underrepresented yet statistically make up a fairly high proportion of students who do not complete their degrees (Thomas & Cochran, 2018). Equally concerning, these students are almost three times as likely not to graduate (Dallinger-Lain, 2016). These data highlight the need to explore not only the current state of FGSOC student support programs and interventions but also their efficacy for FGSOC students.

## **Supports for First-Generation Students**

### **Available First-Generation Undergraduate Supports**

Existing support programs for first-generation students are more common for undergraduates and focus on student retention and academic success (Schelbe et al., 2019). These programs give FG students the confidence to adopt perspectives and behaviors that are



compatible with university expectations (Bassett, 2021). Some effective programs include academic advising (Swecker et al., 2013), institutional bridge programs (Cabrera et al., 2016; Schelbe et al., 2019; Wibrowski et al., 2016), and federal TRIO programs (U.S. Department of Education TRIO, 2023). Other methods of supporting FG students include supplemental coursework, university orientation programming, learning communities, and student support services (Wibrowski et al., 2016). Students who use these programs are more likely to increase their first-year GPA, persist past the first year, and complete their degrees (Pascarella et al., 2004; Schelbe et al., 2019).

Despite having access to these programs, first-generation students underutilize services during their first year when compared with their middle-class peers (NAPSA, 2019). While 72% of their middle-class peers utilize academic advising, only 55% of FG students take advantage of the service. Similarly, only 30% of first-generation students seek academic support services, compared to 37% of their middle-class peers using these services (NAPSA, 2019). It is conceivable that the lower proportion of first-generation students who use these services are better prepared for their post-graduate plans, especially those who undertake graduate study.

### **Successes and Limitations of Existing First-Generation Graduate Student Supports**

Research on first-generation graduate student support programs is limited (Collins & Jehangir, 2021). FG students often lack the support programs that will help prepare them to enter and succeed in graduate study (Tate et al., 2014). They find that they are unable to utilize the same support programs they may have used as undergraduates due to timing and other non-campus responsibilities, like family obligations (Hutson et al., 2022). To address this issue, a few colleges and universities offer programming specifically catered to FG graduate students (Hutson et al., 2022).

Though an exception, some schools, like UCLA's Geffen School of Medicine, are developing multidimensional FG student programming by focusing on areas like community building, intersectional/intergenerational mentorship, and student family integration (Gallegos et al., 2021). Student groups explicitly created for FG graduate students continue to proliferate and cultivate an empathetic community in lieu of the specific support that their families often cannot provide (Hutson et al., 2022). More commonly, though, FG graduate students can take advantage of programs similar to those they encountered as undergraduates, like academic advising/mentoring (Holley & Gardner, 2012) and federal TRIO programs, like the Ronald McNair Program (Gittens, 2014).

### *Academic Advising*

At the undergraduate level, academic advising has historically been labeled a positive influence on FG student retention (Swecker et al., 2013) and often decreases attrition risk at the graduate level (Seay et al., 2008). Faculty advisors serve primary roles in graduate students' path toward retention and degree completion (Burt et al., 2021). In most graduate programs, faculty advisors mediate their students' socialization into both their department and the profession (Burt et al., 2021; Collins & Jehangir, 2022; Miner, 2021). However, FG students may find navigating the faculty/grad student dynamic challenging, as FG students tend to shy away from faculty interaction (Yee, 2016).

The faculty advisor/advisee relationship may also prove problematic for FG graduate students. Some research has described faculty advisors undercutting student academic ability and using identity-based microaggressions (Burt et al., 2021). Depending on the strength of their advisor, FG students may benefit from in-program faculty advising while undertaking graduate

study. However, some of the more successfully executed support programs take place prior to their matriculation in graduate school.

### ***TRIO Programs***

TRIO Programs are sponsored by the federal government. They are composed of eight unique outreach and student services programs that identify and offer services for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including first-generation students (U.S. Department of Education TRIO, 2021). These federal programs, which serve almost 250,000 students in 25% of all colleges and universities each year, were enacted via 1964's Educational Opportunity Act (EOA) and the more recent Higher Education Opportunity Act in 2008 (Bassett, 2021; Quinn et al., 2019).

One of the more well-known initiatives in TRIO's programming suite includes the Ronald E. McNair Program. This postbaccalaureate program helps underrepresented students increase their possibility of achieving a Ph.D. through research, summer internships, and assistance in gaining admission to graduate schools, among other services (U.S. Department of Education McNair, 2023). The McNair program promotes participants' successful academic and social integration (Gittens, 2014), degree completion, and placement into doctoral programs (Ishiyama & Hopkins, 2003).

The McNair Program effectively enrolls FG students in graduate programs, as its participants are approximately 31% more likely to enroll in graduate study than their non-participant FG peers. The success of the McNair Program, however, underscores two limitations. First, not all undergraduate institutions partner with the McNair Program (McNair Programs, n.d.). Secondly, the McNair Program provides support to FG students only interested in doctoral

study. This restriction reaffirms how the specified nature of graduate programs calls for an exploration of phenomena within a single program or discipline (Gardner & Barnes, 2007).

## **Successes and Limitations of Existing Law Student Supports**

### ***FG and Affinity Student Organizations***

An examination of support programs specific to FGSOC students offers a lens into the types of support programs commonly available in law schools. As FGSOC law students generally feel a sense of not belonging in their institutions (Dallinger-Lain, 2016), they are likely to seek communities where they may find common ground with other classmates. Like their graduate school counterparts (Hutson et al., 2022), many law schools have student organizations specifically designed for both first-generation professionals and students who identify as people of color (Deo, 2012). While many FGSOC students may not have the opportunity to participate in these organizations regularly due to other responsibilities (LSSSE, 2023), they are nevertheless available.

These organizations, like UC Berkeley Law's First Generation Professionals, focus on FG student academic support, wellness, and inclusion (First Generation Professionals, n.d.). Similarly, UC Berkeley Law's Law Students of African Descent and La Alianza Law Students of Latin American Descent offer students an opportunity to engage in affinity-based empowerment and community building (Berkeley Law LSAD, n.d.; La Alianza Law Students Association, n.d.). These types of organizations provide FGSOC students with community support during their studies (Deo, 2012; Hutson et al., 2022), but some students access law school support even before matriculation.

### ***Summer Pre-Law Programs***

Though not federally sanctioned like TRIO programs, summer pre-law programs prepare FGSOC students for law school admission (Summer Prelaw Programs, n.d.). Third party organizations, like Sponsors for Educational Opportunities (SEO), and even some law schools, like Yale Law School, facilitate summer programs to introduce FGSOC students to law school curricula, provide mentors, offer LSAT courses, and prepare these students for the application process (Catalyst, 2022; The Yale Law School Launchpad Scholars Program, n.d.).

The Council on Legal Education Opportunity (CLEO) has facilitated pre-law school pipeline programs since 1968 (McClain, 2018). CLEO's current programs like the Pre-Law Summer Institute (PSLI) and Achieving Success in the Application Process (ASAP) allow underrepresented students to preview law school coursework, familiarize themselves with the Socratic Method, and gain insight into the law school admissions process on law school campuses (ASAP, 2023; Pre-Law Summer Institute, 2023). Despite the program's longevity, some research finds the program's efficacy dubious, claiming a lack of evidence that CLEO participants perform better in law school than non-CLEO participants (Schwartz, 2014).

### ***Conditional Admissions Programs***

At present, no studies correlate participation in third-party pre-law summer programs and success in law school. However, there is research – albeit limited – on law-school based pre-law school programs for FGSOC students. As of 2021, 13 ABA-approved law schools offer in-house conditional admissions programs for applicants who generally have lower LSAT scores (Conditional Admissions Programs, n.d.). While not all program websites explicitly make the claim, some of the programs state a clear focus on matriculating underrepresented students. As FG law students, most of whom identify as people of color, score lower on the LSAT than their

non-FGSOC classmates (LSSSE, 2023), there is likely a strong overlap in students who meet program criteria. Law schools select participants based on an application process either through a separate application or their submitted law school applications (LEAAP Alternate Admission Program, n.d.). Accepted students complete law coursework during the summer. Upon successful completion of the coursework, the students then matriculate at the affiliated institution as first-year law students in the fall semester.

Conditional admission program research is scant. O’Bryant and Schaffzin (2018) evaluated the efficacy of The Tennessee Institute for Pre-Law (TIP) at the University of Memphis. TIP limits participation to Tennessee or border-county residents who identify from a list of attributes affiliated with underrepresented students, including first-generation college graduate and racially/ethnically underrepresented. TIP participants simulate first-year law coursework over a five-week summer session. If they successfully meet program requirements, then they may be admitted to the University of Memphis School of Law’s fall term (TN Institute for Pre-Law, n.d.).

From 2012-2016, approximately 75% of FG TIP participants completed the program. During this same time period, approximately 66% FG TIP participants who enrolled outperformed their admissions index score, a number derived from a formula that combines LSAT score and undergraduate GPA (Academic Record, n.d.). O’Bryant and Schaffzin assert that some law schools use the admission index to predict first-year performance and offer specific GPA data for a sample of 14 FG students who successfully completed TIP and enrolled full-time. These students averaged a 2.43 GPA, whereas their average admissions index was 2.21. This positive differential, among other metrics, led O’Bryant and Schaffzin to dub TIP an “intervention that that has resulted in remarkable student success” (p. 956). They further suggest

that more law schools should adopt a similar model. When this study was published, both O'Bryant and Schaffzin were employed by The University of Memphis. Accordingly, their description of the student success as "remarkable" can only be applied relative to student performance at their own institution. The lack of comparative data from other similar programs renders inconclusive whether other law schools should replicate this type of program.

### ***Academic Support Programs***

Whereas conditional admission programs are less pervasive, most law schools offer internal academic support programs (Cabrera & Zeman, 2000; Devine & Odom, 2004). The suite of academic support programs varies by institution. Some of the most common focus on tutoring; study skills; counseling; bar exam preparation; and advising/mentoring, among others (Cabrera & Zeman, 2000). These programs gained popularity in the 1980s after law schools realized the need to bolster retention efforts for the influx of admitted Black and Latinx students (Devine & Odom, 2004; McClain, 2018). Despite the prevalence of these programs, most academic support program data do not reflect a relationship between academic support programs and retention rates (Devine & Odom, 2004). Even more problematic, these programs no longer cater to the underrepresented students they were designed to serve (McClain, 2018). Rather than meet these students' unique needs, these programs have instead expanded to support the entire law school population (Suni, 2004).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was scaffolded by a theoretical framework that uses critical race theory (CRT) through a community cultural wealth lens. As I focused on FGSOC students, the amplification of traditionally marginalized voices anchors my framework. Yosso (2005) asserts that critical race theory (CRT) can be helpful in challenging social structures and practices reinforced by racism

and white supremacy, and higher education is no exception. More specifically, she writes, “I define CRT in education as a theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses” (p. 74). Yosso’s definition of CRT in education supports this study’s use of phenomenological methodology insofar as both aim to center the experiences of People of Color (Yosso’s terminology).

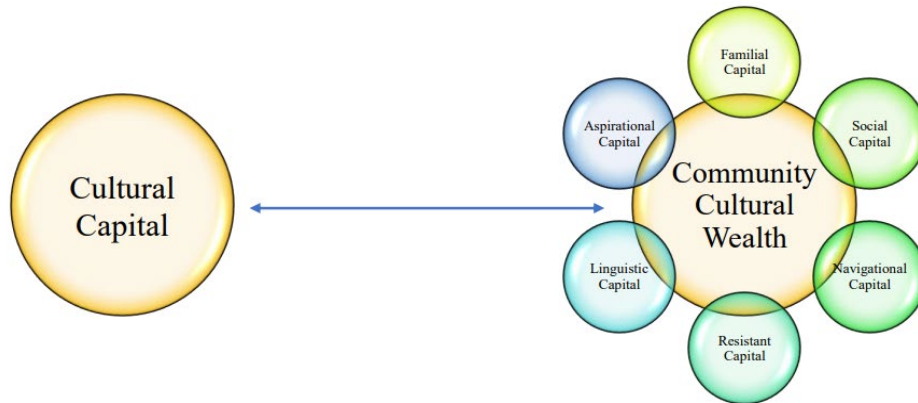
The students most impacted by these oppressive structures are students of color, many of whom are FG. These students are thought to lack the social and cultural capital necessary for college success and social mobility (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). However, the social and cultural capital that serve as a referent for college success is framed in terms of behaviors and beliefs associated with white students with middle class and higher socioeconomic status, thereby placing a deficit frame around students who are neither white nor middle class. Levin (2022) posits that for survival, FG students are assumed to abandon their racial/ethnic and/or socioeconomic background in favor of the aforementioned behaviors and beliefs.

Veering from deficit-based models, Yosso’s community cultural wealth framework argues that the varied forms of capital depicted in Figure 2.1 have the capacity to empower those who wield them.



**Figure 2.1**

*Tara Yosso's (2005) Adapted Community Cultural Wealth Model*



Like Yosso, I resist Bourdieuan theoretical models of social and cultural capital, as Bourdieu assumes “that People of Color ‘lack’ the social and cultural capital required for social mobility” (p. 70). FGSOC law graduates have likely persisted through law school in spite of Bourdieu’s conceptions of social and cultural capital. After I completed a deductive analysis of the data, mediated by Yosso’s community cultural wealth framework, the participants’ sources of empowerment became clear vis-à-vis the framework’s constitutive forms of capital. Using a community cultural wealth lens to explicate their lived experience informed not only this study’s findings but also recommendations for support programs, intervention tactics, and policy changes that will center and empower future FGSOC law students.

### **Summary**

Even with law school diversity pipeline programs, student organizations, and internal support programs, a disconnect exists between the issues FGSOC law students are facing and responsive support systems that meet their unique needs. This disconnect becomes more problematic when considering the continued increase in FGSOC law school enrollment (Krinsky, 2021). This influx of FGSOC students, however, may be stalled by the decision of *Students for*

*Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* (2023), This landmark Supreme Court found that race-based affirmative action admissions programs violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Specifically, this decision nullified *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), a decision that permitted schools to consider race in making admissions decisions.

While the reverberations of the Supreme Court's most recent decision ring loudly throughout the higher education landscape, law schools should maintain a keen interest in improving the law school experience for the FGSOC students they serve. This study both serves this interest and fills a gap in the research by centering FGSOC law students' lived experiences. The qualitative data I collected revealed how best to support FGSOC law students moving forward.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODS**

### **Introduction**

Some research describes the law student experience for first-generation students of color (FGSOC) as hostile (Dallinger-Lain, 2016) and one in which cultivating relationships proves challenging (Bodamer, 2020). Further, FGSOC lack support systems that cater to their unique needs. Through this study, I aimed to understand the unique challenges that FGSOC students face during law school and their experiences using institutional and non-institutional supports. To address these topics, this study was framed by the following research questions:

1. How do FGSOC law school graduates describe their most challenging experiences during law school?
2. How do FGSOC law school graduates describe their experiences with the institutional and non-institutional supports they utilized during their studies?

### **Research Design and Rationale**

This was a qualitative, phenomenological study that centered the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In its culmination, my inquiry uncovered the essence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) of the shared experiences of FGSOC law students and how they make meaning (Peoples, 2021) of the challenges they encountered and the institutional and non-institutional supports they used during their studies. This study largely relied on inductive data analysis of semi-structured interviews that allowed the subjects' experiences to serve as the building blocks for the study's findings. Though more limited in scope, deductive analysis, guided by the six types of capital that comprise Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model, illustrated how participants persevered through law school despite various challenges. While one may be able to glean some of this information from a survey instrument (likely at a

high respondent volume), this type of approach would have been limiting and would not have allowed for a holistic collection of rich data produced by the voices and experiences of marginalized students.

### **Study Inclusion Criteria and Participants**

#### **Study Inclusion Criteria**

I selected two ABA-accredited, U.S.-based law schools from which I secured study participants. The schools had to meet the following criteria:

1. The school has an admissions acceptance rate of 30% and lower.
2. The school has a students of color population greater than 40% but less than 60%.
3. The school is not affiliated with an Historically Black College/University (HBCU).
4. The school has an institutionally recognized club/organization specific to FG students.

By narrowing down to schools with admissions rates as high as 30%, I ensured a broad measure of student abilities not solely centered on GPAs and standardized test scores. Limiting my study sample to graduates from law schools with a 40-60% students of color population increased the probability of securing Black, Latinx, and/or Native American study participants; I estimated that schools with higher proportions of these students would yield more study participants. I excluded HBCUs because they are more successful than predominantly white institutions (PWIs) at academically and socially integrating Black students (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). As this was not a comparative study, the inclusion of HBCU law students would have changed the study's scope. Finally, FG clubs/organizations served as the initial conduit for my study's sample selection and normalized the informal support structures of the sites.

## **Access**

I did not seek access directly from any of the target law schools. Because my study participants are law school graduates, I did not have to rely on any institutional gatekeepers to mediate site access. However, I paid close attention to the variables of time and flexibility. I initially relied on current law students – who are notoriously busy – to disseminate my outreach emails. These students were not required to serve as the intermediary in helping me reach potential study participants. Accordingly, I had to maintain a certain level of flexibility to eliminate certain student groups if the students were unresponsive or not willing to assist me.

## **Site and Sample Selection**

For phenomenological studies, investigators should employ one or a combination of purposeful, criterion-based, and snowball sampling (Peoples, 2021). This study employed all three sampling methods. Purposeful, criterion-based sampling requires researchers to determine what attributes are vital to their study to select sites and/or participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Both the law schools from which I recruited participants and the participants themselves had to meet specific criteria for inclusion in the study. I initially identified 14 law schools that met site selection criteria, but I did not seek participants from all of them.

To increase the chances of securing participants in a relatively quick timeframe, I reached out to two law schools at a time, starting with those with the highest student populations. After completing several rounds of outreach and considering six law schools, I ultimately selected two schools based on responsiveness to my inquiry. In this study, these schools are referred to pseudonymously as East Coast Law School and West Coast Law School. The selections of these two schools increased the diversity of responses and decreased the chance of responses reflecting just one type of student experience.

## ***Recruitment***

My outreach included an email (Appendix A) to established FG law student groups, more specifically, the club president(s) or, if applicable, the alumni chair. In addition to a direct request to forward the email to their alumni members, this email includes an outline of my study, participant and site criteria, a link to the screening questionnaire (Appendix B), and contact information for interested alumni to inquire about participation. As a safeguard to my purposeful sampling, I also employed snowball sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) in my email outreach and encouraged potential participants to share with alumni friends who participated in the FG student group, as well.

The recruitment phase, which lasted from November 1, 2023 until December 5, 2023, moved slowly at the start. My original plan to secure participants through FG student groups saw minimal success with one affirmative response out of six requests. I next targeted affinity groups and yielded similar results: one affirmative response out of six requests. My final round of targeted outreach via email was even less successful, as no law school administrators indicated their willingness to assist in disseminating my study email. In hindsight, I was naïve about the level of enthusiasm my study would generate.

The lukewarm reception to my requests required me to regroup and determine other conduits to secure participants. I gained the most traction leveraging LinkedIn. By posting about the study and reaching out to potential candidates from each law school who were participants in the FG and/or affinity groups, I began to receive more requests to fill out the screening questionnaire. From three of the six targeted law schools, a total of 29 respondents filled out the questionnaire. I removed the third law school from consideration, as only one respondent filled out the questionnaire.

## ***Selection***

From the 29 potentially interested participants, 17 met the requirements to participate in the study. The 12 who did not qualify generally had one parent who completed at least a bachelor's degree. Of the 17 respondents who met the requirement, 12 elected to participate in the study. They are law school graduates who completed their degrees within the last six years from either East Coast Law School or West Coast Law School. Additionally, they identify as Black, Latinx, and/or Native American and come from families in which none of their parents earned an undergraduate degree. I also gleaned demographic information (age and gender), in addition to how they funded their law school education and the types of institutional support programs they utilized during law school. The 12 participants range in age from 27 to 42 with four participants identifying as male and eight as female.

## **Data Collection**

### **Document Collection**

My initial data gathering was largely a passive endeavor. I completed a web scraping of law school websites and any other publicly available documentation for existing support programs and FG student groups. This information provided a substantive working knowledge of the institutions my study participants attended. Specifically related to my second research question, this information also framed my understanding of the resources and support services currently available to FG law students. This documentation includes admissions application questions regarding FG status and race/ethnicity; class profile data; DEI mission statements and/or initiatives; affinity club/organization rosters; and student services websites for evidence of support services (mental health, tutoring, mentoring programs, and diversity/equity/inclusion initiatives, for example).

## **Interviews**

Interviews are a cornerstone of phenomenological methodology and serve as an effective instrument for collecting data directly from the study's participants about their lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Peoples (2021) argues that saturation, the point at which a researcher ceases gaining new data from participants, is the central focus of qualitative research. She maintains that a sample size between 8 and 15 participants should be sufficient. Other scholars assert that phenomenological studies should have between 3 and 10 participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Heeding advice from both Peoples and Creswell and Creswell, I aimed to conduct between 10 and 15 interviews, ultimately landing at 12. While predicting saturation ahead of time was not possible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I found that my final number of participants allowed for a diverse range of experiences without oversaturation. I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews that averaged approximately one hour in length.

My interview protocol (Appendix C) included questions broken down into broad areas of focus: family, economic/financial, social, academic, and support services questions. I also asked participants to suggest improvements that would allow law schools to improve the FGSOC student experience. These key question categories allowed me to address my research questions as they relate to the challenges my participants faced in law school, as well as the supports they used during their studies. Participants were compensated for their time with either a \$25 gift card or a \$25 donation in their name to a non-profit organization of their choosing.

I conducted interviews from December 13, 2023 through January 11, 2024. Because my study participants were located all over the country, I relied on Zoom to facilitate and record interview sessions. Zoom proved to be convenient, cost effective, and consistent. Moreover, the recording feature ensured that all interview content was preserved for future analysis (Merriam



& Tisdell, 2016). Both the audio and video recordings of interviews were downloaded from Zoom's cloud and uploaded into an encrypted cloud. I took contemporaneous notes by hand during each interview and synthesized these notes into analytic memos directly after each session (Saldaña, 2021). All interviews were AI transcribed verbatim by Rev.com, and the transcripts were stored on an encrypted cloud. Transcripts were cleaned of filler words ("umm," "like," "you know," etc.) and then formatted for analysis. Upon completion of this process, participants were given a three-day window to review their transcripts and provide any emendations or clarification notes. Two of the 12 participants requested revisions, which were made either in text or detailed in footnotes.

### **Data Analysis**

For this study, I found relational connections using thematic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) across the data corpus of 12 interviews. I analyzed participants' commentary to understand how they made meaning of their most significant challenges and their experiences using institutional and non-institutional support services during law school. After the interview transcripts were cleaned and formatted, I accessed copies in both digital and hard copy format. As shared in the previous section, digital versions were stored in an encrypted cloud; the hard copy version remained either in my home or on my person when I completed coding sessions in person on UCLA's campus. All digital transcripts were also uploaded for analysis in the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), Dedoose, which I used for data management and coding.

I undertook several coding cycles, initially relistening to every interview, correcting any unclear passages not picked up in transcription, and augmenting my original analytic memos with any relevant details previously missed. I next undertook a line-by-line deductive coding

cycle with predetermined codes (Saldaña, 2021) stemming from my study's theoretical framework. Deductive codes included the six types of capital that comprise Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model: aspirational, familial, linguistic, navigational, resistant, and social. Yosso's six forms of capital guided the deductive coding cycle insofar as I aimed to discover how the participants leveraged these forms of capital as a means of empowerment during their studies. I completed the deductive coding cycle solely in Dedoose.

I then completed two rounds of inductive coding, using the participants' words to unearth patterns in the data. I analyzed the data using In Vivo or emic coding to center participant voices (Saldaña, 2021). Though unaware of the actual codes I would discover, I projected that I would likely find codes in four broad categories: participant information, participant suggestions, challenges (corresponding to RQ1), and supports (corresponding to RQ2). As a first step, I carefully combed through the interview transcripts line-by-line in hard copy form. I underlined relevant words, phrases, and sentences in colors that corresponded to each of the aforementioned four categories and assigned two to four word phrases to encapsulate the participants' lived experiences. To ensure proper record-keeping of the codes generated, I maintained a coding matrix in Excel, which allowed for easier code recall and application for subsequent transcript analysis. As a final step in this coding round, I then transferred my hard copy coding into Dedoose not only to have the ease of a digital form but also to utilize its analytical tools. Though somewhat tedious, this process fortified my familiarity with the data corpus.

The second round of inductive coding, the synthesis phase (Saldaña, 2021), required me to condense and collapse the 73 codes I had generated in relation to my research questions. This step forced me to focus and refine the connective tissue of my emergent data (Peoples, 2021) by taking two steps. First, I lumped the 73 codes into 14 different categories, which I then color-

coded by the number of participants to which the codes applied. Second, I translated these categories into a code map split down the center with one side dedicated to each research question. This mapping offered a bigger picture view of my codes and allowed me to make visual connections between codes within and across my research questions, resulting in the themes upon which I expand in Chapter 4.

### **Positionality**

I served as a senior admissions officer at a U.S. law school from 2011-2018 and have sustained a robust network of law school admissions and student services professionals. When I encountered difficulty in the recruitment phase, I attempted to leverage my existing relationships with law school staff members to facilitate connections with FG and affinity groups. However, this failed attempt ultimately minimized selection bias and fully allowed participants to self-select into my study without third-party administrator interference. I primarily positioned myself as a UCLA doctoral student researcher and an administrator focused on antiracist and economically inclusive practices. I was transparent about my experience in law school admissions but assured participants that I had not been employed by a law school for over five years at the time of interviews.

I was an FG student in both my undergraduate and graduate studies, but postulating about the challenges my participants may have faced would be inappropriate. First, I did not attend law school, so a direct comparison would not be possible in this case. Second, while I was an FG student, I am also a white person. I was transparent about these facts and gained participant buy-in by including in the outreach email that the focus of my study is *their voice* and *their lived experience*. I emphasized that through my research, I aimed to determine recommendations for policy changes, intervention tactics, and support programs that will improve the FGSOC law

student experience and that the study participants were instrumental in this process. Including these facts in writing, preliminary recruitment conversations, and the interviews allowed me to build trust with the participants.

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

I implemented several safeguards to diminish threats to my study's credibility, especially those related to my own bias and participant reactivity. Based on my experience as a longtime admissions professional, I recognized the need to put aside or bracket (Peoples, 2021) the internal biases I carried into my study. Antiracism and economic inclusion serve as the foundation of my professional ethos and, consequently, I am predisposed to advocate for certain students over others.

As I used interviews as my main data collection method, I addressed personal bias concerns by collecting rich data – more specifically, line-by-line transcripts that were transcribed by a third party and from which I pulled direct participant quotations. I further bolstered this measure by using standardized protocols and coding procedures, which allowed me to avoid cherry picking transcript quotations that mirror my own opinions. Finally, I enacted member checking (Peoples, 2021) in which each participant had access to their interview transcript both to review and approve.

I anticipated some level of participant reactivity, as the participants were aware of my background in law school admissions. I predicted two variables that might have induced participants to provide responses that are sanitized or what they think I would like to hear from them. First, I still serve as a university administrator, so they may perceive me as part of a bureaucratic infrastructure, thereby increasing their skepticism of my research motives. Second, my established relationships with current law school administrators may overlap with

administrators with whom they worked during law school. I used care and transparency when I approached my own positionality, which generated investigator-participant trust and encouraged responses reflective of their lived experiences.

Additionally, my use of standardized protocols (asking all participants the same questions, for example) and coding procedures increased my study's credibility in light of the reactivity threat. As an added measure, I piloted my interviews with two colleagues to ensure that my protocol would allow me to build rapport with my participants, thereby encouraging them to respond to my questions as honestly as possible. Finally, I employed peer debriefing to increase accuracy and check any of my blind spots as a researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Ethical Concerns**

To guard against potential ethical concerns, I focused scrupulously on how I structured my researcher-participant relationships. Firstly, I used only my university-assigned email address – not my personal or professional email addresses – for contact between me and the participants (Peoples, 2021). To avoid participant risk during data collection, I followed the tenets of informed consent (US Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). I disclosed (and secured participant sign off) all of the information relevant to my study while also providing them the opportunity to obtain clarification directly with me if they had any questions or concerns if they were inclined to consent to participation. These discussions included a disclaimer that they were under no pressure to participate in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Upon transcription, I provided access to participants to review encrypted digital copies of their interview transcripts. Further measures for doing no harm to participants included anticipating and respecting perceived power imbalances and cultural differences, as I am a white person who interviewed people of color (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

While analyzing the data and preparing my findings, I protected participant confidentiality to the extent possible. I utilized a generic nomenclature for places connected to participants; law schools were referred to with the generic geographic descriptors “East Coast Law School” and West Coast Law School.” Places of employment, for example, were scrubbed of their real names and replaced with “Law Firm” or “Government Office.” While the use of pseudonyms is common practice in qualitative research, culturally responsive approaches encourage researchers to respect the historical and cultural aspects of naming practices (Lahman et al., 2022). For example, investigators assigning pseudonyms may be viewed as an oppressive, racist practice reminiscent of White colonizers forcing the individuals they colonized to adopt names not in their native language, but in the language of their oppressors (Lahman et al., 2022). As this study prioritized participant empowerment, participants selected their own pseudonyms – either their given first name or a different name they felt comfortable using for the purpose of the study. Any identifying information was recorded in a key that remained in an encrypted online folder.

### **Study Limitations**

As this inquiry was qualitative and had a comparatively small sample size, my findings may not be generalizable to individuals or institutions beyond those included in my study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This lack of definitive generalizability, however, will not diminish my study’s credibility. The value of qualitative studies is driven not by generalizability but by the specific description and themes revealed through specific sites or groups (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To support my study’s credibility in light of this limitation, I ensured internal validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) through standardized interview protocols and coding procedures, member checking, and peer debriefing. This study nevertheless may be useful for

other graduate programs or disciplines that seek to improve the experience for their own FGSOC students. Finally, this study focuses on participants who successfully completed law school and does not account for the FGSOC who faced challenges during law school that caused them not to complete their degrees.

### **Conclusion**

Data that explicate the lived experience of FGSOC law students make clear both the challenges they faced as students and their experiences using institutional and non-institutional support services. Moreover, this study provides law schools (and possibly other graduate schools) with sufficiently thick descriptions and rich data to inspire them to advocate for their FGSOC students and improve their in-school experience. Filling this vital research gap provides a template for other graduate programs/disciplines to explore the FGSOC student experience within their own institutions and begin to build a much-needed body of literature.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

### **Introduction**

This qualitative, phenomenological study centers the lived experience of first-generation law graduates of color (FGSOC). I selected this methodology to ensure that the participants felt empowered rather than othered. Twelve FGSOC law graduates participated in semi-structured interviews. I conducted and recorded all interviews via Zoom from December 13, 2023 through January 11, 2024. Upon completion of verbatim transcription by a third-party service, I coded each interview in several rounds using Dedoose. I then visually mapped the data codes and condensed them into themes and subthemes. A round of deductive coding, framed by Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth theory, made clear that the participants accessed Yosso's constitutive forms of capital to find success in law school. Nevertheless, these participants collectively faced a difficult path through law school marked by the shared navigation of challenges and supports during their studies. This chapter, organized by theme and bolstered by their words, reveals their grit, determination, and strength.

### **The Study Participants**

Based on their academic and professional accomplishments, the 12 participants from this study have achieved success. They distinguished themselves as undergraduates to earn admission to well-regarded law schools, completed their law degrees in the typical three-year timeframe, and secured stable post-graduation employment. Among the group are Big Law<sup>1</sup> firm associates, district attorneys, public defenders, and recipients of prestigious public interest fellowships.

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<sup>1</sup> These law firms are often regarded as the most prestigious in the world based on their revenue, global offices, and number of lawyers employed.



**TABLE 4.1***Characteristics of the Study Sample*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Law School</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Career Focus</b>
Carlos	West Coast	Male	Hispanic/Latinx	Government
Elena	East Coast	Female	Hispanic/Latinx	Private Sector
Grace	West Coast	Female	Native American & Hispanic/Latinx	Public Interest
James	East Coast	Male	Black/African American	Private Sector
Kevin	West Coast	Male	Black/African American	Private Sector
Liliana	East Coast	Female	Hispanic/Latinx	Public Interest
Melari	East Coast	Female	Hispanic/Latinx	Government
Monse	West Coast	Female	Hispanic/Latinx	Private Sector
Paola	East Coast	Female	Black/African American & Hispanic/Latinx	Government
Shane	East Coast	Male	Black/African American	Private Sector
Stephanie	East Coast	Female	Hispanic/Latinx	Private Sector
Vanessa	East Coast	Female	Hispanic/Latinx	Public Interest

The participants in this study range in age from 27 to 42 and completed law school between 2017 and 2023. More than half of the group identifies as Hispanic/Latinx, and two identify as two or more races. Female-identified participants make up a majority of the participant group, outnumbering the male-identified participants two to one. They grew up in eight different states, with most participants coming from California, and currently reside in five different states, again with most residing in California.

In their interviews, nine of the 12 participants also revealed that they come from low-income families. Some mentioned reliance on public assistance, like food stamps and WIC. FG status does not necessarily imply lower socioeconomic status, but it does add another differentiating attribute that separates them from most of their law school classmates. Just over one-third of participants come from single-parent households, while others describe large, extended families with relatives either living in the same household or in very close proximity. When asked to describe their families, some of the participants included their parents’

professions: restaurant line cook, housekeeper, truck driver, tailor, and IT professional, among others. The participants mostly spoke with a sense of pride about their parents and how they owed a debt of gratitude to them for the sacrifices they made while working in blue collar and service professions.

In talking about their families, nine of the 12 participants shared their status as first-generation Americans. More than half of them learned English as a second language and play the role of translator in their families. Participants considered this skill a powerful tool and one that made clear their access to linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005). For some, this role required dealing with everyday tasks like bill payment. Others, however, leveraged their English skills to familiarize themselves with written law to help family members, some of whom were undocumented. Participants like Elena, a 27-year-old Latina whose parents are undocumented immigrants from Mexico, decided to become lawyers to help their families:

Originally I wanted to go to law school because, growing up, my parents had often faced a lot of different immigration issues and struggles, and I always saw a good lawyer was someone that they needed and was someone they were constantly looking for.

Everyday events impacted Elena's life as the daughter of two undocumented immigrants, like diverting paths on the train if they saw a police officer. While she later realized that "even the best lawyer couldn't have solved their immigration issues," a young Elena knew she was on the right path toward helping others.

Similarly, James, a 28-year-old Black male, cited his family as the impetus for studying law and shared an anecdote about witnessing his mother endure both verbal and physical abuse from her former husband. He said, "I think living in that household and seeing that sort of power imbalance as it sits between them, definitely, maybe sparked an interest in justice and interest in

peacemaking.” Drawing motivation from this traumatic memory, James’s desire to become an attorney strengthened. He became active on his undergraduate moot court team and cultivated a productive working relationship with his coach and political science professor. James and Elena, among others, made clear their overarching goal in wanting to become attorneys. Giving witness to the fear and trauma of their parents committed them to gaining powerful tools to help others.

Largely products of public schools (n=11), most participants excelled during their K-12 years, with several mentioning placement into honors/AP/IB tracking and active involvement in extracurricular activities, like debate, music, and community service. All of the participants matriculated into four-year colleges and universities after completing high school, with more than half attending private institutions. Almost all participants focused on the social sciences, majoring in subjects like political science and public policy. As undergraduates, several left the country for the first time through study abroad programs. They distinguished themselves academically, with many among the group graduating with honors. Two-thirds of the study’s participants took time off after completing their undergraduate degrees and before starting their J.D. programs. During this time, they worked as teachers, paralegals, non-profit administrators, and academic researchers.

### **Law School Profiles**

The participants in this study attended two law schools, pseudonymously designated as West Coast Law School and East Coast Law School. West Coast is a public school, while East Coast is private. These schools are located in large, urban centers and are affiliated with R1 universities per Carnegie Classifications. Both schools are generally considered highly competitive, with acceptance rates between 12% and 16%. In most publicly available rankings, like *U.S. News and World Report*, both schools consistently rank in the top 20 law schools in the

U.S. Incoming class sizes for the schools range between 300 and 450 students, and students of color (non-white) comprising 50% of each cohort. New graduates from both schools mostly secure employment in the private sector and earn a median salary of \$215,000/year (National Association for Law Placement, Inc. [NALP], n.d.).

### **A New Paradigm: Navigating Social Adjustment in Law School**

Despite having figured out how to navigate their undergraduate years successfully and perform well academically, these participants, in many respects, started over upon entering law school. This new academic and professional paradigm required participants to access and develop new skills, social norms, and coping mechanisms. Some participants found this shift intimidating even before matriculation. James, for example, admitted that he “had a panic attack on my way to East Coast Law School admitted students day.” He felt like he would not fit in with fellow admitted students who “went to Ivy undergrads and boarding schools.”

Elena, who also attended East Coast Law School, began to have doubts after attending an admitted students program. Several of her future classmates, many from Ivy League and similarly well-regarded institutions, were unfamiliar with both her undergraduate school and its parent university system, located in the same city as East Coast Law School. She recalled, “I was asked the same question I think almost the whole night: what’s [*name of university system*]?” The experience left Elena unsure about her decision to attend, thinking, “after that initial visit, for a moment, I was like, maybe I shouldn’t go. Maybe I should just go somewhere where I know I’ll feel like I belong a little bit more.” Both James and Elena summoned the gumption to follow through with their matriculation plans, but they, along with most of the study’s other participants, quickly discovered that their next step would not necessarily be a smooth one.

## **Participants Struggle with Social Integration**

When talking about entering their first year of law school, commonly known as 1L, two-thirds of the participants recalled having a challenging start. Making friends in a brand new environment was not easy for most participants. Vanessa, who attended East Coast Law School, worked for five years before enrolling in law school and was older than most of her classmates. She encountered difficulties connecting socially and confirmed that “I’ve never been someone who gravitates towards cliques. That’s not me. So finding a friend group was really challenging.” When I probed if she eventually cultivated a friend group, she admitted, “I frankly really didn’t” and shared that she made friends more easily at her husband’s graduate school, where she spent every weekend. Shane, an East Coast Law School alumnus a year ahead of Vanessa, experienced similar issues. He said that “it was harder to make friends” and found that classmates from his section were not “particularly interested in being friendly with me.” From both of these exchanges, I inferred their struggle to make friends and connect socially. These struggles impacted the participants’ sense of belonging at the start of their time in law school.

### ***Impostor Syndrome***

Feelings of impostor syndrome is a common occurrence in FG graduate students (Collins & Jehangir, 2021). Over half of the participants affirmed this feeling upon matriculation in law school. Despite earning their place in the class, their fear of being considered as an “other,” or classmates thinking they were admitted as tokens, surfaced (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Monse, a Latina West Coast Law School alumna from a low-income family, recalled:

It was just very hard to ignore the fact that I was one of the few students of color, first of all, or just Latina in the classroom. So I think it made me question, and it was more like

me putting self-doubt on myself. Like, oh, are people thinking here's the token Latina person that was admitted. So that's the kind of insecurity that started getting me.

Monse feared that her mostly white classmates would attribute her admission solely to her identity as a Latina. Despite her impressive undergraduate record, competitive test scores, and completion of a preparatory program, Monse began to doubt her ability to succeed at West Coast Law School.

Melari, a low-income Latina who attended East Coast Law School and grew up “in an immigrant town with a lot of Mexican immigrants,” felt similarly. She related that “I think the impostor syndrome had always been real, but I think it was there through East Coast Law School. I was on high alert. I'm really sure that my application just got stuck to some judge's kid's application.” She doubted that she earned her spot at East Coast Law School and felt out of place, saying, “I don't think they meant to accept me because I don't come from those backgrounds. I don't know how to interact with them. And I don't have the Canada Goose jackets that everyone has.” Their recollection of these feelings is unsurprising given that most U.S. colleges and universities operate based on white and upper/middle class norms (Collins & Jehangir, 2021; Levin, 2022; Miner, 2021).

Elena recalled deliberately sitting in the front row in her first class and noticing two other Latinas. Her comfort was short-lived when class ended and she noticed “a sea of people that look nothing like me or the other women that are in the front.” Experiences like these, coupled with her living off-campus because she “couldn't afford dorming” made it easy for Elena to disengage:

I remember my first semester I isolated myself, so I very much made it a commuter school for me. So I would immediately leave, go home, study, study, study, study, study,

sleep, wake up in the morning, come back, classes, went back home again. I would never really study in the library. I would never really sit around. I would never go to any events. Elena felt that “everything would just be ripped away” if she did not study enough. Despite “batting a 3.9 something [GPA]” as an undergraduate, Elena could not suppress feelings of self-doubt. Unfortunately, participants’ internalized struggles with impostor syndrome did not abate as they became acquainted with their classmates.

### ***Racial Differences***

Several participants recognized a difference between them and the majority of their classmates almost instantly. Melari described an exchange with a classmate during one of her early classes in which he simultaneously offered to share an outline while also perpetrating a racial microaggression. She recalled him saying, “I can send it to you. I can only imagine how hard it is for you to be an affirmative action student here,” thus demeaning her. Melari was mostly unacquainted with this student, yet he relied on her physical appearance to make racist assumptions about her. Unfortunately, this type of race-based microaggression repeated itself early in Melari’s 1L year when three white students, who claimed they were not looking to form a study group, excluded Melari and two other students of color from a study group.

Like Melari, Grace felt the impact of race-based differences between her and her mostly white classmates. A Native American woman proud of her heritage, Grace struggled when she started law school, as she “was the only Native student in my class.” Lacking a Native American classmate with whom she could connect, she admitted that “not having another Native student that I could rely on that way was also difficult.” As she had done as an undergraduate who struggled to adjust, Grace relied on the Native American law student affinity group for support and was “very grateful for the upperclassmen.” She also confirmed that by the start of 2L year,

another Native American woman joined her in the class as a transfer student from another school. While it may not seem that the addition of one more Native American student in a law school class would make an impact, it is important to keep in mind how few of these students matriculate in any given year. For the first-year class matriculating in fall 2023, Native American students made up 0.1% of the total number (ABA, 2023) – even one additional student in an incoming class makes a difference. The phenotypic differences based on race revealed themselves plainly. Race, however, was not the only difference the participants contended with during their time in law school.

### ***Socioeconomic Differences***

Early interactions with participants' classmates exposed stark socioeconomic stratification. In several cases, this class difference only amplified participants' FGSO status and, in many instances, their low-income status. Liliana, for example, called East Coast Law School "very old money," while James asserted that most of his classmates were "from very privileged backgrounds, like 1% type backgrounds." Vanessa, who described her undergraduate institution as "affluent," likewise noticed a clear difference in her wealthier classmates:

I wasn't new to being around very affluent families, but the people at the law school were just different, a different kind of affluence. And definitely felt like there was like a stratification of people, according to what their assumptions were just by markers, social markers.

While she did not mention any specifically, Vanessa learned to translate these social markers by code switching, shifting language and behavior depending on racial and social contexts (Gray et al., 2018). On code switching (a skill some East Coast Law School classmates asked her to teach them) as "a survival mechanism," she said, "I think that I learned how to pass because of my



undergrad. I learned what things to say and how to say them.” Vanessa, a Latina who attended a PWI as an undergraduate, refers to passing via code switching and indicates an awareness that shifting her language prevented her from signaling different cultural or lower socioeconomic status to her white, wealthy classmates (Gray et al., 2018). Participants from both law schools encountered classmates who came from extreme wealth and discovered that, in many ways, it dictated the school’s social dynamic.

These social markers to which Vanessa referred materialized in very tangible ways. Kevin, a West Coast Law School graduate “felt like it was a place where if you don’t have money to go skiing or on these bar trips or go other places, that you’re kind of a weird person who can’t do things socially.” Melari expressed similar sentiments about students whose lower socioeconomic status dictated which classmates they would befriend. She recalled:

[You’re] having to choose between hanging out with friends who could afford a different lifestyle, who were given their monthly stipends from their parents or whose parents were paying for their apartments, or going to the Hamptons or doing trips, and eating out every day.

Unable to rely on her parents for money, Melari would invite friends to her apartment to cook and enjoy meals together instead of going out to restaurants. Likewise, Stephanie paid for law school on her own, often “relying on the free food from the lunches,” while Shane “didn’t take any trips.” These participants did not view their situation negatively per se – they merely understood that their experience was different than their wealthier classmates. As Shane pointed out, “that was just the reality of the situation.” However, several participants discerned that class differences did not solely manifest between them and their white classmates.

### *Socioeconomic Difference from Like Peers*

After initial attempts at fostering relationships with their fellow classmates of color, some participants discovered the one-dimensional nature of their connections. Employing an intersectional lens that adds class to the conversation illuminates why participants struggled at times to connect with classmates from the same racial background, even if they were surrounded by more students of color than in the past. Paola learned that “a lot of my peers that I had that were people of color were not first gen.” The class difference manifested in social markers that she noticed, like classmates of color who “had attended very elite colleges or very elite private schools.” These classmates mostly had parents who worked white collar professions and earned high salaries. These reflections reinforce how the confluence of race and class heighten feelings of cultural alienation (Torres, 2009).

Elena shared how the intersection of race, class, and in her case, generational status, made more complicated her attempts to connect with fellow Latinx peers:

I always felt like I couldn't a hundred percent connect with the people that I was hanging out with. I always felt when I would find someone that I would share my experiences. I think there was one time I was like, oh yeah, my parents immigrated here too. ‘Oh yeah, mine did too.’ Oh, that's amazing. ‘Where does your dad currently work?’ Oh, he's a back cook here at this place. ‘Oh.’

In this conversation with her classmate, whose parents were a teacher and an engineer, Elena explained that her parents’ undocumented status and the need to earn money prevented them from staying in school. Her classmate responded, “they must be so happy that you made it this far.” As they initially navigated law school social life, participants found that differences – not commonalities – defined how they related to their classmates.

### ***Isolation During the COVID-19 Pandemic***

Five of the participants connected feelings of isolation with their time in law school being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Participants like James and Kevin matriculated in the fall of 2020, which required them to experience the start of law school completely virtually. On forming community through “social media and Zoom,” James shared, “it was very challenging and kind of isolating. I didn't really know who I could reach out to... how do I relate to people? All these thoughts were going through my mind.” Eventually, James and some other classmates in a smaller discussion section over Zoom formed a study group, which lessened his feelings of isolation. Whether or not the participants commenced their time in law school during the COVID-19 pandemic, their social integration struggles were abundant – but fortunately, not permanent.

### **Finding Community & Affinity Group Dichotomies**

Participants indicated that extracurricular activities aided in smoothing the transition to their undergraduate institutions. Grace found that clubs and organizations made her feel supported as an undergraduate while navigating a new system. She indicated that joining the Native American student affinity group made her feel “a little bit more comfortable in my skin,” and as a newspaper staff member, she found her voice. For Carlos, a West Coast Law School graduate, pledging a fraternity gave him a sense of connection, while for James, the moot court team “was a real game changer in terms of changing my trajectory.” Participants largely found that joining undergraduate clubs and organizations facilitated their on-campus connections. They found similar benefits as law students.

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<sup>2</sup> The scope of this study did not allow for an intensive investigation of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic certain participants’ law school experience – that topic could be a powerful study on its own. Participant comments made in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic are included if relevant to the study’s overall findings.

## **The Power of Affinity Groups**

When probed about their involvement or participation in key affinity groups in law schools, participants described casual participation in groups for FG students. However, most found some of their greatest support in race-based affinity groups – officially recognized associations specifically designated for Black/African American, Latinx, and Native American Law Students. As these groups are officially recognized by their law schools, they have access to resources, like funding and event space. Initially skeptical that her law school would be a competitive, cutthroat environment, Paola, a Black and Hispanic/Latinx woman who attended East Coast Law School, quickly found herself uplifted by the Black law student affinity group:

It was very, very welcoming. There were so many really good people who were like, oh, you're public interest. Let me connect you with this alum. And there's a lot of people doing great things. And people that would ask how's your spirit? And not how are you doing? But really wanted to know. I just really felt held by that space. People really cared about how we were doing.

As an undergraduate, Paola had attended a large, private PWI without such an affinity group and found that the Black law students affinity group provided an experience “completely different than what college was like for me.” Being embraced by this affinity group made a lasting impact on Paola, as she tried to recreate a similar environment at her law firm after graduation.

Similarly, Carlos responded positively about his experience in the Latinx law student affinity group at West Coast Law School. Upon enrolling, he noticed “there were not a lot of Latinos.” The intersection of race and class amplified this feeling of difference for Carlos, whose mother is a housekeeper. He found a strong sense of community after he joined the Latinx law student affinity group. When probed, he identified this group as the one in which he felt the most

supported. This support did not end when he graduated in 2017. He confirmed that “we have a really tight-knit group of like a dozen people that we're very active over chat or WhatsApp still. Yeah, we all are very close.” For some of the participants, these groups were a saving grace during a tumultuous transition. Vanessa shared that, without involvement in a group for women of color, “I would’ve left a lot sooner,” and Grace noted that “[the Native American law student affinity group] was always like my home, and without [the Native American law student affinity group], I don’t know if I would have made it.” Membership in affinity groups served as a panacea to the feelings of isolation the participants experienced at the start of law school.

### **Affinity Groups Provided Participants with Navigational Capital**

While developing a sense of community through affinity groups, participants also gained access to other navigational capital (Yosso, 2005), like course outlines from former students and valuable career advice. Paola pointed out that “the student groups really wrapped their arms around 1Ls and gave us mentors and gave us outlines and gave us so much programming and advice.” Access to peer and alumni mentors within the specific affinity groups emerged as the most helpful benefit. Affinity group-facilitated peer mentoring programs both foster solidarity and aid in professional development (Anders et al., 2023).

Peer mentors facilitated a smoother transition to law school for some of the participants, like Stephanie, who found that the mentor assigned to her through the Latinx law student affinity group at East Coast Law School helped her “just take the first steps and know exactly where to reach out for resources and go from there.” Kevin’s mentor from the Black law students affinity group provided useful career advice, especially as someone who was navigating how to land a firm associate position without any prior knowledge of the process:

I think they were very helpful of like, hey, this is the culture. These are things that might go wrong. These are things to watch out for. And I think they're the ones that helped put a lot of the opportunities I was able to get... they're the ones that pointed me to the 1L positions and scholarships.

These relationships proved pivotal for Kevin, as he attained highly coveted 1L and 2L summer positions at a Big Law firm. These positions tend to pay high salaries and, depending on performance, result in a full-time job offer after graduation – Kevin earned both. Participants were active in these groups throughout their three years of law school, and some even took on affinity group leadership positions. However, despite these groups buoying the participants, they were not without problems.

### **Participants Find Stratification within Affinity Groups**

Most participants found that affinity groups offered them a sense of community and support. They benefitted from the navigational capital provided by current members and alumni. However, several participants conceded that class, racial, and career path stratification existed within these groups. This stratification accordingly required participants to negotiate spaces that simultaneously celebrated and alienated them.

### ***Socioeconomic Stratification***

Kevin comes from a single parent, low-income family and found tension within the club for FG students. Members debated about whether the “first gen” moniker also applied to those who were the first in their family to attend law school, thus creating factions within the group:

We felt left out because it ended up being ran by mostly people who I think wanted to apply for a lot of the diversity scholarships, and they wanted to kind of say, ‘I'm the first in my family to do law’, but then some of us would say, yes, but your family's full of

doctors and investment bankers and very wealthy people. 'cause we see you went to very wealthy private schools, and you're going skiing all the time, and we know what your family does. And it just seems like this group wasn't really for us.

This divide made the navigation of class-affirming spaces challenging for Kevin. While no participants explicitly expressed the same sentiment, Kevin's experience may suggest why most participants were only casual participants in their FG student groups.

Intra-club class differences were not limited to FG orgs. Monse recalled feeling grateful for the Latinx law student affinity group but identified that class differences, often coupled with immigration status, resulted in her feeling alienated within the group. Coming from a low-income, mixed-status family, Monse felt out of place when compared to her middle class, second- or third-generation classmates. She admitted that "although it was nice to have that in common, I felt like sometimes it was a little more isolating to realize even though we have this one thing, our experiences are very different." Similarly noticing class divergence in the Black law student affinity group, James observed that some more privileged members "were acting like they were more oppressed than their background would suggest."

### ***Racial Stratification***

Class and socioeconomic status were not the only drivers of stratification within affinity groups. Racial divides, for example, prevented participants like Paola and Vanessa from engaging in the Latinx law student affinity group. Paola identifies as both Black and Hispanic/Latinx and found her brief involvement in the group disappointing. Of her experience, she said that the group felt like it was "for white Latinos" and that "they had some misses in my opinion when it came to Black Latinos." Based on group member behavior, she perceived that her Blackness prevented her from fitting in with the Latinx law student affinity group. Vanessa,

who identifies as Hispanic/Latinx and Paola's friend during law school, provided more specific context that alludes to the tensions that emerge on campuses regarding conceptualizations of Blackness and Latinidad (García-Louis & Cortes, 2020):

I met people who were outwardly racist and would say things like, 'they're Dominican,' 'they're not the right kind of or the right percentage of Latino.' And just things that to me, I would never say that, so I didn't lean on them all that much. And I didn't really feel comfortable being around them either.

Vanessa instead found support in a group for women of color, which she referred to as "a mainstay for me." The anti-Black sentiment they felt and witnessed underpins the notion that students like Paola can be perceived as neither Black nor Latinx enough by these groups (García-Louis & Cortes, 2020), thus causing feelings of isolation.

### ***Career Path Stratification***

Melari and Kevin referred to career path stratification in their race-based affinity groups. Melari, focusing on public interest, felt that her participation in the Latinx law student affinity group was limited due to the focus and resource pooling for private sector recruiting and events. On the other hand, as a private sector student in the Black law student affinity group, Kevin "felt like if you didn't want to do public interest work, it was very difficult to fit in with the group." While it took some time, Kevin eventually connected with other "people in [Black law student affinity group] who were more on a business law track or just on a litigation big law track. And they were more attuned to what the challenges were." He indicated that while most of these students were not FG and "navigate[d] the space based on their race as opposed to by their socioeconomic status," he was happy to find common ground. Though ultimately relying on



affinity groups for support, several participants understood that affiliation came with caveats and concessions that constrained their membership.

### **Class Is in Session: The Faculty Paradox and a Steep Learning Curve**

Participants' attempts at social acclimation in law school occurred concomitantly with academic acclimation. A crucial part of this process included cultivating fruitful working relationships with faculty members. While FG undergraduate students tend to interact with their professors less (Yee, 2016), most participants remembered fondly their relationships with undergraduate professors. In fact, several participants continued to rely on undergraduate professors and mentors for support during law school. Equipped with the understanding and skills to engage with faculty, the participants' matriculation into law school signaled the opportunity for them to learn from their professors valuable information relevant to the academic and professional aspects of the law (Miner, 2021). This opportunity, however, posed yet another challenge for participants.

### **Awkward Office Hours**

Fairly standard across most U.S. law schools, the 1L curriculum lays the foundation of law (civil procedure, constitutional law, contracts, criminal law, property, and torts). Participants from both law schools also completed a compulsory legal writing course. At most schools, 1L students have little control over their course selection and, consequently, the choice of professors. As such, they may not share intellectual or professional interests with their first-year professors, most of whom are tenured faculty members. The interviewees nevertheless said they made their best efforts to foster positive student-faculty relationships.

First-year class sizes at their law schools tended to be on the larger side. Class sizes at both law schools were listed on the high side at 100 students in 1L and some elective courses to

as few as 10 students for seminar classes. Participants recognized that attending office hours presented the best opportunity for them to build relationships with their professors. For many participants, however, faculty office hours did not meet their expectations. While attending office hours was emphasized by administrators and faculty at both law schools, participants like Melari were hesitant to take up a professor's time if they did not have a specific question:

I go in, and I ask the question, and she just responded very shortly and just cut it off. And I was like, okay, I have nothing else to talk about. We just sat there, awkwardly, and I was like, this was terrible. I never, ever wanna do this again, and so I didn't go to office hours for a long time.

While faculty members may not have intended to make their FGSOC students uncomfortable, most participants translated this awkwardness as standoffish and dismissive behavior. Melari suspected that her professors were likely more focused on research than teaching and did not "know how to deal with first-gen students." The interaction lacked the personal warmth that she was seeking in a connection with her professor.

Similarly, Elena shared how she struggled to initiate friendly conversations with professors who seemed uninterested in this type of engagement. Unlike Melari, however, Elena prioritized interpersonal relationships over course content in an exchange with her contracts professor:

I didn't have a specific question in mind. I think it was more of just like me going in to connect and then sit there and go, you know, I really enjoyed this about your class. And just talk to them like a human being. And I remember going in and sitting down being [asked] 'okay, so why are you here?' I was like, oh, I just wanted to talk to you about today's class. I was really interested in this. And he goes, 'okay, do you have a question?'

I was like, well, maybe, as we continued the conversation. And then I was stuttering. And I was getting extremely red because maybe I should have come in with a question. He was like, 'I have a line of students outside. If you don't have a question, we can just talk another day.' And I was like, 'oh no, of course.' And I quickly scrambled and [got] my backpack, and I [left].

Despite her embarrassment, Elena attempted to connect with her other professors in office hours a few more times before giving up. For her, these interactions stood out in stark contrast to her interactions with the professors at her smaller undergraduate institution where she received consistent individualized attention.

Other participants shared similar anecdotes, but Stephanie captured their challenges succinctly, stating that "they all have office hours, but that doesn't necessarily mean they were approachable." Largely lacking professors who looked like him at his school, James sought a connection with a Black professor. Sadly, his interest was not reciprocated:

There was a Black professor who I had took a class with who I tried to form a relationship with and [thought] maybe we could have a mentor-mentee relationship. But nothing really came with that either because, well, I'm not really sure, but that professor just didn't really seem to wanna put in the effort to develop me or help me. So, yeah, it was kind of a bust.

This rejection came on the heels of a different professor ghosting James after he completed research for her over the summer. James could not put this professor out of his mind, however, as she taught his 1L seminar. Indeed, the lack of professor approachability extended into the classroom.

## Contending with Antagonistic Professors

Most interviewees described unfavorable relationships with tenured faculty members during their first year of law school. Kevin echoed Melari's sentiment that most faculty members "were just there to research and write, and then teaching was something that they had to do." For most participants, inaccessibility defined their negative perception of faculty members, but for some, this perception was fueled by what they felt was antagonism from their professors. Anecdotes shared by Shane and Grace reflect Dallinger-Lain's (2016) assertion that hostile interactions permeate FG students' law school experience. Initially excited that his property professor shared a similar research interest, Shane's opinion quickly changed. His enthusiasm about attending office hours soured after the professor "was remarkably hostile to me." Their relationship took a turn for the worse when the same professor pushed back on Shane's disability accommodations, which he needed to complete his exams. Shane saw how this contentious relationship embodied how he related to most of the faculty members in his first year. He admitted that he "didn't really feel a connection with any of them" and wondered why they were teaching 1L classes in the first place. He asserted, "they're not even interested in the students. They're not interested in answering questions."

The antagonism Shane details above makes clear the ways in which professors acted openly adversarial toward students. Though at a different school, Grace shared a similarly antagonistic experience with her property professor. She recalled going over *Johnson v. McIntosh*, which Grace explained was "the foundation of settler colonialism." As the discussion progressed, Grace, who identifies as Native American, disagreed with the professor's interpretation of the case and found herself isolated and attacked:

It was the second day of our property class. I'm all scared, and I raise my hand. I'm like, well, in my class in settler colonialism, this is how we discuss this case. And I just think that really undermines every precedent that this case sets up, and she cuts me off, doesn't even let me finish.

After being cut off, Grace recalled her professor asking her classmates “to raise their hand to basically say if they agreed or not.” This microaggression made her feel isolated.

However, as a self-described activist, Grace turned her reaction into action. Dissatisfied with her school’s inertia upon reporting this incident, she engaged members of an on-campus organization and fellow classmates to write letters expressing both their disagreement with how the professor comported herself and how they feared future retaliation. This incident set the tone for the remainder of her 1L year. Grace shared how her other professors crafted exam hypotheticals around microaggressions (“thugs and gangs”) or triggering events like sexual assault. These anecdotes illuminate problematic practices that prevented the participants from nurturing positive professor relationships during their first year of law school.

### **Building Positive Relationships with Faculty Through Structured Office Hours**

While participants mostly did not find meaningful connections with their 1L professors, there were some exceptions – even for Shane and Grace. For example, Shane’s constitutional law professor wound up fiercely advocating for him to receive his disability accommodations. For others, faculty members facilitated these connections through intentional activities and expectations. Participants discovered that professors mollified their office hour fears by imposing structure. Melari’s civil procedure professor required each student to meet with him for office hours, which felt to her “like 15-minute interviews for him to know where we were from and our background.” Compared to other faculty members, this professor showed an interest in Melari as

a person and not just another student looking for clarification from the day's case readings. Far from transactional, this meeting served as a turning point in Melari's 1L year:

I think he made me more comfortable with office hours. And after that he would tell me to come by his office, and we'd chat and he'd check in on me, and I really shared with him how scared I was to be in law school and how I didn't know if that was the right place for me and I didn't have anybody who I knew that was a lawyer and I didn't really know what I was doing. And from there he was like, okay, come in, let's talk, how are you feeling? How are you doing in your classes? And he slowly made me feel more comfortable talking to professors.

This professor's approach granted Melari a two-fold benefit: she no longer feared office hours, and she actively sought out working with professors, ultimately becoming a research assistant. As a testament to the impact this professor made, Melari shared that they had caught up over wine during one of her work trips to the city where East Coast Law School is located.

Paola found similar success with professors who required attendance at office hours. As a 1L she "found it hard to stand out from the pack" and learned over time that she thrives in smaller, more intimate environments. These one-on-one opportunities with a built-in purpose opened the door to connecting with one of her professors:

We had to go meet with her about the [paper] topics that we selected. And that was an in, right? That was an assignment that I could prepare for and then go talk to her about. And so she was someone that I developed a relationship with, and she was very kind and her feedback gave me the avenue to do that.

Paola admitted that she did not prioritize building relationships with her 1L professors, as she "was just trying to survive the next day's readings" and found some of the professors

“intimidating.” This sense of intimidation lessened when “there was a defined reason to go talk to [them].” While it is unclear whether these professors were well-versed in FG student tendencies, they avoided assuming that their students – FG or otherwise – already understood the behavioral rules typical of successful law students (Gardner & Barnes, 2007).

### **Successful Relationship Building with 2L and 3L Professors**

In their second and third years of law school, most participants established productive relationships with faculty members. Free from a 1L schedule over which they had no control, their upper years gave them agency over course selection. Some interviewees appreciated the autonomy to avoid larger classes like those from 1L year in which they were “one of 200.” Coming from a small liberal arts college where the largest class was 13 students, Vanessa found comfort in her elective courses and engaged directly with faculty on a more frequent basis:

I think once I was able to start choosing electives where the classes were significantly smaller, that's when I felt like I was learning, feeling significantly more engaged. I feel like I was gaining more depth than I wanted. I felt like it was what I expected law school was going to be.

Several participants crafted their schedules around smaller seminars based on their interests and engaged in experiential learning opportunities. The interviewees who enrolled in law clinics as upperclassmen spoke effusively about their experiences and their clinical professors. This shift outside the lecture hall not only empowered participants to apply law in tangible ways but also presented them with opportunities to work with faculty directly. Liliana called her clinic “a pivotal experience” that helped prepare her for a career in public interest law:

A lot of the things that she [her clinic professor] taught me were just so translatable to even the work that I'm doing now. And she really taught me how to be a lawyer

practically in a way that my other professors just couldn't because of how law school is structured. It's not really structured to teach you how to be a lawyer in practice and how to navigate client work and all of that stuff. So yeah, my relationship with her was probably the closest.

Liliana confessed struggling to connect with her other professors, but she flourished by working collaboratively with her clinical professor in an intimate, more focused setting in which they could work collaboratively as advocates. Overall, participants largely encountered obstacles in fostering relationships with their 1L professors but ultimately found more success in this endeavor during their 2L and 3L years.

### **“Like a Firehose to the Face”: Unexpected Rigor and the Shock of New Pedagogies**

Along with navigating relationships with their professors, the participants had to adjust to the law school classroom. Most of their class sizes were large, and the amount of reading increased dramatically and required more preparation time outside of the classroom. Part of this preparation included participants steeling themselves for the possibility of professors calling on them at random to test how well they ascertained case details. Sometimes these cold calls were the only way for participants to gauge how well they were absorbing the material since, as Liliana shared, “you’re just studying for one exam at the end, and that’s what your whole grade is built off of.” The results of these exams, unlike most participants’ undergraduate grades, were not based on raw scores; rather, their professors employed curve grading. Given these changes, the participants understandably found their transition to the law school classroom a challenging one.

As stated previously, all participants performed well as undergraduates and based on their admission, were primed for success in the law school classroom. Yet some participants felt



shocked by the rigor of their first-year coursework. On her rough adjustment to law school coursework, Paola remarked:

I think academically, it was a huge adjustment. And it was like a firehose to the face, and unlike every other academic setting that I'd been in, it was hard, you know? And so that was a challenge, that was humbling.

For participants like Paola, law school marked one of the first times in which they struggled in school. She observed that “not being good at or not immediately getting and acing things was like its own learning curve.” Recalling their initial challenges, some interviewees cited the reading load, dense material, and learning legal writing. However, the in-class participation requirement topped the list of classroom struggles.

### **Struggling with the Socratic Method**

The Socratic method has remained the engagement method most popularly utilized in law school classrooms. Professors use this baptism-by-fire approach to call on students – either at random or pre-assigned – so that they may assess a student’s case analysis and understanding of legal principles (Szypszak, 2015). Half of the participants identified the Socratic method as their primary challenge during their academic acclimation to law school. Described by Paola as “stressful” and Grace as “stupid,” the Socratic method required participants to make a significant learning leap. In these exchanges with their professors, participants had to think on their feet and analyze case material in real time. Thinking back to her 1L courses, Liliana recalled her uncomfortable adjustment to cold calling:

It was so nerve-wracking. I mean, you have some classes where you get an idea about when you're gonna be called because they'll do it by section. And so you'll know if your row is up next class. But for the random cold called ones, those were the hardest classes

for me because I was just constantly on edge and in fear that I would get called on. So if I didn't do the reading, I would either sit there just praying that I would not get called on or, I mean, I think there was only one class where I didn't end up going because I just hadn't done the reading that I was terrified that I'd get called on.

Though shocked at first, Liliana conquered her fear of cold calls by her third year, letting professors know “I just don’t have the answer for you” or admitting in real time that she had not read a particular case. Liliana shared that, in hindsight, she attributed initial nerves to impostor syndrome and not wanting her professors to view her as unintelligent. James extended this sentiment, saying, “the cold calling in class definitely was scary and made me not want to look stupid in front of my peers.”

Melari affirmed a similar fear and worried that classmates would perceive her as an impostor if she answered a question incorrectly. This anxiety led her to compare herself to her classmates:

They had such a better balance and a better handle on law school, and it seemed like they could bring all these theoretical concepts and they just knew who the judges were. I just felt so lost. And they were able to be so critical of the material when I was taught to just accept things as fact. And so I was like, I don't belong here. Right? I can't read something and be as critical and compare it to something else that I read in college.

Wondering if she made a mistake by coming to law school, Melari reached out to one of her mentors who encouraged her to stay the course. He reminded her that “the hardest thing about law school is that they’re rewiring you.” While they did not use this exact term, several participants commented that the law school classroom differed immensely from their undergraduate experiences. This experience was completely foreign to them and required a

retooling of their approach to learning and digesting information. From the amount of the material to the way in which they studied, participants found that this “rewiring” impacted other aspects of their academic experience.

## **Adjusting to Law School Pedagogy**

### ***Participants Encounter Learning Style Mismatches***

Part of the participants’ academic adjustment in law school entailed what I determined to be a pedagogical misalignment based on their past experiences. This misalignment translated in three different ways. Some participants discovered that the teaching pedagogy did not match their learning styles. Grace, for example, did not respond to the focus on the details rather than understanding the bigger picture of a case. Kevin felt that his undergraduate and master’s degree professors fostered an atmosphere of learning for learning’s sake, whereas in law school, he studied cases only to learn them for exams. This change impacted his entire outlook on his academic experience in law school:

I just accepted that we're not here to learn and there's no love of learning; it's just learning how to do things for an exam. And so I started, instead of learning and being interested in things, [I focused on] what's gonna be on the exam?

Kevin indicated that once he adopted the exam-focused perspective, his performance improved in later courses. While I made the mistake of not probing Kevin about this topic further, I could only infer that professors structured their courses around exams to prepare students to pass the bar exam, a vital success metric for law schools.

### ***Lacking Performance Indicators***

Some participants commented that, until receiving their final grades, they had no barometer for their performance while enrolled in their courses. Their undergraduate courses

often had more frequent checkpoints; shorter writing assignments and midterms gave them clearer indicators of performance. The sheer amount of material covered in one class caused concern, as well. This concern combined with professors determining grades solely from final exams triggered apprehension for Shane:

I also think figuring out what you're gonna be tested on, how you're gonna be tested, and how you're gonna prepare for the test. [It] just becomes this tornado that just keeps gathering steam down the road. And that was ultimately the hardest part of it is how do I even know what's gonna be on this test? How do I even know what I'm supposed to study or what it is that I'm supposed to master? That was really tough.

Shane's aforementioned disability heightened his sense of nervousness about exams, as well. After receiving her first term grades and having not completed her civil procedure exam, Liliana took advantage of her professor's invitation to discuss their exams during office hours. Although she could not retake the exam and change her grade, Liliana felt more confident about taking exams moving forward after discussing it with her professor.

### ***The Stress of the Curve***

In connection with their performance being reduced to one exam grade, participants weighed in on curve grading, a common practice in law schools. Coming from an undergraduate institution where students felt they "were in this all together," Monse was unaware that she would be graded on a curve and ranked against her classmates. For her, curve grading resulted in a more competitive atmosphere "even if people don't want to give into it." Curve or normative grading requires professors to assess individual student performance relative to the entire class, thus creating an environment in which students perceive their success as possible only when their peers are less successful (Burleigh & Meegan, 2017). While no participants explicitly made the

connection, the use of curved grading may impact student interpersonal dynamics, as illustrated in Melari's earlier anecdote about classmates deliberately excluding her from a study group.

Kevin, who attended the same law school as Monse, signaled the downside of curve grading:

I felt like it was almost a demoralizing experience because you felt like you're trapped in this curved grading thing that sometimes the professors don't believe in either. I had professors who blatantly said, 'yeah, the curve was one or two points determined if you got an A or if you got a B+ or a B minus, it was came down to like two or three points.' You're like, okay, that doesn't make me feel better because it ends up being like, okay, we're all doing the same thing but we all get radically different grades based on who put one little fact from a question in there or not.

From Kevin's perspective, curve grading was used "to create an artificial cream of the crop" to funnel the students with the best grades to competitive, sought-after positions, like clerkships, another law school success measure. Several participants asserted that curve grading did not serve as the only factor that put their classmates at a competitive advantage.

### **Participants' Classmates Gain Advantages from Attorney Parents**

Participants found that the majority of their classmates had parents not just with white collar professions but who also had attended law school and worked in the legal field. To be sure, their classmates had educated parents. Almost 75% of law students come from families in which at least one parent has a bachelor's degree, 20% with a professional or doctoral degree, and about 11% with a JD (Petzold, 2021).

The participants detected that their classmates were at a clear comparative advantage. Shane observed, "having a parent or reference point in your life that is extremely knowledgeable or an expert on the law or something like that is going to make a difference in your law school

experience.” Shane’s parents had been a consistent source of support during his high school years, encouraging him to meet with his guidance counselors and taking him to tour colleges. However, Shane did not have any resources at home to bestow any advantages upon him. As he pointed out, when he got to law school he was “beyond the point where my parents can meaningfully assist me with a lot of things.”

Liliana and James pointed out specifically how their classmates with attorney parents benefitted academically. Liliana witnessed classmates “bragging about their parents reviewing their papers or writing them in some cases,” while James ascertained that lacking these advantages would require him to put forth even more effort in law school:

I knew one [a classmate] personally who would just call her dad and ask him questions while she was studying, and he was a partner at a great firm in DC. So just knowing that you have people like that who have these resources that you don't, made me know that I had to work hard if I want to succeed.

These benefits were unavailable to students like Liliana and James, as, by that point, they were the most educated people in their families. There was, quite literally, no help their families could provide that matched that of their classmates’ more erudite families. From the start of their time in law school, the participants confronted a reality in which the differences between them and the majority of their classmates were unmistakable.

Based on their testimony, participants found their academic experience at law school one in which they were both challenged and supported. The participants yet again found themselves navigating a new school environment, and their acclimation was not without hiccups. Nonetheless, they persevered, as their motivation for attending law school was never far from their thoughts.

## **FGSOC Families: A Mixed Blessing**

As previously discussed in this chapter, most participants spoke fondly about their families, and several identified their families as a motivating factor for attending law school. During their interviews, candidates spoke frankly about undocumented family members, home foreclosures, job loss, and a parent's cancer diagnosis just before the start of 1L year. The familial difficulties participants dealt with on top of law school underscored their resiliency and resourcefulness. The participants responses suggest that FG graduate students' families can serve as both a support and a challenge.

### **Participant Families Provide an Escape from Law School Stress**

When asked to talk about their families, no participants spoke about a prototypical nuclear family – a household with one father, one mother, and their children. Rather, the composition of their families included single and stepparents, intergenerational and extended family households, aunts and uncles<sup>3</sup>, spouses, and non-law school friends. These descriptions evoked Yosso's (2005) assertion of "a more broad understanding of kinship" (p. 79). Indeed, when prompted, most participants identified their family members – broadly defined – as their main source of support not affiliated with their law schools. Sustaining connections with non-law school friends provided opportunities to disconnect from the pressures participants regularly faced as law students. Monse appreciated these opportunities to escape, even temporarily, sharing, "I have a really close friend that I've had since middle school. And so [it was] just always nice to be able to check in with her and not have to talk about law school." Paola echoed Monse's sentiment, relaying how her closest non-law school friend served a critical role during her most hectic times. She recalled, "at the time where I was most stressed, most burnt out, I

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<sup>3</sup> Grace used this term and clarified that she was not referring to biological aunts and uncles. She said, "it's just like when you're Native, everyone's kind of – anyone older than you is like your auntie and uncle."

would call her. And it was a nice reprieve to be able to go there. And she didn't understand the stress. And so we just did other things.”

Some participants’ spouses played a similar role, providing comfort and support away from the law school environment. Others like Elena relied on their partner for financial support, while Vanessa’s husband provided her with the nurturing community she could not find at East Coast Law School:

My friend group was at my husband's graduate school. That's where I would go away on the weekends. Had it not been for them, I don't know if I would've... I probably would've taken a leave of absence from East Coast Law School and gone somewhere else.

Through her husband, Vanessa also accessed effective mental health and DEI services. By unveiling the varied resources her husband provided, Vanessa made unequivocally clear the need for familial support during her studies.

## **Families Provide Specific but Necessary Support**

### ***Moral and Emotional Support***

Most participants’ parents provided moral and emotional support for their educational goals. The participants serve as an emblem of their families’ ability to aspire beyond their current situation despite adversity (Yosso, 2005). Despite lacking higher education, participants’ parents ingrained in them the importance of earning a postsecondary degree (Sterk & Olson, 2024). Shane’s parents, for example, strongly encouraged early and frequent interactions with his guidance counselor, while Grace recalled that even when she was a child, her mother and grandmother frequently affirmed her intelligence and asked which college she wanted to attend. This type of moral support continued in law school for most participants. Melari attended East Coast Law School while her large, close-knit family lived thousands of miles away. She admitted



that living so far away from them while attempting to perform well in law school took a toll on her mental health. Not wanting to let them know she was struggling, she often resorted to self-isolation. Melari recalled being unable to return home for Thanksgiving break and feeling uplifted when her father flew to celebrate with her:

They [her parents] were very supportive and knowing that I couldn't fly home for the holidays and being there, and we would buy food from the market. And we would order all the Thanksgiving food and actually, friends from my class and the class below used to come over, who were also from [Melari's home state] and couldn't fly home for the holidays. They would come over and we would just have Thanksgiving and my dad got to know my friends, my friends loved my dad. It was great.

Melari disclosed that her family had a difficult time accepting that she would be so far away from home for three years, but her parents ensured they would stay connected.

### ***Basic Needs Support***

Some participants' families augmented their emotional support by providing basic needs. Carlos, Shane, and Liliana relied on their parents for housing during some of their law school years, a benefit that allowed them to avoid the high cost of living near their law schools and in some cases, reduce their student loan amount. Monse's family would "go over on the weekends to drop off food for the week. They would say, you know, maybe we can't cover your tuition or do more, but we can at least take this burden off your shoulders." Her sister, who she looked up to as their first in their family to attend college, would send her money for coffee.

Elena's mother found a way to nourish her with homecooked food while at the same time giving her the emotional sustenance she needed during final exams:

After each and every single final, I would, as if I was possessed, I would immediately, without thinking about it, just go straight into the train and go all the way back home. And after every single final I'd show up and I'd be like, oh my God, it's a surprise. She knew I was coming, but she's like, 'it's a surprise I made you this food!' And I would just sit there, and she'd just sit there. We'd silently just sit there as I ate, and I'd finish eating and she'd be like, 'so how are you?' And I'm like, I'm here. That's really all I can say. I'm just here, finished eating. And then I'd commute all the way back to my apartment because I had a second final to take the following day.

While homemade meals relieved them from what Elena called “Trader Joe’s microwaveable food,” their families’ gestures demonstrated a culture of caring that deeply impacted both Monse and Elena’s emotional well-being (Yosso, 2005). Most participants expressed deep gratitude when speaking about how their families helped them as much as possible during law school. Accompanying this appreciation, however, was the concession that there were very specific ways in which their families could support them.

### **Families Unable to Understand Participants’ Path**

Despite communicating love and admiration for their families, most participants acknowledged that their families lacked an understanding about their path toward becoming attorneys. For the most part, they did not contend with the resentment that some FG graduate students face from their families (Sterk & Olson, 2024). They nevertheless felt that without their families’ genuine understanding of their law school experience, they could only rely on themselves. Given that participants successfully completed their bachelor’s degrees, their families may have assumed that they were smart enough to get by on their own. According to Kevin:

I felt like they didn't really understand a lot about law school and I felt like they were like, oh, you've always done really well in school. I'm sure you can do it, and you always do really well. And so it was like they just assumed things would go well.

With two younger brothers and a mother who was a high school graduate, Kevin could not expect his family to have a referent for what to expect in law school. James felt similarly, claiming that his family “didn't really know what I was going through. They didn't know what law school was like, so they only can kind of help you so much.”

Liliana shared that her parents did not understand why she was so upset about her first LSAT score or “why I couldn't just commute 2L and 3L year and why I had to be so involved in these activities or why I wasn't just dropping them.” Both of Liliana's examples demonstrate her parents' lack of knowledge about the importance of outcomes for law school students. Regarding the former, a lower LSAT would have limited Liliana's ability to attend a competitive law school, and the latter, Liliana's activities augmented her resume, making her more attractive to post-law school employers. Elena recalled a conversation with her mother about the cost of attendance at East Coast Law School:

I remember telling her how much it would cost, and it was such a culture shock that she didn't understand the number, like in her brain, numbers didn't go above the hundreds. And so when I told her that although I had a 50% scholarship, the other half would be anywhere around \$150,000. And she was like, ‘what do you mean?’ And I said the number in Spanish. And she was like, ‘I'm not understanding.’ And so I wrote it down for her and she was like, ‘I'm not getting the number.’ So it was a few minutes of just explaining what that means. And for a moment she was horrified.

Coming from a low-income family with undocumented parents, Elena had financial aid that completely covered her undergraduate degree, hence her mother's sticker shock. As she combed over the financial information, Elena thought about how many years her father, a line cook, "would have to work to be able to get even near that amount." She sensed her mother's bewilderment and wanted to avoid upsetting her further, so Elena stopped the conversation. Completing her due diligence and recognizing that she was investing in herself, Elena took on the emotional and financial burden of paying for law school. The participants developed an increased level of self-reliance as a result of their families lacking an understanding of the world in which they now operated.

### **Financial Independence & Future Family Financial Obligations**

For most participants, self-reliance meant that they received no family financial support during law school. When I questioned them about law school finances, most participants responded matter-of-factly that their reality was one in which their families could not afford to provide monetary support. When asked, Stephanie recalled, "I don't think I ever asked my parents for money during law school." While nearly all interviewees confirmed they received some level of scholarship funding from their law schools, they all confirmed taking out high amounts of student loans.

Because their financial aid packages did not always cover the full cost of attendance – especially given the high cost of living for each law school's location – participants relied on wages from their summer positions. Though discouraged by their law schools, some participants held jobs during the academic year. Grace ignored her law school's recommendation not to work when she found she needed more money to afford attendance at West Coast Law School and took positions at both her law school and other public interest organizations. Elena initially

worked one part-time job at her undergraduate institution but had to take on a second part-time job and send money to her family when her father lost his job at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Vanessa and Kevin also remembered sending money to family members in need during law school. However, Kevin, along with several other participants, placed more emphasis on what they felt were future family financial obligations. Kevin acutely understood that he would provide for his family in the future:

I saw the writing on the wall, that as my family aged, they would be able to support themselves less and less, and I kind of knew that was coming... and my brother's loans, too. I'm gonna have to be a connector person between where my family is now and helping them just to be able to be okay, but also helping myself and my future family that I'll have be able to do the things we want to be able to grow.

This commitment to his family was a deciding factor in Kevin seeking a position at a Big Law firm. Having graduated and now earning a healthy salary as a corporate associate, Kevin made more feasible his family's financial security.

Other participants felt compelled to take post-graduation private sector jobs despite aspiring to work in public service. Shane, for example, completed a clerkship and then had to take a job as an associate at a Big Law firm. Speaking candidly, he shared that his family obligations "forced me to do shit I don't want to do." Shane financially supports "the same grandparents who helped to raise me" but did not resent helping his family. Rather, he took umbrage at the notion that as a graduate of a competitive law school with a high-paying job, he enjoyed the same advantages as his non-FG classmates:

I believe the great difference maker in all of this is when you're backed by intergenerational wealth, you have that, right? I have a friend who's quit the law, and the

only reason why she was able to quit the law and do what she really wants to do is because her father paid for her law school, and she went to East Coast Law School. So her father was paying \$80,000 every year for her to go to law school. If you have a quarter of a million dollars in your bank account and you can afford to pay for someone's law school and you have other kids too, chances are you don't just have a quarter of a million dollars in your bank account, you have a million or more. And that makes a difference. That's freedom for her.

For Shane, his student loans and family responsibilities dictate not only the jobs he selects but also his ability to build generational wealth. Like the others, he is a pioneer in his family who, by virtue of his academic and professional achievements, is tasked with breaking generational cycles (Sterk & Olsen, 2024). All participants broke their family's lack of higher education cycle, while others conveyed their eradication of familial poverty and abuse. Across their responses, the participants crafted complex narratives about their families, simultaneously rooted in a place of connection and a place of difference.

### **Institutional Supports Provide Inconsistent Service**

During our interviews, the participants described how they relied on institutional and non-institutional supports during law school. Per the interview protocol, I asked the participants to detail their experiences with commonly found institutional supports: academic support; career management; mental health counseling; financial aid; and structured mentoring programs. In the aggregate, participant responses regarding academic support mostly reflected a lack of engagement with academic advising, tutoring services, and teaching assistants. Most participants spoke positively about structured mentoring programs, as described earlier in this chapter. The

remaining supports – financial aid, career services, and mental health services – elicited the strongest responses.

### **Financial Aid Frustrations**

Compared to their non-FG classmates (23%), 35% of FG law graduates incur in excess of \$120,000 of law school debt (LSSSE, 2023). FG students who also identify as Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx represent the highest percentage of law graduates with more than \$120,000 of law school debt at 44% and 48%, respectively (LSSSE, 2023). Not all participants shared their exact amount of loan debt upon graduation, but most intimated that they borrowed high amounts to attend law school. Some also received scholarship funding with no participants indicating they were granted a significant amount. Their status as loan borrowers and scholarship recipients, as well as some participants' reliance on loan repayment assistance programs, required regular engagement with the financial aid office. Participants' perceptions of their interactions and experiences with their financial aid offices, which were housed within and only served each law school, were largely negative.

Because most participants painted a less than flattering picture of their law school financial aid offices, I re-listened to the portion of the interviews in which they discussed their experiences. Most participants spoke about their experiences with the financial aid office in a straightforward manner without any discernible ire. If anything, their delivery suggested ownership over the decision they made to attend law school despite the high cost. However, two participants' testimonies – Vanessa and James – merited a closer look. The content and tone of this interview section evinced how these participants endured traumatizing practices from their financial aid offices.

### *Traumatic Policies and Practices*

Vanessa recounted her initial interaction with the financial aid office at East Coast Law School, pinpointing this experience as one that singularly impacted her law school transition. For financial aid consideration, Vanessa had to submit several years' worth of parental tax forms regardless of the fact that she had been working for five years. To make matters worse, Vanessa disclosed her status as a domestic abuse survivor and that she had not spoken to her father since she was 19. After sharing this information with the financial aid administrator, Vanessa was told that without the tax forms, they would assume her parents were wealthy and would not consider her for need-based financial aid. Knowing that she needed financial aid to attend law school but fearful of being "berated" by her father, Vanessa covertly conspired with her mother to retrieve the necessary documents:

My mom unlocked the windows on the first floor of their home and texted me and told me when she was not going to be home and when I could expect my dad to be home. And I had to jump the fence to get to their backyard, jump in through one of the windows, go upstairs to their bedroom and find the boxes where they had their taxes, take pictures, send those pictures to the UPS store, and print out a copy there. And it was the most traumatic, like to this day I have heart palpitations right now, because it was just so traumatizing.

Vanessa revealed that she met two other women who faced the same financial aid roadblock.

While neither of those women participated in the study, James, who entered law school the year after Vanessa graduated, endured similar treatment from the financial aid office. Like Vanessa, James had a fractured relationship with his father who, when asked if he would share tax information, "rudely told me he would not do so." James saved these voicemails and



submitted them to the financial aid office in hopes of circumventing the requirement – he was not successful:

It actually resulted in me having to have two of my professors from undergrad write declarations and support of me basically describing my background with my father, that I never really had a relationship with him. Which was very triggering because you have to provide this information to them. I mean, they knew a little bit about it, but I had to basically give them my entire life story just for them to be able to write this letter because it couldn't be from a family member.

These interactions with the financial aid office emblemized James's and Vanessa's transition to law school. This distressing process inspired James to initiate change. He joined student government as a 1L, worked to remove the policy, and succeeded in having it eliminated with his "story being one of the main drivers." By enacting resistant capital, James exhibited "oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80), and, in doing so, ensured that his future classmates would not encounter the same re-traumatization that that he and Vanessa faced.

### ***Harmful Communication Practices***

James's efforts to change policy yielded a reactive response from the financial aid office instead of a proactive one. Until James's story resonated enough to enact change, the financial aid office had not acted empathetically toward students when they expressed past trauma. Stepping back to consider the root issue, I inferred poor communication practices, an overarching problem that half of the participants raised during their interviews. Kevin, for example, received a poorly timed email from the financial aid office at West Coast Law School:

March of my 2L spring, I got an email on a Friday afternoon at 4:00 PM that said, ‘oh, there's been an error. You were marked as a California resident, but we were paying you loan money as if you were not a California resident. So you've been over given loan money in the amount of \$8,000, so you have two weeks to pay us back \$8,000 or we're going to submit this to the university holding this year delinquent on a payment.’ And they just left the office.

Kevin underscored the problematic nature of both the timing and content of the email he received. Instead of reaching him directly to discuss such an important matter and assuming he could afford the overage, the financial aid office forced him to spend the weekend thinking about how he was going “to live on a \$500 a month budget for the rest of the school year.” After significant back and forth between Kevin and the financial aid office, he proposed a solution they had not considered but ultimately adopted. Perhaps more glaringly, the \$8,000 that Kevin purportedly owed resulted from an error made by the financial aid office.

Several participants considered the inadequate communication cavalier and contended that the financial aid offices assumed they came from wealthy backgrounds like many of their classmates. As Shane pointed out, even documents designed to help students achieved the opposite:

Their loan repayment assistance program handbook is one of the most confusing documents I have consulted in my life. And to this day, when I went on a few years ago to see what is the process for a clerkship loan deferment, it was the most confusing language that I had read. At this juncture, I read contracts, laws. I mean, literally, I read confusing documents every day. It's part of my job to distill what they mean. And I'm

like, this document is useless. You have to call someone. And when you call them, typically they're pointing you to the document, and it becomes this loop.

Shane's frustration resulted from the lack of effort put forth by the financial aid office to help guide students through processes with major fiscal implications. Based on these anecdotes, the participants' exasperation is merited, as they are incredibly astute people – or in this case, consumers – whose time is being wasted due to their financial aid offices resisting any sort of accommodations or exceptions.

Paola and Liliana shared Shane's dissatisfaction with the financial aid office's haphazard and often absent communication about loan repayment assistance, a crucial program for students taking lower-paying public interest jobs. They both recalled searching for information on their own or relying on friends to discover additional loan repayment programs that significantly reduced the years required for forgiveness. Given how much they paid each year in costly tuition, the participants justifiably expressed disappointment with their financial aid offices' policies and practices. Their experiences convey a model of support and service that fails to center students, especially those that require the most help.

### **Career Services Guide the Way**

Before entering law school, participants understood the academic rigor would require intense focus. For most law students, strong academic performance correlates with more lucrative job opportunities – premier clerkships, Big Law associateships, and prestigious postgraduate fellowships. With no lawyers in their families, participants initially lacked a working knowledge of their law schools' job culture. While their affinity group memberships provided peer counsel and recruiting events, participants relied on career services for job search

guidance and industry norms. Regardless of their professional sector, almost all participants confirmed feeling supported by their law schools' career services offices.

### ***Private Sector Career Services***

At both law schools, the majority of graduating students landed in the private sector after graduation. Several participants have shifted sectors in the years since completing their degrees, but exactly half of them worked at law firms directly after graduation. The generous six-figure salaries and unparalleled resources made these positions attractive to students trying to mitigate loan debt and financially assist their families. Most 2L students secure these positions by participating in large-scale, multi-day recruiting programs that take place before the start of the academic year. During these events, they meet with multiple law firms looking to hire students for summer associateships and, ultimately, full-time post-graduate offers. Despite expressing frustration with most institutional support programs, Shane valued the services offered by the private sector career services office. He “found that the career advising was very, very helpful in terms of preparing materials and preparing for an interview.” Paola echoed Shane’s sentiment, affirming that “East Coast Law School does private sector advising extremely well.” Both participants secured 2L summer associate positions and full-time job offers from highly regarded firms.

Initially intending to work in public interest, Elena panicked going into her 3L year. She realized she might struggle to take care of her family financially after graduation with a public interest salary. Though Elena missed on-campus interviewing for firm positions, the career management office nevertheless coached her through the process:

They were very supportive. They thought that I was a little crazy [with] that switch a little bit towards the end. But they helped me the best way they can and were always

there to do mock interviews and to read my resume and adjust accordingly. So they were very kind.

A professor helped Elena secure a firm-sponsored post-graduate fellowship with the option of joining the firm afterwards. The guidance she received from career services helped Elena as she transitioned to firm work upon completion of her fellowship. She said, “I’ve learned to enjoy it [firm work], and I’ve definitely enjoyed the economic abilities it’s afforded me. A lot.” While several participants, like Elena, planned to work in public interest after graduation, those who pivoted to firms were well-served by private sector career services.

### ***Public Interest Career Services***

Two-thirds of the participants utilized public interest career services, which, like their private sector counterparts, were positively regarded. The career search for public interest students generally occurs on a more protracted timeline with many students not securing jobs until their 3L year. Compared to private sector jobs, fewer of these positions exist, thus making them more competitive. Because of these factors – and the smaller number of students pursuing these types of jobs – the participants described a more bespoke experience than the private sector.

The one-on-one relationships the participants cultivated with the public interest career staff provided a sense of comfort as they faced a tough job market and lower pay upon graduation. Both Grace and Carlos, the two West Coast Law School participants focused on public interest, benefited from their school’s career services. Grace was selected for one of the country’s most well-regarded postgraduate fellowships, while Carlos landed a position in his preferred area of focus. Speaking of the relative ease with which he secured post-graduate employment, Carlos shared:

We'd meet once a semester to talk about the job hunt, and they [public interest career services] have a very wide alumni network. They would put you in contact with folks. One of the professors in the public interest program literally just made a phone call and got me a job. I was interested in union side labor law, and he is really big in the labor law union scene and just called a partner at a law firm, a union side law firm, and got me a job. It was just like that.

The willingness to advocate for their students as described by Carlos seemed to be regular practice at both law schools' public interest career services offices, even after students graduated.

As an alumna, Vanessa reached out to East Coast Law School's public interest career services office to discuss professional options as she battled a serious illness. She was met with empathy:

I reached out to them a couple times when I was starting on my [illness] journey and when I was thinking of just pushing myself and just starting to work again. But obviously I thank God I didn't. But they were really helpful in just helping me reframe what kind of work I could be taking on at this time. And that was important for me to understand.

Vanessa spoke effusively about her public interest career services advisor and painted her as an administrator on whom she depended for both career and academic advice. However, like some other participants, Vanessa reflected on how private sector career services overshadowed public sector. Paola, who utilized both offices and served as the president of the public interest student group, likened this overshadowing to "begging for scraps." This observation, along with some complaints about specific personnel in both offices, comprised the limited negative commentary about career services at both law schools.

Given the discordant descriptions of financial aid and career services from participants at both institutions, I attempted to determine potential root causes that explained the differences. Because both offices were housed within their law schools and served only law students, I could not deduce any comparative difference based on services offered within only the law school versus those available to the entire university community. While re-reading the participant responses about career services, I came across a possible connection in a comment from Kevin's transcript. Finding that private sector career services prioritized placement over relationship building, he opined, "I guess I don't really fault career services because, like I said, they get a publicly distributed metric every year that says what their students are doing now, and then they get graded on that." Kevin's assertion does not provide definitive proof that explains the difference in the quality of service. However, an examination of the relationship between a student-facing office's quality of service and the requirement of publicly reported metrics may illuminate the difference.

### **Mental Health Services Fail to Bring Inner Peace**

At both law schools, the financial aid and career management offices served only law students, whereas mental health services were operated by their law schools' parent institutions and made available to the entire student body. At the undergraduate level, FG students' mental health struggles can be exacerbated by their perceived mismatch with college-going norms (Rockwell & Kimel, 2023). While no studies have made similar claims about FG law students, it is reasonable to posit that their shift to a new environment may have heightened their mental health struggles.

Among their responses, participants admitted to contending with depression, ADHD, secondary trauma from clinical work, a friend's death, a parent's cancer diagnosis, among other

challenges. Half of the participants confirmed their use of mental health services during law school. Elena, who did not utilize mental health services, expressed regret at not paying more attention to her mental health during law school. She acknowledged that she “tragically had a terrible mental health regime. So I knew I had access to it. I just never took the step to go and get it.” Monse opted not to seek mental health support as a student but started therapy her first year as a practicing attorney. Of the participants who used mental health supports, only two affirmed positive experiences. Melari felt a connection with her therapist, who was the only Latina available on staff. Despite her therapist’s specialization differing from Melari’s needs, “she still allowed me to go to her for sessions, and she was really good.”

The remaining participants felt insufficiently supported by mental health services. Shane failed to connect with any of the therapists he was assigned, while Grace relied on a non-university therapist. She explained, “I didn’t have West Coast Law School insurance. I opted out ‘cause it’s insanely expensive for no reason. I just used Medicaid.” Like Grace, Vanessa ultimately sought mental health services outside of her law school, but not due to lack of trying:

I've done mental health counseling for a long time. But I restarted at East Coast Law School. I didn't find it to be super helpful. I know that I started getting depressed my first year of law school, but the therapists at East Coast Law School were very resistant to helping me get on medication, like an SSRI or something.

Friends from Vanessa’s affinity groups corroborated that mental health services would not prescribe them with certain medications. Instead of suffering – and like she had done to replace several services at East Coast Law School – Vanessa used mental health services at her husband’s graduate school.



Similarly, Kevin also faced mental health struggles during his first year of law school, which coincided with the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. When he found himself struggling to meet deadlines and feeling isolation from taking all of his classes online, he took the initiative to seek help from his university's mental health services. Unfortunately, Kevin's assigned caseworker turned out to be unreliable and neglected to show up to their first session:

This person had reached out to me. We had made a time. I said I was excited to meet with them, and then I think a week or two later they tried to circle back or something, but they just pretended we never had a meeting set up. And it was weird because they had not only confirmed, but then I had reached out and said, sorry, I missed you, you know? And then they pretended like I had never sent any of those emails or they didn't send any of the emails.

The caseworker's initial ghosting and eventual gaslighting tainted Kevin's perception of his school's mental health services. Despite genuinely needing mental health assistance, he never used their services. FG undergraduate students tend to use mental health support services less than their peers (Lipson et al., 2023), but several participants followed the opposite path as law students and actively sought help. These participants were largely failed by their institutions in providing them with sufficient mental health services during their most challenging times.

### **FGSOC Student Participants Did Not Feel Supported by Their Law Schools**

My synthesis of the study's interview transcripts revealed that participants had far more to say about their challenges than their supports during law school. Nevertheless, one-third of the participants declared that, despite the many challenges they faced, they were still grateful for their law school experience. They framed this perspective around their post-law school outcomes, acknowledging their law schools gave them "a leg up" in navigating the competitive

legal landscape. Carlos, who grew up in a low-income household, confirmed the socioeconomic advantages that attending law school provided:

I feel like I would be very ungrateful to say that it wasn't a positive experience. It has allowed me to jump up multiple tax brackets from where I grew up to have opportunities that I never would've had if I had not gone to undergrad, [had I] not gone to law school.

Based on their post-law school outcomes, the participants benefited professionally from having gone to law school. However, participants expressing gratitude for the outcomes law school provided them does not preclude them from criticizing their law school experience. I prompted participants to consider their entire law school experience and rate how well their law schools “supported them as first-generation students of color.” Responses were overwhelmingly negative. Regardless of how participants assessed their overall experience (participants used a 1-10 or A-F scale or used verbal descriptions), the general sentiment could be reduced to, as Shane described, “not very well.”

### **On Their Own and Overworked**

This chapter’s unpacking of the challenges the participants faced bolsters their largely unfavorable opinion of how their law schools supported them. In scanning the transcripts for other contributing factors, I detected two themes. First, participants described their time in law school as largely self-directed. Examples of their self-directed experience included course selection, job searches, and loan repayment programs. FG students generally persist through self-motivation and personal accountability (Gardner & Holley, 2011), but these characteristics becoming proxy for these students being “fine” sets a precedent in which FG students are left unsupported.

While participants determined the limited supports on which they could rely, they could not take for granted that their law schools would automatically assist them. As Grace pointed out:

The only time I ever felt supported was by students and a select few professors. And for the select few professors, I feel like I sought it out versus like being provided it, if that makes sense. And then I was able to find supports through law school, but I had to very much find it myself and seek it out myself and figure out how to utilize it in a way that worked for me.

Grace referred to herself as a “proactive person,” which motivated her to figure out her path to achieve her post-law school goals mostly on her own. However, she admitted that her process should not be the norm.

Second, participants addressed that during law school they undertook labor in place of law school faculty and administration. This concept of *in loco professoris* materialized for some participants in relation to taking on the burden of creating FGSOC support infrastructure.

Vanessa failed to understand why this task was incumbent on her and her classmates:

I feel like a lot of the support that students relied on had to come from the students, and that just took time away from us being able to focus on stuff we had to focus on, like coursework. And it felt more like it started, especially during 3L, it felt more like a chore than anything else. And it felt like, why is this yet again falling on us when we're going to this institution that we know what the endowment is.

Vanessa describes a problem analogous to the invisible labor that women faculty and faculty of color feel compelled to take on because of the resultant institutional benefits (Gordon et al., 2022). While her fellow students benefited from the creation of these intra-community support

structures, Vanessa astutely asserts that this labor should not have taken priority over their student responsibilities.

Liliana expanded on Vanessa's observation, claiming that she and her classmates absorbed "the burden on first gen students to create those structures for themselves and bring the resources to the first gen students when really the administration should have been doing that." Faculty and administration shifting these responsibilities to students who identify as FGSOC illuminates how their law schools may be unprepared or unaware of how to serve these student communities effectively. This institutional oversight reinforces how colleges and universities flaunt vanity metrics that give the appearance of a diverse institution (percentages of women, students of color, FGLI students, etc.) but do not serve these populations when they matriculate. As Shane pointed out:

These students are the backbone of changing the culture at these institutions, which historically, have been kept from certain segments of the population. And everyone knows that these students make their campuses, their law schools a better place, and help everyone collectively by reflecting the society that we live in.

Shane's assertion carries even more weight when remembering that the number of law students of color – and accordingly, FG students – continues to increase (Krinsky, 2021). As made evident by the participants' testimonies, law schools are not providing these students with the support they need during their studies.

### **Participant Suggestions for Improving the FGSOC Law School Experience**

Centering the participants' lived experiences remained one of my study's overarching goals. With the knowledge that I would make recommendations to improve the FGSOC law student experience, I included in my interview protocol an opportunity for the participants to

suggest programs, protocols, and/or policies that would have been helpful during their studies. I do not engage each of these suggestions in the recommendations that follow in the next chapter. Nevertheless, I determined their full inclusion to be vital, as proceeding otherwise would contravene my intention to honor the participants’ voices.

**Figure 4.1**

*Participant Suggestions for Improved FGSOC Law School Experience*

<p><b>Academic</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hire more diverse faculty</li> <li>• Faculty-student mentoring programs</li> <li>• Faculty training programs</li> <li>• Different academic track options</li> <li>• Structured assignments earlier in 1L year</li> </ul>	<p><b>Financial</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial literacy programs</li> <li>• Increased financial aid</li> </ul>
<p><b>General</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen to students of color</li> <li>• Engage in earlier and more consistent intervention</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student Services</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formalized bridge programs</li> <li>• Formalized FG programs</li> <li>• Improved mental health services</li> <li>• Robust DEI office</li> </ul>

I found that the participant recommendations in Figure 4.1 respond to the challenges they faced during law school. Some participants already made positive impacts for FGSOC during their time in law school. As detailed earlier in this chapter, James deployed resistant capital (Yosso, 2005) to eliminate traumatizing financial aid practices that he and Vanessa endured. Carlos worked to increase summer funding for public interest students. I inferred that, while they did not benefit from these actions, participants were hopeful that law schools would create more FGSOC-friendly environments in the future. Their input proved valuable as I devised recommendations in Chapter 5.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, 12 FGSOC law graduates shared their lived experience as it relates to their most significant challenges and the supports they accessed during law school. Utilizing Yosso’s

(2005) community cultural wealth theory as a theoretical framework revealed that participants' success in completing law school was bolstered by their leveraging of community-based assets designed to empower oppressed communities. Originally motivated to attend law school by their families and a passion for serving their communities, participants found that their social integration into law school was not a smooth one. The resulting feelings of impostor syndrome and isolation were somewhat mollified through participant engagement in affinity groups. While they found a sense of community and helpful resources in these groups, they also encountered stratification that often left them alienated. This sense of social disconnection permeated participants' academic experience as they navigated complicated relationships with faculty and acclimation to the rigors and often unclear expectations of the law school classroom. While deciphering this new environment, participants contended with altered family dynamics and future familial obligations as they considered their professional paths after law school. Finding uneven institutional support efficacy, participants felt bolstered by career services but unimpressed by financial aid and mental health services. The participants claimed that they mostly felt unsupported by their law schools as FGSO, thus confirming that law schools may be unprepared to serve these students adequately.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

### **Study Overview**

This phenomenological study centered on one discipline in which the available data reflect a significant overlap between students who identify as first-generation and people of color (FGSOC) and amplified the lived experiences of 12 FGSOC law graduates. The study sample included eight female-identified and four male-identified participants who range in age from 27 to 42. While the group consisted of participants who identify as Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and Native American, over half identify as Hispanic/Latinx. Several participants are first-generation Americans who learned English as a second language, and most come from low-income families. Having graduated from law school between 2017 and 2023, the participants now serve as corporate and litigation associates, public defenders, district attorneys, among other professions within the law. They are in many ways, to reference a popular phrase, their ancestors' wildest dreams. Through semi-structured interviews, the participants revealed how they made meaning of their most significant challenges and their use of institutional and non-institutional supports during their studies at two law schools.

### **Summary of the Findings**

Interviews revealed that the participants' intersectionality transcends the FGSOC moniker. As mentioned above, the majority of the participants are first-generation Americans, more than half learned English as a second language, and most come from low-income families. The complexity of their humanity is undeniable. Drawing motivation from the injustices thrust upon their families, the participants looked to careers in law to give them a tangible, powerful skillset to help their communities and contribute to the greater good.

Continuing their journeys as pioneers within their own families, the participants faced a rocky transitional period. This period was marked by a re-acclimation process that required skills they may not have accessed as FG undergraduates. Participants negotiated new social norms, academic skills, and survival mechanisms as they shifted into a new paradigm that tested them on a daily basis. They found challenges connecting with their classmates socially, resulting in feelings of impostor syndrome. While enduring these negative feelings, participants observed how racial and socioeconomic differences dictated their law schools' social dynamic. Forced to contend with microaggressions and translate social markers, participants felt at a competitive disadvantage compared to their wealthier (and often white) classmates, many of whom had parents already in the legal profession. Feelings of isolation became commonplace for many of the participants.

Involvement in race-based affinity groups salvaged the participants' rough first-year transition, as these groups offered an environment in which members bonded over a shared experience. In addition to camaraderie, the participants benefited from course outlines, career programming, and alumni mentorship. As these connections with their affinity group members deepened, participants noticed that, despite sharing phenotypic traits and cultural bonds, they still felt different. Within affinity groups, their safe haven, participants found racial, socioeconomic, and career stratification. Consequently, their membership in these groups yielded a dissonance in which they felt both supported and left out.

The social woes participants faced coincided with their attempts to adjust to a rigorous and demanding academic environment. Participants struggled to connect with their first-year professors, at times being met with hostile or adversarial behavior. This disconnect traveled from the classroom to office hours, during which participants detailed awkward, uncomfortable



interactions with their professors. Unable to cultivate fruitful relationships, most participants abandoned office hour attendance during 1L year. The classroom likewise presented participants with other and unexpected challenges; the rigor and demand of their coursework was intense. For many participants, law school was the first time in their lives in which they did not find immediate academic success. Participants found overwhelming the prospect of participating through the Socratic method, which exacerbated their fears of being perceived by their classmates as less intelligent. These fears intensified on account of participants' professors employing curve grading, thus placing them in direct competition with their classmates.

While their academic life became less stressful in their 2L and 3L years, most participants' families were consistently on their minds. Family members, including friends, offered moral and basic needs supports during participants' studies. Nevertheless grateful for what their families could provide, participants discovered that their families lacked a genuine understanding of their path toward becoming an attorney. This familial disconnect affirmed for many participants that, for the first time in their lives, they were largely on their own. However, as participants traversed this solo path, they confirmed that future financial obligations to their families dictated their post-law school career plans.

Despite exhibiting a great deal of self-reliance, participants attempted to utilize institutional supports to bolster their law school experience. Unfortunately, these supports provided inconsistent service and, in some instances, stopped participants from using the services altogether. Participants spoke positively about their interactions with career management. These offices provided higher quality, student-centered services that ultimately aided them in securing post-law school employment. On the other hand, participants described their financial aid and mental health services offices in mostly negative terms. Instead of providing participants, many

from low-income families, with kindness and openness, the financial aid offices at times employed traumatizing practices and communicated vital information poorly. Participants felt vexed by the inaccessibility of mental health services, as these offices were operated by the law schools' parent institutions. While competing with other students for services, participants found these offices largely ineffective. Among several issues, mental health services were unwilling to prescribe certain medications and failed to show up for appointments.

The problematic policies and practices from institutional supports – compounded by the aforementioned challenges – symptomized the overwhelming participant sentiment that they felt unsupported by their law schools. Limited in the number of reliable supports, participants felt that their law experience was largely self-directed. This self-directed experience resulted from their taking on the labor and burden of establishing FGSOC support systems instead of law school faculty and administration. These practices underscored how the law schools failed to address the needs of participants.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

In this section, I unpack my study's unique findings as an exploration focused on a single discipline instead of a monolithic study of FGSOC graduate students. Two overarching sections comprise my discussion. One section focuses on participants' transition to law school and the other on interpersonal support systems. The transitions section serves as a departure from the literature's focus on the entire law school experience. Participants homed in on the singularly challenging timeframe between their enrollment in law school and the end of their 1L year. I discuss how participants deployed behaviors and tactics typical of FG undergraduates despite curbing these habits or never previously exhibiting them during college. The social acclimation process, made complicated by racial and socioeconomic differences, revealed how participants

felt unable to act as their authentic selves. Initial struggles to connect with their professors were quelled by faculty members who made office hours mandatory, which normalized attendance and facilitated purposeful, productive interactions. Participants also made clear that even a strong undergraduate record could not prepare them adequately for the rigor and structure of the law school classroom.

My analysis unearthed the conflicting role of the participants' interpersonal support systems. Despite their consistent social and moral support, participants' families simultaneously served as a challenge. Participant families were unable to understand their path toward becoming attorneys, and, accordingly, participants experienced an increased level of self-reliance. This tension became amplified for participants, as they were unable to rely on their families for help yet were compelled to take on familial financial responsibility upon graduation from law school. Membership in affinity groups similarly presented participants with a discordant experience. While affinity groups provided participants with meaningful social connections, they also alienated the participants due to intra-group stratification. Institutional support programs, like financial aid and mental health services, generally operate to help students, but participants disclosed how these offices actively caused them harm during their studies. Left unsupported in meeting their needs, participants characterized their law school experience as "self-directed," thus assuming labor more appropriate for faculty and administrators.

### **A Rough Transition**

Participants' 1L year presented them with a series of transitions that collectively rendered difficult their entrance into law school. Past studies confirm that FG students struggle in transitioning to undergraduate study (Beard et al., 2023) and that FG students who attend law school often carry some of these undergraduate struggles with them (LSSSE, 2023). During their

interviews, some participants described a shaky adjustment to college that was short-lived. For the most part, however, the participants excelled as undergraduates; reported regular involvement in varied extracurricular activities, social events, and leadership development; and maintained productive relationships with faculty and mentors.

From the participants' undergraduate success I inferred that they possessed the requisite navigational skills to succeed in law school. Their impressive resumes, educational pedigree, and inspiring careers further reinforced my initial inference. However, upon matriculating in law school, some participants described an emergence of FG undergraduate student tendencies that they did not exhibit as undergraduates or ameliorated before graduation. Like FG undergraduates, participants initially avoided professor engagement and solved problems independently (Yee, 2016). The participants learned that employing these strategies did not facilitate a smooth acclimation process and resulted in struggles to connect and develop relationships with both faculty and peers (Bodamer, 2020; Dallinger-Lain, 2016), feelings of impostor syndrome (Collins & Jehangir, 2021), and contending with hostility and microaggressions (Dallinger-Lain, 2016).

The limited available literature focuses mostly on the overall experience for law students who identify as FGSOC, but the interview data reveal a strong participant emphasis on the period leading to their matriculation and through 1L year. The participants' testimonies in this study make a convincing case, at the very least, for law schools to consider carefully how this span of time shapes not only the FGSOC student introduction to law school but also how they proceed through their J.D. programs. The deep, lasting – and largely negative – impact this time had on participants illustrates the need for earlier, proactive interventions from law school

administrators and faculty that could be enacted through the recommendations I make later in this chapter.

### ***Social Isolation***

Participants endured a rough social transition as they began their studies. The struggle to make friends heightened participants' feelings of isolation and impostor syndrome. Participants expressed an amplified awareness of racial and socioeconomic disparities between them and their classmates. The racial differences between participants and the majority of their classmates were more easily recognizable, as both law schools are PWIs. Most participants internalized the recognition of racial difference. But for some participants, like Melari, race served as a legible way for classmates to make assumptions about the basis of their admission to law school. These assumptions materialized as a classmate hurling a racist microaggression at Melari, labeling her "an affirmative action student" and other white students excluding her and two other students of color from a study group.

Similarly, participants detected socioeconomic stratification among their classmates rather easily. They learned relatively quickly that most of their classmates came from wealthier families, many with parents who worked in the legal field, thus placing them at a competitive advantage. The participants perceived that socioeconomic status functioned as a defining feature of their law schools' social dynamic. That is, wealthier students who could afford luxury apartments, designer clothes, and extravagant trips tended to associate with one another and not with low-income students. The social markers that signified affluence and wealth were translatable given that these types of students also attended participants' undergraduate institutions, as well.

Participants' experiences reflect the suggestion that students of color tend to feel the impact of institutional classism through "resource knowledge and specific rules of engagement" (Garriott et al., 2023, p. 522). This intersectional impact becomes extended through participants' responses to the racial and socioeconomic differences between them and their classmates. As they struggled to transition socially, participants felt singled out based on who they were not (white and wealthy) instead of being celebrated for who they actually were. Excluded from their law schools' dominant faction, participants felt a pressure to change themselves. They sometimes employed tactics like code switching, as Vanessa shared in Chapter 4, to avoid communicating their cultural and/or socioeconomic background. The act of being othered by their classmates across several dimensions appeared to confirm for the participants that they did not belong.

### ***Complicated Faculty Relationships and Classroom Struggles***

Transitional discomfort entered the academic sphere, as well. The challenges they describe may have materialized due to the perception that their matriculation at two of the country's most prestigious law schools signaled their full preparation for rigorous graduate study. First, participants struggled to connect with their 1L professors, especially during office hours. Several participants claimed to feel intimidated by their professors and recalled attending office hours that resulted in awkward interactions with faculty. Other interactions, however, reflected research that classifies the law school environment as hostile for minority students (Dallinger-Lain, 2016). Both Shane and Grace described unpleasant interactions that illustrate the hostile, even antagonistic behavior inflicted by their first-year professors. There exists a clear distinction between faculty behavior that can be perceived as unintentional awkwardness and intentional displays of animosity toward students. While participants found neither type of professor behavior helpful, the latter can be considered an egregious abuse of power.

Some participants recounted faculty engagement that challenged the notion of a hostile law school environment. First-year professors who proactively required students to attend office hours or linked office hours to a structured assignment more successfully cultivated positive relationships with participants. These practices reflect Yee's (2016) assertion that interactive faculty engagement strategies allow for more fruitful engagement with students. She further underscores that "If practitioners wish to promote interactive practices, then they must take responsibility for proactively engaging with students" (p. 854).

Second, the adjustment within the classroom proved equally difficult. Law school represented one of the first academic environments in which participants stumbled; they lacked a meaningful referent for how rigorously the law school classroom would test them. Practices like the Socratic method and curve grading required participants to realign their academic expectations from those to which they had become accustomed as undergraduates, which was not an easy task. From their arduous 1L classroom experiences, I extrapolated that even coming into law school with pristine undergraduate grades from competitive colleges did not prevent participants from struggling. The pedagogical styles intrinsic to law school instruction initially served as an affront to participants' learning. However, they developed resistant capital (Yosso, 2005), ultimately adapting in institutions not designed for their success. While I commend the participants' fortitude, their struggles underscored the critical need for increased institutional support when their law schools failed to provide any.

### **Limited Interpersonal Support Systems**

#### ***Shifting Family Support and Changes in Family Dynamics***

As I shared in Chapter 4, participants spoke fondly about their families, a concept broadened by Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework to include blood relatives,

extended family, and networks of friends. Throughout law school, participants relied on this familial set of connections mostly for moral and basic needs supports (Sterk & Olson, 2024). Participants described how these relationships functioned as a means of escape from the everyday stress of law school. Research on FG graduate student families suggests two very different scenarios: one in which FG student families support their graduate school journey and another in which families serve as a barrier (Sterk & Olson, 2024). Initially using this dichotomy to codify participant families, I found that most fell into the former category. Few participants' families fell into the latter category (recall Vanessa and James's harrowing financial aid experience), and, in some cases, were connected to instances of abuse.

The data, however, uncovered more nuance than Sterk and Olsen's (2024) assessment of prior studies' motivator/barrier binary. Participants revealed the relational tension that defined how they perceived their families. Simply put, their families simultaneously functioned as a support and as a challenge. On one hand, most participants expressed affection for their families and affirmed them as motivation for attending law school. Family provided participants with much-needed moral and basic needs supports. On the other hand, participant family support was limited due to a lack of understanding about the path toward becoming an attorney. By that point, they were, in many respects, worlds apart. This participant-family gulf complicates Yosso's (2005) conceptualization of familial capital. Yosso asserts that "isolation is minimized" (p. 79) due to Delgado-Gaitan's (2001) notion that families connect around common problems and collective problem solving. However, participants experienced quite the opposite in relation to their families insofar as they solved problems independently. The limitations of their families' ability to help were abundantly clear.



Participants understood why these limitations existed and, consequently, why they quickly developed a higher level of self-reliance during law school. Despite the support they received from their families, participants felt pressure due to future familial financial obligations. The knowledge that they would provide for their families after law school dictated their career paths – often unaligned with their passions – and ability to build generational wealth. The participants intimated that navigating these tensions was never easy. However, they persevered by leveraging their own resourcefulness with the aim of breaking generational cycles (Sterk & Olsen, 2024) and completing their degrees. Nine of the 12 participants identified as low-income and made connections between aspirational capital and family socioeconomic status (Yosso, 2005). Participants secured lucrative post-law school employment with healthy salaries. They were able to lift their families into a higher socioeconomic status and ensure more comfortable futures for themselves.

### ***Affinity Group Striation***

With limits on family support, participants naturally looked to connect with others who shared their experiences, namely their fellow classmates. They aimed to access familial capital through what Yosso (2005) refers to as “a broad understanding of kinship” (p. 79). As noted in the previous section on their rough transition to law school, participants initially struggled to connect with their peers. To mediate the socialization process and access community support as graduate students, participants relied on affinity student groups mostly based on racial identity and FG status (Deo, 2012; Hutson et al., 2022). In addition to the solidarity they fostered through affinity groups, participants benefited from access to social and navigational assets (Yosso, 2005), like career programming, mentorship, and outline banks. To be sure, the participants

conveyed gratitude for these groups, as membership appeared to be connected to their survival during law school.

This connection to students of shared affinity seemed fundamental to the participants' success. Nonetheless, the support accessed through affinity groups described by the literature (Deo, 2012; Hutson et al., 2022) contrasted sharply with the in-group stratification that the participants reported. This stratification eventuated across several dimensions: racial, socioeconomic, and career track. For the participants, this creation of intra-group factions translated into feelings of not belonging in the spaces where they sought social connection and the skills to get through law school. Moreover, participants feeling out of place within their affinity groups rebuts Yosso's (2005) description of the community-based assets that should be readily available to them as people of color. Instead, the familial, social, and navigational capital from their affinity groups required participants to make difficult concessions if they wanted to access the assets that would be key to their success in law school. For participants, these assets cost them a genuine sense of belonging – an investment they deemed necessary for survival.

Beyond participants feeling a lack of belonging, the implications of stratification within affinity groups cause concern. FGSOC law students represent a comparatively small proportion of the overall law school population (LSSSE, 2023). Accordingly, there exist fewer opportunities for these students to find like peers who share their intersecting identities. Even within the communities designed to celebrate their existence, the participants once again found their support system limited. Despite issues with their affinity groups, participants remained active, and some even became leaders within these groups. The participants had learned to compartmentalize the specific support they could expect from their families and appear to have applied the same tactic to affinity groups.

### *Uneven School Supports*

As their familial and peer support had limitations, participants hoped to rely on their law schools' structured supports to fill in the gaps. For example, participants collectively found mentoring programs – often associated with affinity groups – highly efficacious. Other institutional supports garnered uneven responses and were mostly negative. Financial aid and mental health services caused participants extreme stress, whereas the career services offices at both law schools offered helpful guidance. The participants felt almost unanimously that, as FGSOC, their law schools offered them inadequate support overall. Previous literature argues that support programs originally designed to support underrepresented students no longer cater to these populations (McClain, 2018). This study affirmed that contention to be true but also extends the argument by demonstrating that some institutional support programs actively harm FGSOC students. Mostly lacking any FG-specific resources, except for FG affinity groups, participants had to decipher how best to use law school-wide resources to meet their needs.

With an experience described several times as “self-directed,” the participants assumed the burden that faculty and administrators failed to own. From this, I derived two takeaways. First, participants adopted independent strategies, an approach that can be detrimental for FG undergraduates (Yee, 2016). Undergraduates often suffer from using this approach, as they prevent themselves from accessing crucial information and often allow their problems to become critical before seeking help (Yee, 2016). The participants largely relied on themselves to figure out problems and carve their paths through law school, despite not necessarily using this tactic as undergraduates. This choice may have stemmed from their intimidation of faculty and staff members and/or a fear of conceding to their families that they were in dire need of help.

Second, the participants' law schools were not designed to support their navigational needs as FG students. Both the financial aid and mental health services offices applied blanket policies to a population whose life circumstances differ from the majority white, middle- and upper-class student body. Additionally, the FG population comprises mostly students of color. I find it reasonable to consider race, in addition to FG status, as a barrier in the participants securing appropriate support. While the participants ultimately found supports that suited their needs and successfully graduated, law schools must consider preemptive measures to improve overall service.

### **Recommendations and Implications**

As a longtime university administrator, I am grateful for my professional experiences at several universities and the students I have been fortunate enough to serve. This gratitude, however, is tempered by an acute awareness of my own complicity in practices contributing to higher education structures that perpetuate oppression. My role as the primary investigator in this study afforded me the opportunity to serve as an active, empathetic listener. From participant testimonies, I became privy to the types of in-school experiences from which I had the luxury to disengage given my work in admissions. I hope to use this study's findings as a springboard to dismantle the aforementioned oppressive structures within higher education. The recommendations that I make hereafter are informed by the available literature, my experience and instincts as a higher education administrator, and most importantly, the study's participants.

#### **Administration**

##### ***Develop a Culture of Caring***

From financial aid to career management to student services, administrators impact several aspects of law students' lives. This study makes clear the obligation to institute a culture

of caring (Yosso, 2005) and provide a nurturing, student-centered environment, especially for the students most in need. Research suggests empathy plays a crucial role in student-service provider relationships and that service providers should endeavor to understand student needs while showing care (Tan et al., 2019).

Based on participant responses, however, this culture of caring mostly lacked at both law schools. Focusing my recommendations on the three student services offices outlined in Chapter 4, participant descriptions of career services offices were overwhelmingly positive. The high quality of career services may correlate to the success metrics these offices are required to make publicly available each year. Nonetheless, the service these offices provided made a positive impression on the participants based on the individualized attention they received. Contrarily, participants found both financial aid and mental health services at both law schools less than adequate. In fact, some participants described traumatic practices from their interactions with these offices. Financial aid and mental health services administrators should adopt more student-centered service practices while keeping in mind the potentially sensitive nature of their interactions with students. Strategies may vary depending on an office's specific services, but financial aid and mental health services providers should focus on improved communication practices, collaboration opportunities for student feedback, and stress reduction measures.

### ***Improve Affordability and Cultivate Students' Financial Aid Literacy***

Financial aid acts as a main driver in FGSOC students' law school selection process, and these students often engage with their law schools' financial aid offices even before matriculation. Law schools should look to increase affordability for FG students, as they tend to come from lower-income families, take on greater loan debt, and are less likely to receive merit-based scholarships (LSSSE, 2023). On an interpersonal level, financial aid administrators would

be advised to extend compassion to all students but FGSOC students especially. At the undergraduate level, FG students lack support in the financial aid process and often require assistance completing financial aid forms (Tichavakunda, 2016). Participants had access to limited family assistance during law school, so they had to figure out the law school financial aid process by themselves.

The cost of attendance at both East Coast Law School and West Coast Law School is over \$100,000 per year, an amount likely unfathomable to most FG students' families. These students serve as emblems of their families' aspiration beyond their current situation despite adversity (Yosso, 2005). The prospect of taking on such a significant amount of debt undoubtedly overwhelms these students and their families. Easily accessible one-on-one guidance from financial aid administrators coupled with financial literacy/planning sessions may alleviate some FG student financial anxiety, in addition to clear, consistent communication. Ideally, financial aid offices would offer this guidance as soon as these students are admitted. Earlier outreach provides financial aid offices the opportunity to start building productive relationships with students before they officially matriculate. Financial aid administrators should examine their in-house forms and related paperwork to determine intelligibility and reduce student confusion; using student surveys or focus groups may help in this endeavor. Simply put, financial aid administrators should determine policies and practices that empower FGSOC students instead of alienating them.

### ***Offer In-House Mental Health Services to Law Students***

While fewer participants relied on mental health services than on financial aid, they expressed equally negative sentiment. Unreliable mental health services only made participants' time in law school more challenging. As members of traditionally marginalized groups, students

who identify as FGSOC “experience increased stressors due to how society and other individuals interact with their identity” (Quimby & Agonafer, 2022, p. 412). The resources to calm these stressors – in addition to other difficulties described in the study’s findings – should be readily available. Both law schools offered mental health services through their parent institutions, which forces law students to compete over therapist availability with the other students at their universities.

The likelihood of FGSOC law students requiring mental health services (Quimby & Agonafer, 2022) should compel law schools to curate in-house mental health services only available to their students. If taking this route, law schools have the opportunity to serve FGSOC students while respecting culturally responsive practices. This type of specific mental health support may be achieved through an embedded counseling model in which mental health practitioners offer services in a division of the university instead of the entire institution (Quimby & Agonafer, 2022). This approach increases convenience for students and may make them more apt to rely on the services. Law school administrators could bolster an embedded counseling infrastructure by hiring therapists of color and/or identify as FG. If administrators made FGSOC aware of this resource prior to the start of 1L year, then they would encourage these students to begin law school in a healthier state of mind.

### ***Implement Bridge Programs for Matriculating First-Generation Law Students***

The availability of FG-specific programming both prior to matriculation and during their studies could provide these students with not only a smoother transition to law school but also a focused support network throughout their three years. Research suggests that undergraduate bridge programs can serve as a tool to help FG students transition effectively to college (Cabrera et al., 2016; Schelbe et al., 2019; Wibrowski et al., 2016). Similarly, bridge programming before

the start of 1L year could impart crucial law school-related social and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) not only among FG students but also between FG students and key faculty and administrators. Two participants at West Coast Law School confirmed partaking in a separate FG student orientation and offered mixed reviews. Monse found comfort in meeting fellow FG students, while Kevin shared that the academic preparation component did not mirror the way in which professors tested information on class exams. A pre-matriculation bridge program designed with FG student guidance could allow for more accurate program structure and content.

Law schools might pair these bridge programs with the establishment of school-sanctioned, FG-specific programs that these students may access all three years for support. Though uncommon at other institutions, USC's Gould School of Law offers the C. David Molia First Generation Professionals Program. This program supports USC Gould's FG students through peer mentorship, seminars, and networking opportunities (USC Gould School of Law, n.d.). Law schools could also consider including student family integration into FG programming, like UCLA's Geffen School of Medicine (Gallegos et al., 2021). This measure directly addresses the lack of familial understanding to which most participants alluded during their interviews. The structure of these programs would likely be contingent upon institutional resources, but law school administrators have an opportunity to develop comprehensive, holistic programming for a population in need. Further potential exists for administration to collaborate with faculty on these efforts. For example, USC Gould's program provides FG faculty profiles, a simple action that makes legible a connection between FG students and their professors.

## **Faculty**

My recommendations for law school faculty members focus on interpersonal, programmatic, and pedagogical dimensions of the FGSOC experience. The study's participants



revealed how some current professorial practices can harm FGSOC students and, accordingly, made me question if some of these practices serve a purpose. Ideally with student input, faculty would drive changes both inside and outside the classroom. Law school faculty members should consider how these practices and methods harm certain students, and I invite them to ponder alternative approaches that could be just as rigorous.

### ***Improving Interpersonal Dynamics through Required Office Hour Attendance***

Law faculty, especially those teaching 1L classes, have an opportunity to rethink their relational approach to students. As the arbiters of the information and values of the legal profession (Miner, 2021), faculty members should feel obligated to ensure that FG students learn early on how to navigate yet another new academic environment. For several participants in this study, their professors were the first people they encountered who were connected to the legal world. Because FG students generally interact less with their professors (Yee, 2016), professors should take the first step in proactively building relationships with these students. They might start by developing an asset-based understanding of these students and the resources they rely on for success (McCain & Roksa, 2023; Yosso, 2005).

As the findings show, participants felt more comfortable engaging with their first-year professors when they deliberately imposed a structure around meetings – to discuss a paper topic, for example. To quell FG student nervousness about one-on-one conversations with their professors and to normalize consistent interactions, 1L faculty members can consider mandating that 1L students attend office hours for each class at least once per term. The focus of this session should ideally consist of interpersonal engagement and, of course, any class-related questions. Establishing fruitful relationships with professors early in their first year will allow faculty members to socialize their FG students into the legal discipline and profession (Burt et

al., 2021; Collins & Jehangir, 2022; Miner, 2021). To fill in knowledge gaps about FG students and instill faculty confidence, appropriate law school administrators (or if necessary, third-party consultants) could provide faculty with training in best practices that enable productive and harmonious relationships with FG students.

This relationship building may be augmented and sustained throughout the first year by instituting formalized FG student-faculty mentorship programs. Pairing FG students with their 1L professors in school-sanctioned mentoring programs may minimize student anxiety. Faculty members, especially those with a limited understanding of FG student attributes and habits, may refine how they relate to these students and aid in their future success during law school and beyond.

### ***Rethink Curve Grading***

I make this recommendation while understanding the likely resistance to changing longstanding institutional policies and practices. Like the Socratic method, curve grading remains a practice entrenched in the law school zeitgeist. The majority of the study's participants spoke negatively about their law schools' reliance on curve grading, claiming that it creates unnecessary competition and exists to funnel certain students to the most prestigious firms and clerkships. Research indicates that with curve/normative grading in place, students are less inclined to help their peers they either perceive as close to their own performance or for whom they have no gauge of performance (Burleigh & Meegan, 2017).

From both the literature and the participants, curve grading tends to yield less than desirable behaviors and attitudes from students (Burleigh & Meegan, 2017). Instead of assessing their students relative to their classmates, faculty should consider devising grading methods to determine how well the students perform based on their individual understanding and

applicability of legal principles. I recognize that this shift would not be an easy one. Curve grading serves as a shortcut for private sector career services and judicial clerkship advisors to determine which students should apply for certain selective positions. However, alternative grading formats (criterion grading, labor-based grading, etc.) may allow for rigorous grading practices, confirm whether a student has mastered the necessary material, and quell unnecessary intra-class competition.

### **Law School Leadership, LSAC, and The ABA**

The challenges participants described in this study coupled with the continued increase of FGSOC students in law schools (Krinsky, 2021) make clear the need for law school leadership and the affiliated governing bodies (the ABA and LSAC) to consider policy changes to support this population. Moreover, these changes will hold law schools, The ABA, and LSAC accountable for enacting practices and programming that provide FGSOC students with a healthier law school experience.

Law school deans specifically have an opportunity to make significant impact, as their leadership and decision-making trickle down to faculty, administration, and most importantly, students. Law schools' longtime adherence to entrenched practices, like the Socratic Method and curve grading, may pose challenges to deans eager to institute a culture of caring. Additionally, a lack of law school deans who identify as FG and people of color may impede these types of changes. Data on FG law school deans are limited, but *Rosenblatt's Deans Database* reveals that approximately 22% of law school deans are Black/African American, 6% are Latinx, and 2% are Native American (Mississippi College School of Law, n.d.). These percentages may increase, as the ABA's Standards Committee looks to expand Standard 206, which confirms law schools' commitment to diversity of faculty gender, race, and ethnicity. In February 2024, the Standards

Committee looked “to expand their understanding of disadvantaged faculty even more” and include several other categories, among them Native American tribal citizenship and socioeconomic background (Braff, 2024).

An increase in the number of law school deans of color – and possibly FG status – may result in more deliberate efforts to improve the FGSOC experience. Fortunately, some deans are already taking action. Through the American Association of Law Schools (AALS), deans have collaborated on the development of information clearinghouses on antiracism (Onwuachi-Willig et al., 2023) and student mental health (Barton et al., 2024). These unique projects reflect a decanal dedication to developing a caring culture for students and demonstrating accountability. Deans should continue to expand these types of efforts within and across law schools.

Law school deans may also ensure accountability through data transparency. Law school data, including but not limited to GPA and standardized exam quartiles, are verified annually by both LSAC and The ABA. Once the data are aggregated, The ABA produces reports (commonly known as 509 Required Disclosures) that provide public information about each law school for consumer knowledge purposes. Failing to comply or providing inaccurate data may result in law schools being censured (Mondics, 2011). Working collaboratively, law school deans, LSAC, and The ABA should determine school-based requirements, reported on annually, that ensure FGSOC are being supported. This measure would not only obligate law schools to make public this information but also ensure that FGSOC have the opportunity to determine which law schools are apt to support them best.

### **Future Research**

Limited research on FG graduate students exists (Carlton, 2015; Collins & Jehangir, 2021; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Hutson et al., 2022; Miner, 2021; Seay et al., 2008; Tate et al.,

2014). In designing this study, I aimed to contribute to a nascent body of literature that focuses on this population while heeding advice to focus on a single discipline or degree program (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). As I started collecting data, newer studies that align with mine emerged (McCain & Roska, 2023) and confirmed the relevance and timeliness of my study. This type of traction certainly augments the literature available on FG law students, but the need for continued research cannot be understated.

### ***Further Studies in Law Schools***

Future research that builds upon this study by employing maximum variation (expanding the number of sites and participants) opens further opportunities for more widespread application (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Multiple studies at different law schools may invite more extensive pattern tracking to confirm if law graduates at other schools shared experiences similar to my study's participants. Future researchers interested in comparative analysis could consider advancing the study with populations that identify as FG but do not identify as Black, Latinx, or Native American. Another variation could include law schools affiliated with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Studies conducted with participants from these schools may shed light on whether HBCU law graduates faced similar challenges during their studies or, like HBCU undergraduates, found a more inclusive academic and social environment (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002).

### ***Studies Outside Law Schools***

As cited in this study, some attention has been paid to FG doctoral students (Gardner, 2010; Gardner & Barnes, 2007, Gardner & Holley, 2011; Gittens, 2014; Holley & Gardner, 2012), but FG graduate students in other programs are largely ignored. Studies across different disciplines/degrees would provide institutions with not only first-hand accounts of the FG

student experience but also recommendations for how to develop and implement FG student-centric programming and practices. FG students would see a tangible institutional investment in their success beyond undergraduate study and would likely have an improved experience in graduate school. FG students purportedly attrit at higher rates than their non-FG counterparts during graduate school (Seay et al., 2008). Institutional support measures derived from these studies may result in lower dropout rates for FG graduate students. Finally, though beyond the scope of my study, future researchers may wish to investigate the FG students who did not complete their degrees to illuminate these students' lived experiences beyond the existing literature (Dallinger-Lain, 2016).

### ***Quantitative Studies***

In selecting qualitative methodology, I found that my participants' humanity remained a focal point of this study. A phenomenological inquiry gave life to their lived experience through their testimony. This type of study, however, may be augmented through the use of quantitative methodology, specifically large-scale surveys. The experiences and perceptions I have uncovered through this study could be adapted to survey instruments. Through survey data, investigators would have the opportunity to understand the prevalence of these experiences and perceptions across larger cross-sections of FGSOC law and other graduate students. This type of analysis may help determine different patterns depending on participants' backgrounds and institutional contexts. Among the other benefits, surveys may produce more generalizable results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Final Thoughts**

The genesis of this study stemmed from both my personal and professional roots. As an FG student and the first in my family to complete undergraduate and graduate degrees, I

traversed higher education mostly on my own. Like the participants I interviewed, my family could not provide much assistance beyond the moral support I received. When I entered graduate school in 2003, I felt like any navigational skills I gained in the previous four years had evaporated. The lexicon was complicated, my professors – save for a few exceptions – came across as inaccessible, and I felt like I did not belong there. I perceived myself as neither smart nor cultured enough. Literary references my professors made in class baffled me, and embarrassing myself in office hours was commonplace. After abandoning my aspirations in academia, I found refuge in administration. In hindsight, I sought to gain back some of the power that I lost in graduate school the first time around to ensure that students like me felt supported.

Tracing the arc of a 17-year career in graduate and professional school admissions, I have met thousands of FG students looking for more promising futures. However, in most cases, their self-doubt made these futures seem out of reach to them. Counseling these students, guiding them through the application process, and celebrating their admission – even when they thought we made a mistake – remind me why this work is so gratifying. My direct impact ends after a student is admitted, but I always suspected that the FG students struggled once they matriculated. This study confirmed my suspicions and provided me with an opportunity to advocate for students beyond my day job.

I started teasing out ideas for this study during my first year of doctoral study and allowed one question to channel my thought process: who can I best serve? Mulling this question over, I recalled specific students by whom I was inspired over the course of my career. FG students first came to mind, likely due to my own FG status. Any self-serving motivations were quickly eclipsed by my commitment to racial, economic, and social justice. I recognized that despite our shared FG status, most of the students I recalled did not look like me; they were

students of color. With my anecdotal observation affirmed by published research, the population I could serve best became clear. Decolonizing praxis informed my study design, hence centering the participants' voices and lived experiences.

It is my hope that other researchers will continue undertaking similar work, especially in the face of roadblocks. The decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* (2023) effectively nullified the consideration of race in making admissions decisions. I already grapple with the intended chilling effects of this decision in my everyday work. Nevertheless, the onus is on me and my fellow practitioners to support students who have traditionally ended up on the wrong side of institutional gatekeeping practices. While I am not naïve enough to think that my study will galvanize an instant sea change in higher education, I am optimistic enough to recognize that it is a good start. The work continues.



## APPENDIX A

### Recruitment Email

Dear NAME,

I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership Program at UCLA and a university administrator focused on antiracist and economically inclusive practices. I am conducting a study focused on the challenges faced by law students who identify as both first-generation and Black/African American, Latinx, and/or Native American. I am reaching out today for assistance in securing study participants who meet the following criteria:

- Graduated from one of the following law schools within the last 1-6 years: LAW SCHOOL NAMES
- Identify as a first-generation college student, and
- Identify as Black/African American, Latinx, and/or Native American

**Purpose:** I am conducting this study to amplify the voices of first-generation students of color by centering their lived experiences as they relate to the unique challenges they faced during law school and the institutional/non-institutional support services they used during their studies. Through this study, I hope to determine recommendations for policy change, intervention tactics, and support programs that will improve the law school experience for first-generation students of color.

**Procedures:** Selected participants will complete a one-on-one interview via Zoom that will last approximately one hour. Participants will respond to questions about their law school experience, including those of an academic, social, and economic nature. All interviews are 100% confidential, and the responses will be used to determine common themes among participants. Study participants will either (1) receive a \$25 gift card or (2) have a \$25 donation made in their name to the nonprofit organization of their choice.

**Potential Benefits:** Participants in this study will directly contribute to the discourse surrounding the law school experience for first-generation students of color. Their voices will be instrumental in developing changes that will benefit future first-generation students of color as they navigate their law school experience.

**Potential Risks:** There are no known risks associated with participation in this study. Interviews will be scheduled at times most convenient for participants.

**Those interested in participating may reach out to me directly at EMAIL ADDRESS.**

**You are more than welcome to share this with any fellow alums that may meet the study's criteria.**

I am available to answer any questions or concerns that potential participants may have about the study. Thank you for your consideration!

With warm wishes,

Jeb Butler  
Doctoral Candidate, UCLA

## APPENDIX B

### Participant Screening Questionnaire

*Disseminated via Qualtrics*

#### Instructions

This questionnaire should take approximately 10 minutes to complete and will help me better understand which respondents may be an appropriate fit for study participation. As a reminder, this study is focused on the challenges faced by first-generation, law school graduates of color during law school and the support services – both institutional and non-institutional – they utilized during their studies.

This questionnaire is 100% anonymous, and none of your identifying information will be publicly available.

Participation is completely voluntary, and there are no consequences for declining to participate or respond to every question.

There are no right or wrong answers in this questionnaire. Please take your time reading each section and respond carefully and honestly based on your own experience.

You will be contacted regarding your selection to participate in this study. Please note that completing the questionnaire does not guarantee selection.

Thank you for completing the questionnaire!

1. Name (Fill in blank)
2. Contact Information
  - Email address (Fill in blank)
  - Phone Number (Fill in blank)
3. How old are you? (Fill in blank)
4. I identify as (race/ethnicity). Select all that apply:
  - American Indian/Alaska Native
  - Asian
  - Black/African American
  - Hispanic/Latinx
  - Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
  - White
  - Other (Fill in blank)
  - Prefer Not to Respond
5. I identify as (gender):
  - Female
  - Male
  - Nonbinary/Nonconforming

- Transgender Female
  - Transgender Male
  - Other (Fill in blank)
  - Prefer Not to Respond
6. What is the highest degree or level of education your parent(s) has completed? (Select from drop-down)
- Parent 1
    - Elementary School
    - Middle/Junior High School
    - High School Diploma
    - Associates Degree
    - Bachelor's Degree
    - Post-Graduate Degree (Masters, Professional, Doctorate)
    - Other (Fill in blank)
  - Parent 2
    - Elementary School
    - Middle/Junior High School
    - High School Diploma
    - Associates Degree
    - Bachelor's Degree
    - Post-Graduate Degree (Masters, Professional, Doctorate)
    - Other (Fill in blank)
7. From which law school did you graduate? (Fill in blank)
8. In what year did you graduate from law school?
- 2023
  - 2022
  - 2021
  - 2020
  - Other (Fill in blank)
9. How did you pay for law school (including tuition/books/fees and living expenses)?  
Select all that apply:
- Institutional Need-Based Scholarship
  - Institutional merit-based Scholarship
  - Third Party Scholarship
  - Student Loans
  - Federal Work Study
  - Off-Campus Employment
  - Family Assistance
10. Were you a member of your law school's club/organization for first-generation students?
- Yes
  - No
11. Did you utilize any of the following institutional support programs? Select all that apply:
- Academic Advising
  - Career Advising
  - Mental Health Services
  - Financial Counseling

- Structured Mentorship Program
- Tutoring Services
- Other (Fill in blank)
- Prefer Not to Respond

## APPENDIX C

### Interview Protocol

#### Welcome & Introduction

Welcome, NAME! I am really excited to speak with you today, and I appreciate you taking time out of your schedule and agreeing to speak with me. We are going to be spending about an hour together. I am hoping to learn about your lived experience through this interview. Specifically, I am curious about how, looking back, you perceive your most significant challenges as a law school student who identifies as both first-generation and a person of color. I am also hoping to learn about how you perceive the interactions with any of the institutional support programs you may have used during your studies and the non-institutional supports you relied on during your studies. Through this interview, I hope to take what I learn from your lived experience to propose policy changes, interventions, and support programs so that law schools can improve the experience for their first-generation law students of color.

Since I received your verbal consent, this interview will be recorded via Zoom. Afterwards, the interview will be transcribed, and I will then code our interview. In coding the interview, I will be defining categories or themes that reflect recurring patterns I find in your responses. Any identifying information (your name, law school, etc.) will be anonymized using a pseudonym you have selected. I will be providing you with access to review and encrypted transcript of our interview and providing a window for feedback. As a reminder, all transcripts and audio files will remain in an encrypted drive, and I am the only person with access to these files.

Before we begin, I want to let you know that some questions may focus on sensitive topics like race, socioeconomic status, and family. If you are uncomfortable with any questions, then please feel free to let me know, and we will move on to the next question.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

#### Interview Questions

*Interview questions have been structured based on recommendations from Peoples (2021).*

#### *Warm-Up Questions*

1. Just to reaffirm, do you mind if I record this session?
2. Would you mind telling me a little bit about your family?
3. Can you talk to me about your K-12 experience?
4. What was your transition to college like?
5. Did you work in between undergrad and law school, or did you go straight through?
6. Can you talk a little bit about what motivated you to attend law school, generally and LAW SCHOOL in particular?

#### *Key Questions*

7. What was your transition to law school like?
8. How would you describe your relationships with your fellow classmates?

- a. To what extent did you experience challenges connecting socially in law school?
  - b. What were some of the ways in which you cultivated friendships?
  - c. Were you active in clubs or journals? If so, which ones? What were your roles? (Confirm that they mention the FG student group and probe if they do not mention a race-based affinity group.)
  - d. In what community did you feel the most supported? Why?
9. I'd like to move on to something that many first-generation law students have to consider: finances.
- a. How did your family's socioeconomic status influence your thinking about law school and/or where to attend?
  - b. Ultimately, how did you pay for law school?
  - c. To what extent did you encounter financial challenges in funding your law school education?
    - a. Possible probes regarding working during school, using financial aid and summer salary to cover family costs, affording basic needs
10. Let's focus on academics now. How would you describe your relationship with the faculty and staff?
- a. Possible probe: Can you describe any instances in which you fostered good working relationships with any faculty or staff members?
  - b. What did you find most academically challenging about the law school classroom?
  - c. How did you navigate and manage/overcome those challenges?
11. Let's transition into the support side of things. I'm going to name some commonly found support services in law school one-by-one, and I'd like you to tell me about your experience with these supports to the extent that you used them: academic support (advising, tutoring, etc.), career management, mental health or counseling services, financial aid, structured mentoring program?
- a. How would you describe your interactions with the faculty or staff responsible for these support programs?
  - a. Reroute: If a participant indicates they did not use any support programs, probe why they did not use them.
  - b. In what ways did you find these support programs useful?
12. Moving beyond the resources you used at LAW SCHOOL, let's shift to non-law school support. Can you talk about the non-law school supports you used during your studies? These could include your family, non-law school mentors, off-campus programs, among others.
13. Thinking about the your most significant challenges you faced during law school as a first-generation student of color, what types of services or programs would be helpful that did not exist when you were a student?
14. Considering your overall experience, how well do you think you were supported by your law school as a first-generation student of color? You can use whatever scale you like (A-F, 1-10).

### *Closing Question*

15. Finally, is there anything else relevant to your law school experience that we haven't discussed yet and would like to share?

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