

Spring 2018

## Not Made for “FGLIs”: Social Capital, Cultural Capital, and the First Generation Low-Income Experience at Yale University

José Yobani López Sánchez  
Yale College, New Haven Connecticut

### Abstract:

The trajectories of first-generation low-income college students are rarely linear and often challenging. While our current national rhetoric of standardized learning may lead us to believe this disproportionate performance stems from a larger systematic issue about lack of academic preparation easily remedied by simple enrichment strategies, narratives of the experiences of students who, because of a dimension of their identity feel judged, unsupported, or alienated, point to a different possibility: the misassumption that every student can sit down and learn naturally in a new environment. In other words, perhaps the issues are not the grades so much as the fact that some students do not feel confident engaging academically because academic and social performance are so intertwined among students, and the inherent social challenge affects students' careers. In this project, I investigate this topic by interrogating first-generation low-income students about their social experiences on campus. Through an analysis of survey responses and interviews, I argue that in the interest of providing inclusive and productive diverse educational spaces, Yale University—as well as any institution that pursues a similar goal—must acknowledge and understand the importance of social support and social community when challenging students to engage in rigorous academic spaces. And to do so, the institution must revolutionize their approach: to listen first and foremost as it empowers its students, those who hold the most crucial knowledge in understanding this issue, to lead the change toward this goal.

Suggested Citation: Sánchez, J. Y. L. (2018). *Not Made for “FGLIs”: Social Capital, Cultural Capital, and the First Generation Low-Income Experience at Yale University* (Unpublished Education Studies capstone). Yale University, New Haven, CT.

---

This capstone is a work of Yale student research. The arguments and research in the project are those of the individual student. They are not endorsed by Yale, nor are they official university positions or statements.

Not Made For “FGLIs”: Social Capital, Cultural Capital, and the First-  
Generation Low-Income Experience at Yale University

José Yobani López Sánchez

Senior Capstone Project

Advised by Carla Horwitz

Education Studies Scholars Program

Yale University

May 27th, 2018

“Quisieron enterrarnos, pero no sabían que éramos semillas.” - Mexican proverb

“The paradox of education is precisely this - that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which [they] is being educated.” - James Baldwin

To the beautiful people who have provided the love and support that has led to the most transformative few years, especially those that see themselves in this work. To my family in

Ballet Folklórico, to la Hermandad, to the bEUties, to Esperanza:

Mil gracias por dejarme construir un hogar de nuestras amistades.

This one is for the FGLIs.

Light this place up with your wisdom, your energy, and your love.

## Contents

<b>Introduction: A Home Away from Home</b> .....	5
<b>Literature Review</b> .....	8
The First-Generation Low-Income Student .....	8
Social and Cultural Capital .....	12
The Problem with Our Current Approach .....	16
<b>Research Questions</b> .....	19
<b>Methodology</b> .....	20
<b>Positionality Statement</b> .....	22
<b>Data and Results</b> .....	23
General Findings .....	23
Distinctions Among Demographic Groups .....	31
First-Generation and Low-Income .....	31
Race/Ethnicity .....	32
FSY Participation .....	35
<b>Analysis and Discussion</b> .....	36
The Oppressive Nature of Yale Culture .....	36
Race/Ethnicity and FGLI Identity .....	39
Reacting Through Redefinition .....	42
<b>Moving Forward</b> .....	46
The Reach of These Findings .....	49
Recommendations .....	51
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	53

**Contents**

**References** .....55

**Supplemental Information** .....60

    Recruitment Materials .....60

    Survey Questions .....61

    Interview Questions .....62

    FSY (First-Year Scholars at Yale) Information .....63

### **Introduction: A Home Away from Home**

On Saturday, just a couple of days after Halloween, I stood in the streets of Fair Haven among skeleton figures, women dressed as *soldaderas* (female fighters during the Mexican Revolution), and undergrad members of Ballet Folklórico Mexicano de Yale dressed in their typical Mexican folk dance attire. We were all gathered to participate together in the Día de los Muertos parade, honoring the Mexican holiday dedicated to remembering those who have passed away. While we sang to songs like *Cielito Lindo*, chanting “*Me gusta la lima, me gusta el limón, pero no me gusta la deportación*” (“I like lime and I like lemon, but I don’t like deportation”), I had the chance to talk to some of the new dancers in the group. I learned that one of them leads practice for a *matachines* dance group, which in Latin American cultures celebrates *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. With another, we talked about our relationship with our Mexican parents, and how that relationship shaped our personalities growing up. At various points throughout the night emotions were heavy, accompanied by either laughs or tears—but ultimately the afternoon provided us all with a sense of home and family when we were so far away from them.

Before their affiliation with Ballet Folklórico Mexicano de Yale, I first met these students during the five-week summer program called First-Year Scholars at Yale (FSY). As a former FSYer, I was one of eight counselors for this year’s cohort of 60 students from across the country, all chosen to receive support and mentorship with their transition from home environments where not many students attend colleges to the elite academic institution that is Yale University. As a counselor, I experienced the program differently from when I participated in it myself. As a much shyer and socially-unsettled first-year, I focused mostly on attaining academic preparation for myself; as a more experienced student who found himself struggling socially more than anything, I prioritized providing social support instead. I accompanied

students to all of their scheduled events, organized one-on-one meetings, hosted counselor group meetings weekly, and provided my own insight during Dean's Time, the allotted time when students would meet with Dean April Ruiz to talk about subjects like family, living with students of more privileged backgrounds, and how Yale affects our identity formation.

Yet even outside the structured components of the program, these students seem to take the initiative in fostering comfortable and supportive environments where students can express questions and fears on their minds. Very quickly students seemed comfortable being honest with their apprehensions and the overwhelming stimulation of being in a place that seemed so surreal while coping with the fact that they are leaving so much of themselves behind at home. After three years at Yale trying to find these types of environments, I was impressed by and excited for these students' ability to trust each other and almost immediately provide for each other what, from my experience, so many older Yale students found extremely challenging to do: listen humbly, express honestly, and form a community based on getting to know others as more than just peers.

Today the 2017 Cohort of FSY is still strong, and I am grateful that I can call many of these first-year students sincere friends for whom I care and support unconditionally. I am convinced that, when provided appropriate and *needed* social support, these students become empowered to express meaningful insight derived from their own unique perspectives on questions of identity and social belonging, insight that this institution continues to overlook in its mission to become more inclusive and provide the space for its most "disadvantaged" students to thrive. It is the reason why I feel passionate and comforted by these friends, and it is, I hope, why they continue to look up to me as a friend that can assure them that, regardless of how other

people see them and perceive them, they are powerful and thoughtful in ways they will come to learn about in the coming years.

As I shall discuss, the trajectories of first-generation low-income college students, including many of the students FSY serves, are rarely linear and often challenging. While our current national rhetoric of standardized learning may lead us to believe this disproportionate performance stems from a larger systematic issue about lack of academic preparation easily remedied by simple enrichment strategies, narratives of the experiences of students who, because of a dimension of their identity feel judged, unsupported, or alienated, point to a different possibility: the misassumption that every student can sit down and learn naturally in a new environment. In other words, perhaps the issues are not the grades so much as the fact that some students do not feel confident engaging academically because academic and social performance are so intertwined among students, and the inherent social challenge affects students' careers. In this project, I investigate this topic by interrogating first-generation low-income students about their social experiences on campus. Through an analysis of survey responses and interviews, I argue that in the interest of providing *inclusive and productive* diverse educational spaces, Yale University—as well as any institution that pursues a similar goal—must acknowledge and understand the importance of social support and social community when challenging students to engage in rigorous academic spaces. And to do so, the institution must revolutionize their approach: to listen first and foremost as it empowers its students, those who hold the most crucial knowledge in understanding this issue, to lead the change toward this goal.

## Literature Review

### The First-Generation Low-Income Student

To continue a conversation on the experiences of students from underrepresented backgrounds, we must first determine and define what type of backgrounds we are investigating, as well as look into the context of how these investigations take place. Henceforth, I will discuss students that self-identify as first-generation low-income (FGLI) college students, as opposed to students from just one of those identities but not both, for reasons outlined in the following pages. I define first-generation (college) students as students who, upon their admission to Yale University, are the first generation in their family to receive a four-year college education in the United States, meaning the student lacks college preparation support at home. I define low-income to be students who make the minimal family financial contribution (no more than \$3000 per year, in line with FSU's definition described later). To better conceptualize a low-income student, it helps to be more familiar with the effect of low-income circumstances, which include but are not limited to: stress over school expenses (books, supplies, travel—especially if home is a plane ride away, food, clothes—especially for the winter), working to assist family financially, the inability to pursue professional or personal opportunities, such as internships, without a sufficient compensation or stipend, and a keen constant awareness of how much money one has when making purchases. FGLI students, then, are those that can relate to all of these aspects.

There exists literature on the college experiences of first-generation and low-income students (focusing on only one of these identities), which collectively conveys that the academic experiences of both groups of students have many more challenges compared to peers from wealthier and more educated backgrounds. The disparity in experience begins through the simple act of applying to college, a challenge in itself given that first-generation college students

experience significant difficulty attaining their educational aspirations<sup>1</sup> and typically carry the perception of college being “out of [their] league”.<sup>2</sup> Should they choose to apply *and* enroll, first-generation students tend to be more heavily involved in work and less in class and extracurricular activities than other students, depriving them of “developmental benefits...derived from postsecondary education”<sup>3</sup> and potentially lowering their confidence in academic preparation and leadership ability.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, research finds that students of low-socioeconomic status are likely to have lower levels of post-secondary education completion than their higher income peers,<sup>5,6</sup> and the gap is only growing.<sup>7</sup> Finally, there exists research on FGLI students that find they graduate at lower rates than their peers who come from households where parents received a college education and have higher socioeconomic status.<sup>8</sup> First-generation low-income students also have a harder time adjusting and performing well academically due to a lack of support from peers in their college—which is all the more

---

<sup>1</sup> McCarron, Graziella P. and Karen K. Inkelas. 2006. “The Gap between Educational Aspirations and Attainment for First-Generation College Students and the Role of Parental Involvement.” *Journal of College Student Development* 47(5): 534-549.

<sup>2</sup> Meraji, Shereen Marisol. 2015. “Why Many Smart, Low-Income Students Don’t Apply To Elite Schools.” *National Public Radio*. Accessed at: <https://www.npr.org/2015/03/16/393339590/why-many-smart-low-income-students-dont-apply-to-elite-schools>

<sup>3</sup> Pascarella, Ernest T., Christopher T. Pierson, Gregory C. Wolniak, and Patrick T. Terenzini. 2004. “First Generation College Students: Additional Evidence on College Experiences and Outcomes.” *The Journal of Higher Education* 75(3):249-284.

<sup>4</sup> Saenz, Victor B., Sylvia Hurtado, Doug Barrera, De’Sha Wolf, and Fanny Yeung. 2007. *First In My Family: A Profile of First-Generation College Students at Four Year Institutions Since 1971*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

<sup>5</sup> Long, Bridget Terry. 2007. “The Contributions of Economics to the Study of College Access and Success.” *Teachers College Record* 109(10): 2367-2443.

<sup>6</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. 2015. “Postsecondary Attainment: Differences by Socioeconomic Status.” Accessed at: [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe\\_tva.pdf](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_tva.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Bailey, Matha J. and Susan M Dynarski. 2011. “Gains and Gaps: Changing Inequality in U.S. College Entry and Completion.” *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 17633*.

<sup>8</sup> Thayer, Paul B. 2000. “Retention of Students from First Generation and Low Income Backgrounds.” *Opportunity Outlook, the journal of the Council for Opportunity in Education*: 3-9.

important given students come into college with a limited support system given, by definition, parents' unfamiliarity with the college experience.<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately, Yale University, as well as other institutions like Princeton and Georgetown, have recently responded to these preparation and performance gaps between FGLI students and the rest of its student body.<sup>10</sup> For the past five years, First-Year Scholars at Yale has provided students with an English course for Yale credit and programming to increase familiarity with resources like personal librarians, the Center for Teaching and Learning, and tutoring. In doing so, the program provides students with concrete tools that confirm their familiarity with Yale's campus and ability to use it for their own goals, with the intention of making students believe that they belong at Yale, which has been proven to help students' academic and health outcomes.<sup>11</sup> In addition to these academic goals, the program also aims to increase campus engagement with students so as to "model how to engage with the many layers of resources available to Yale College students and offer workshops that focus on the kinds of study skills that will enhance success," as well as goal of increasing community so that they may "[interact] with a diverse and international group of the very best students from around the world."<sup>12</sup> The admissions office decides to send invitations to incoming first-years based on the following criteria:

---

<sup>9</sup> Dennis, Jessica M., Jean S. Phinney, and Lizette Ivy Chuateco. 2005. "The Role of Motivation, Parental Support, and Peer Support in the Academic Success of Ethnic Minority First-Generation College Students." *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(3): 223-236.

<sup>10</sup> Gable, Rachel L. 2017. "Mastering the 'Hidden Curriculum': How some colleges help first-generation and low-income students succeed." *Harvard Magazine*. Accessed at: <https://harvardmagazine.com/2017/11/mastering-the-hidden-curriculum>

<sup>11</sup> Walton, Gregory M. and Geoffrey L. Cohen. "A Brief Social-Belonging Intervention Improves Academic and Health Outcomes of Minority Students." *Science* 331(6023): 1447-1451.

<sup>12</sup> FSY Information Document, see **Supplemental Information**

- “the student must have confirmed that they will be matriculating at Yale in the fall
- “the student has not had access to the type of college prep that a typical Yale student might have had (for instance, attended an under-resourced public high school)
- “the student comes from a low-income background (for instance, the 2017 cohort was limited to students with an expected family income contribution of \$3000 or less)”

However, while the five-week program ultimately centers its purpose and attention around the goals of academic remediation, it also allows for other experiences to occur organically that are outside the scope of academic performance and campus acclimation. Twice a week, students attend a scheduled 1.5-hour meeting with the Dean of the program to talk about topics, including what going to college means to students personally, how getting admitted to Yale affected each student’s relationships, family, and living with wealthier suitemates. The goals of these sessions (known as Dean’s Time) was to provide students a space to share thoughts and questions going on in their minds with each other as they got used to the idea of seeing themselves as students at Yale, but often the space was also used to engage with questions regarding social experiences: those with peers, with family, with friends, with professors, and, of course, with the other FSYers.

While research on the social experiences of FGLI students and the relevance of their background to their overall college experiences exists, this body of research still centers on how these experiences affect them as *students*; their academic careers are primarily considered. For us to engage more deeply with what these social experiences do for students and why they are becoming more relevant to the discussion of FGLI students, we must turn our attention away from academics and consider the importance of social and cultural capital.

### Social and Cultural Capital

Pierre Bourdieu defines social capital to mean “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition”.<sup>13</sup> In other words, social capital can be understood as the resources (that benefit academics, social life, professional opportunities, etc.) that are dependent on “who you know,” but also what friends you have. Ultimately, social capital is dependent on what type of people you attract and how they see benefit in developing a relationship with you, which depends on how one forms relationships and engages in social spaces. Mannerisms, dialect, accent, vocabulary, intonation, language: all these, therefore, play a role in the social capital one holds.

Cultural capital, on the other hand, can be thought of as “convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications.” Cultural capital, then, is a way of not only determining how wealthy one is, but also how embedded one is in an elite, prestigious, admired culture. The history of the formation of this country tells us this academic culture is one that holds the architects of current power structures in highest regard, more specifically old, white, male academics. And, like social capital, one can argue that it also dictates how one is perceived in academic institutions: according to Paul DiMaggio, the university (professors, students) “communicate more easily with students who participate in elite status cultures, give them more attention and special assistance, and perceive them as more intelligent or gifted than student who lack cultural

---

<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. 1985. “The forms of capital.” In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory research for the sociology of education*: 241-258. New York: Greenwood Press.

capital.”<sup>14</sup> This includes owning top-brand accessories, having proper table manners, and the ability to reference classic canon text, authors, and artists, to name a few examples.

Social capital and cultural capital play a role in perpetuating a hierarchy of social and cultural status within academic institutions: Students who are capable of forming social networks with “accomplished scholars” (and are themselves “accomplished scholars”) and professors through socially enticing dialogue (charismatic, confident, using a specific register of language), and students who bear symbols of familiarity with an institution like Yale (clothing, thoughts and experiences that can only have occurred with access to considerable wealth, family that is familiar with college or who have attended Yale) have the opportunity to a more comfortable Yale experience that will likely lead to promising and prestigious opportunities upon graduation.<sup>15,16</sup> There is ample research that corroborates the idea of a hierarchy in schools based on social and cultural capital. In college, social and cultural capital have been found to have a positive association with student persistence overall<sup>17</sup> and across all racial/ethnic groups, with certain groups (in particular Hispanics) having lower levels of “normatively valued forms of social and cultural capital” than others.<sup>18</sup> Social and cultural capital, along with forms of academic and intercultural capital (“the capacity to negotiate diverse racial and ethnic

---

<sup>14</sup> DiMaggio, Paul. 1982. “Cultural Capital and School Success: The Impact of Status Culture Participation on Grades of U.S. High School Students.” *American Sociological Review* 47(2): 189-201.

<sup>15</sup> Yale University Office of Career Strategy. “Yale College First Destinations: A Four-Year Report, Classes of 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016.”

<http://ocs.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/First%20Destinations%20Classes%202013-2016.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Yale University Office of Career Strategy. “First Destination Report: Class of 2017.”

[http://ocs.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/OCS%20Stats%20pages/Final%20Class%20of%202017%20Report%20\(6%20months\).pdf](http://ocs.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/OCS%20Stats%20pages/Final%20Class%20of%202017%20Report%20(6%20months).pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Wells, Ryan. 2008. “The Effects of Social and Cultural Capital on Student Persistence.” *Community College Review* 36(1): 25-46.

<sup>18</sup> Wells, Ryan. 2008. “Social and Cultural Capital, Race and Ethnicity, and College Student Retention.” *Journal of College Student Retention* 10(2): 103-128.

environments”), are also positively associated with academic self-confidence.<sup>19</sup> And although this paper focuses strictly on the college experience, there exists research that points to cultural capital having a significant impact on grades in high school after controlling for family background and measured ability.<sup>20</sup>

The diverse experiences that exist even amongst first-generation college students further support the idea of social capital playing a role in their academic experiences more than background does. While research has found that the formation of relationships with peers and faculty mentors is important for first-generation students,<sup>21</sup> the initiative the student takes to reach out to faculty mentors varies not only by socioeconomic background but also by willingness to socialize with authority figures in college, something that the “privileged poor” (students who attended high school that greatly prepared them for college, like prep schools and private schools through scholarships) own and the “doubly disadvantaged” (students who come from poorly resourced schools) lacked.<sup>22</sup> The exposure of FGLI students to opportunities for them to become comfortable with authority figures in academic spaces, whether for intellectual engagement or for building a relationship, grants them social capital that can significantly help them in their classes. Furthermore, Mark Orbe finds that first-generation identity seems to be more important for students for whom it intersects with other aspects of identity such as race/ethnicity, class, and gender, which could either exacerbate or diminish the feeling of “trying

---

<sup>19</sup> Núñez, Anne-Marie. 2008. “Modeling the Effects of Diversity Experiences and Multiple Capitals of Latina/o College Students’ Academic Self-Confidence.” *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 8(2): 179-196.

<sup>20</sup> DiMaggio, Paul. 1982. “Cultural Capital and School Success: The Impact of Status Culture Participation on Grades of U.S. High School Students.” *American Sociological Review* Vol. 47(2): 189-201.

<sup>21</sup> Gable, Rachel L. 2016. *Pathways to Thriving: First- and Continuing Generation College Student Experiences at Two Elite Universities*. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

<sup>22</sup> Jack, Anthony Abraham. 2015. “(No) Harm in Asking: Class, Acquired Cultural Capital, and Academic Engagement at an Elite University.” *Sociology of Education* 20(10): 1-19.

to live simultaneously in two vastly different worlds.”<sup>23</sup> In these cases, it could be that having an amount of social capital, in the form of comfortable interactions with wealthier peers from highly educated families, might overshadow one’s judgement of how much first-generation identity affects them; indeed, Orbe’s study finds that European-American male students most likely deem their first-generation identity as unimportant, in comparison to first-generation students of a different race/ethnicity or of a different gender.

By definition, then, FGLI students lie at the bottom of this hierarchy. Being a first-generation student means you lack the social capital completely (by definition, the parents of first-generation students are unfamiliar with the college experience), and being low-income means you lack the cultural capital completely (since access to cultural symbols are often only attained through money). While it is expected that such students will also have overrepresentation of students of color, this factor is more of a result of the racialized nature of social and cultural capital, and so I focus solely on the FGLI identity. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind the demographic background of the Yale student body: currently, it educates more students in the top quintile (18.7% in the top 1%) than the bottom 60% income bracket,<sup>[24][25]</sup><sup>2425</sup> but its racial composition (10% Black or African-American, 2% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 21% Asian, 11% Hispanic of any race, and 71% White)<sup>26</sup> is fairly representative of the larger U.S. racial composition.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Orbe, Mark P. 2004. “Negotiating Multiple Identities Within Multiple Frames: An Analysis of First-Generation College Students.” *Communication Education* 53(2): 131-149.

<sup>24</sup> Ciancarelli, Luke. 2017. “Report shows income inequality at Yale.” *Yale Daily News*. Accessed at: <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2017/02/03/report-shows-income-inequality-at-yale/>

<sup>25</sup> Aisch, Gregor, Larry Buchanan, Amanda Cox, and Kevin Quealy. 2017. “Some Colleges Have More Students From the Top 1 Percent Than the Bottom 60. Find Yours.” *The New York Times*. Accessed at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/18/upshot/some-colleges-have-more-students-from-the-top-1-percent-than-the-bottom-60.html>

<sup>26</sup> Yale 2016-2017 Factsheet. [https://oir.yale.edu/sites/default/files/factsheet\\_2016-17.pdf](https://oir.yale.edu/sites/default/files/factsheet_2016-17.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Kao, Grace, Elizabeth Vaquera, and Kimberly Goyette. 2013. *Education and Immigration*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Revisiting the academic approach to integrating first-generation low-income students, then, I argue that at the heart of these students' disadvantages upon arriving at college is the lack of social and cultural capital, both of which influence academic performance. There already exists evidence that supportive social lives can potentially help students adjust at college so that they may engage intellectually more comfortably.<sup>28</sup>

### The Problem with our Current Approach

With a better understanding of how FGLI students are disadvantaged, we can continue to advocate, as programs like FSY do, for a more comprehensive method of providing these students the support, through social and cultural capital, they need to succeed and have fulfilling social lives in college—should we choose to accept the hierarchical model of capital. But what is at stake in this method, what is completely overlooked and simplified is the fact that FGLI students and their peers from wealthier and more educated families have *real* differences not only in experiences but in beliefs, in how they view the world and their education, and in what they value. Should a FGLI student participate in FSY and, upon completion, have the capital necessary to engage comfortably with even the most accomplished and social students at Yale, these conversations will be limited to the extent that they can critically reflect on how cultural differences affect students' lives and how they interact with others. Because these differences seem to disappear in these comfortable interactions, these two students will have a harder time accepting the fact that their different upbringings are important, that they are not as removed from such issues as their discussions might imply, and that there is an issue with a world in which one must suddenly adopt foreign capital simply to be recognized and included in

---

<sup>28</sup> Crockett, Lisa J., Maria I. Iturbide, Rosalie A. Torres Stone, Meredith McGinley, Marcela Raffaelli, and Gustavo Carlo. 2007. "Acculturative Stress, Social Support, and Coping: Relations to Psychological Adjustment among Mexican American College Students." *Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology*: 299.

conversation. I return to a paper written by Walton and Cohen I cited to note that minority students who have a stronger sense of social-belonging have better health and academic outcomes. A look into the methodology reveals such students arrive at social-belonging by believing that their social adversity is shared among peers and is short-lived, rather than reflecting the idea that they don't belong in those spaces. The problem with this methodology can be noted with a single question: What if this social adversity *is* a result of peers and faculty believing consciously or subconsciously that they do not belong? How appropriate is it for students to believe something that may not be accurately reflecting their social environment? As helpful as this intervention was for the students involved, it fails to address this concern and evaluate more deeply the social landscape of the school.

The question that naturally comes from the criticism of the hierarchical model is, why *should* one's background and the social and cultural capital that it provides be deemed irrelevant to their ability to engage in social, academic, and professional spaces? Indeed, work centered around critical pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy, and critical race theory point to the fact that such decisions are made by systems of power developed precisely to prioritize the culture of those who have held and continue to hold power. The appropriate response, this work argues, is to incorporate what students bring into the classrooms with them to shape learning and relieve them of the harmful myth that the backgrounds of underrepresented students—especially first-generation low-income students—exist in direct opposition that of an educated person. Gloria Ladson-Billings has much to offer on this approach through her proposal of culturally relevant pedagogy, which encourages educators to find what students are experts in, for “much of what [educators] claim [they] want to teach kids they already know in some form.”<sup>29</sup> “What they

---

<sup>29</sup> Ladson-Billings, Gloria. 1994. *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

know” can be described as alternative forms of capital, such as aspirational, navigational, linguistic, familiar, and resistant capitals, that likely go unacknowledged but nevertheless bring rich opportunities for students to learn from each other, culminating in community cultural wealth.<sup>30</sup> What results is learning that occurs only through deep engagement with students, which can only occur genuinely by validating the experiences, beliefs, and emotions of students, and results in pedagogy that “shifts, changes, adapts, recycles, and recreates instructional spaces to ensure that consistently marginalized students are repositioned into a place of normativity—that is, they become subjects in the instructional process, not mere objects.”<sup>31</sup> In doing so, knowledge centered around experiences and language that students can engage with intellectually and more comfortably becomes the key in driving learning—not social and cultural capital, which makes learning inaccessible to marginalized students. And because in current teaching pedagogy these two student profiles, that of the marginalized student and that of the “educated” student, have been rendered antithetical, initiating such practices that challenge and change teaching content and style and in turn directly and explicitly confront white elite values and beliefs is a process that is inherently difficult and uncomfortable.<sup>32</sup>

With this new framework in mind, we can accept a study of the hierarchy of social and cultural capital *only insofar* as to understand its effects on the students that it deems contrary to the “highly academic profile”—not to validate its accuracy. In abandoning the hierarchical model, I propose instead a model of different but equally valued social and cultural capital, one that reframes the FGLI student from someone that needs remediation to someone who has tremendous knowledge and wisdom to share with their peers—and their professors.

---

<sup>30</sup> Yosso, Tara J. 2005. “Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth.” *Race Ethnicity and Education* Vol. 8(1): 69-91.

<sup>31</sup> Ladson-Billings, Gloria. 2014. “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the Remix.” *Harvard Educational Review* 84(1): 74-84.

<sup>32</sup> Sleeter, Christene E. “An agenda to strengthen culturally responsive pedagogy.” *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* Vol. 10(2): 7-23.

---

In fact, this knowledge and wisdom is all the more important to understand from the perspective of the institution, given that, I argue, **FGLI students inhabit spaces that were not designed for them, and therefore hold knowledge and wisdom that the institution cannot generate itself.** Their existence in such spaces is in itself an act of resistance to the systematic oppression that has historically deprived them of such opportunities, and to thrive in these settings provides them with the wisdom of how the institution falls short to students they are not prioritizing, and more importantly, how to combat against these forces.

---

I approach this project with the belief that understanding the social experiences of FGLI students provide a method of understanding how social and cultural capital affects them. In turn, their responses to such experiences provide an understanding to how students find alternative ways of engaging with social spaces should they find themselves alienated from greater social spaces at Yale, challenging the argument that students find fulfillment through higher levels of capital.

### **Research Questions**

This project seeks to investigate the social dynamics that emerge upon the integration of first-generation low-income students into Yale University as a case study of how perceptions of social and cultural capital, or lack thereof, affect a student's capacity to engage socially and intellectually. This project is guided by the following research questions: **1) What are the challenges that first-generation low-income students face socially upon arriving to Yale? What apprehensions do these students develop before and after they arrive on campus that relate to how they adjust socially? 2) How have students addressed and worked towards solutions to these**

challenges? How did they make their closest relationships (friends, student organizations, faculty, etc.), how do they sustain them, and why are these relationships important to them? **3)** What implications do these findings have on how Yale can become increasingly inclusive and supportive of students from diverse backgrounds?

### **Methodology**

This project surveys Yale students and alumni online through Yale Qualtrics, enabling me to look into how students interpret what it means to be a Yale student, how this interpretation affects their own sense of identity especially as it relates to this definition of being a Yale student, and how this plays a role in developing relationships with peers and what interactions with them look like, looking particularly at how they discuss identity and issues that come up relating to identities. Subsequent interviews were conducted to expand on these questions and specific experiences, and these students were contacted after providing contact information in the survey. All initial students were contacted through templated emails. (See **Supplemental Information**)

The survey, which collects information anonymously, is separated into four sections: Demographic Information, Social Life at Yale, Yale Culture, and Follow Up. The first collects background information of participants (first semester at Yale, race/ethnicity, high school background, whether the student participated in FSY, and whether they identify as first-generation, low-income, or both). The second probes questions around social apprehensions prior and upon arriving to Yale, closest friends on campus, and how often and with whom participants discuss questions around underrepresented identities. The third asks participants to define “Yale culture,” reflect how their culture relates to Yale culture, and reflect on how social and cultural

capital affects them. The final Follow Up section is intended for participants to volunteer contact information for interviews, and provides a final space for comments and questions.

The survey relies almost exclusively on free text responses on the second and third sections except for two questions that ask students how much they agree (on a 1 “strongly agree” to 5 “strongly disagree scale) to two statements: “My cultural background is at odds or incompatible to Yale culture,” and “Yale culture presents me with challenges in socializing with people or in social events. (i.e. living with suitemates, student organizations, night life, Yale events, etc.).” (For complete survey, see **Supplemental Information.**) Survey responses are kept anonymous so as to promote honesty and comprehensive answers to questions about social life experiences at Yale; upon analysis of the data, it is more important to spot trends across responses from multiple participants than obtaining identifiable profiles of FGLI students, and so surveys are the best tool to increase participation while providing the space for students to engage deeply with personal questions.

12 interviews were conducted, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to complement the results of the surveys. The names of interview participants were kept confidential, although demographic information (year, race/ethnicity, where they come from) is collected.

The participation in study is limited strictly to Yale students who identify as first-generation and/or low-income students and will prioritize the responses of first-generation low-income (FGLI) students. This study first contacted students who participated in the First-Years Scholars at Yale program. Names and emails of students who have participated were retrieved by asking Michael Fitzpatrick and April Ruiz, who were involved with the program the past two summers. Subsequent participants (as in, outside the FSY program) were obtained by FSY students forwarding the email to first-generation/low-income students who did not participate in

the program. Given FSY's criteria of selecting students for their program<sup>33</sup> and the conversations that are initiated during the summer of the program, starting to collect responses from these students is most appropriate.

General trends and themes are reported from the collective complete responses, but responses are also analyzed by first-generation/low-income/FGLI identity, race/ethnicity, and other demographic distinctions to look for patterns.

It should be noted that this project attracted primarily participants who are very interested in these questions and/or who consider FGLI identity important, and so data collection is expected to show more opinions noting the importance of this identity. Furthermore, this paper only looks into *complete* responses to the survey, excluding data from responses that fill out either the first or first two sections of the survey but fail to complete it. (Sections of this data, however, are still analyzed and preliminary findings are noted in Further Studies.)

### **Positionality Statement**

I, the author of this paper, identify as first-generation low-income and as Latinx, and I participated in the FSY program. Therefore, I must recognize my subjectivity and position in many of the questions I probe to contextualize these findings.<sup>34,35</sup> This statement is all the more relevant given I served as a counselor for the program summer 2017, meaning I must consider the work it does important enough to dedicate a summer to work for it. I rely on the anonymous/confidential nature of this project to generate more honest answers, including those that don't consider such identities important or relevant, in addition to the theoretical focus on social and cultural capital to understand experiences and the position of students. In addition, I

---

<sup>33</sup> FSY Information document, see **Supplemental Information**

<sup>34</sup> Berger, Roni. 2015. "Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research." *Qualitative Research* 15(2): 219–234.

<sup>35</sup> Milner IV, H. Richard. 2007. "Race, culture, and researcher positionality: Working through dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen." *Educational Researcher* 36(7): 388–400.

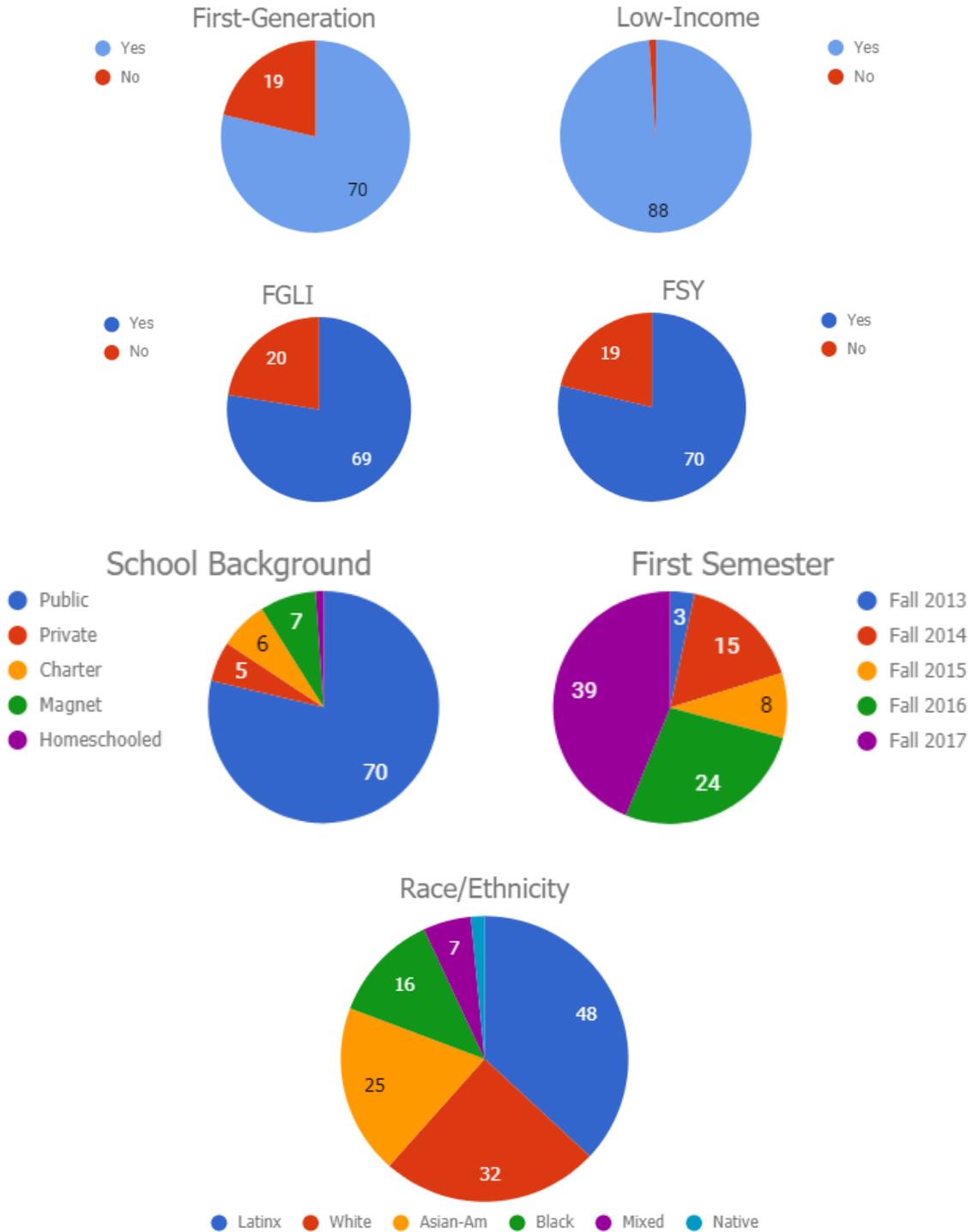
have opted out of participating in the survey or interview, and so work only with the information given to me.

This positionality becomes relevant in the interpretation of data and analysis, where I suggest potential explanations to patterns observed. While I rely on research to corroborate my findings, I also use some of the learning I have gained first-hand as a FGLI student, and from discussions I have had with other FGLI students, to shape my approach towards arriving at explanations. I argue doing so is appropriate, as my voice, one that has engaged in many discussions on the issue and is therefore important, participates in the dialogue that FGLI seek on campuses like Yale's by attempting to bring relevant elements to contextualize findings (e.g. how people of different races/ethnicities are perceived) to understand better patterns but never claiming absolute causations.

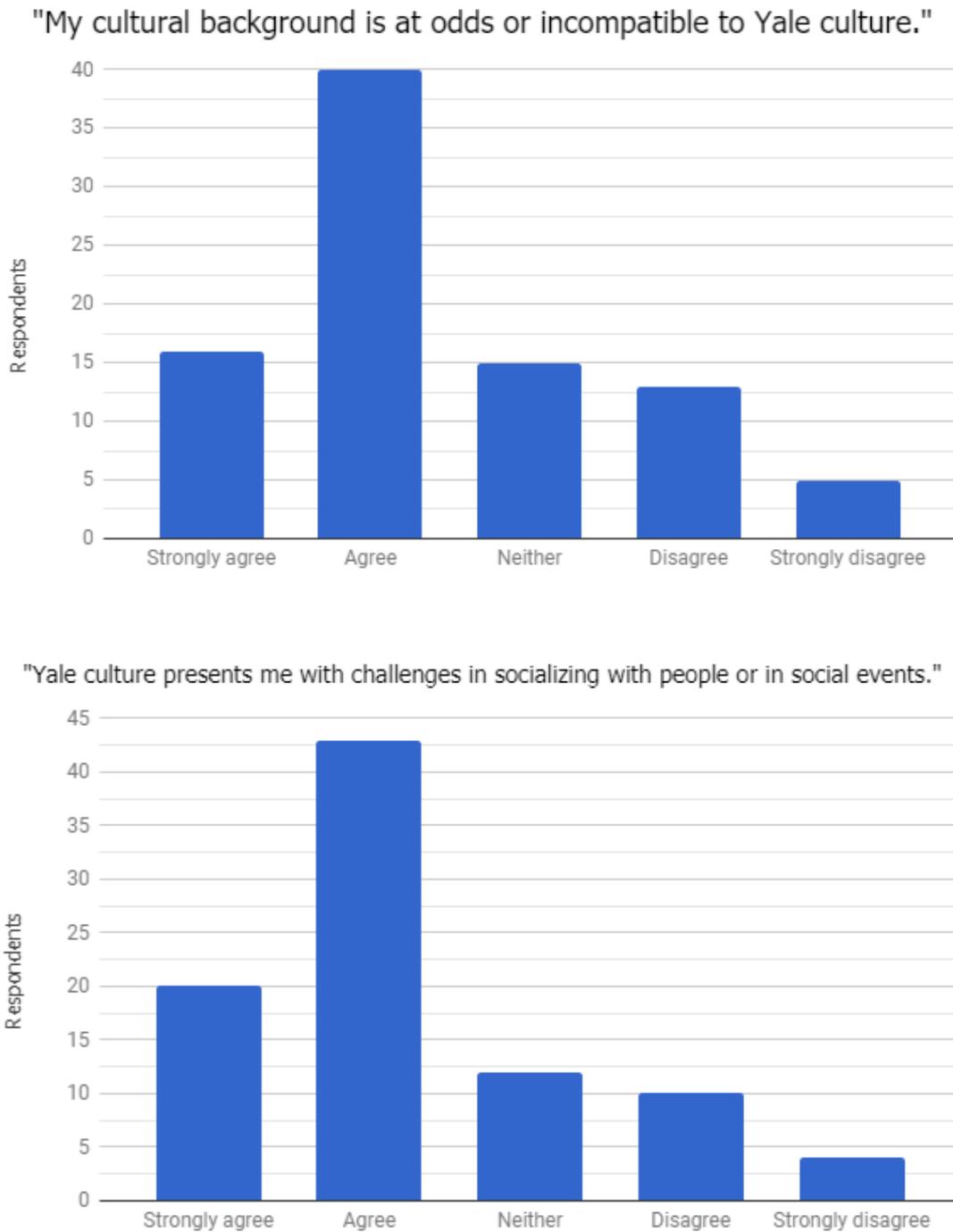
## **Data and Results**

### General Findings

Upon distribution, 89 complete survey responses were recorded, the first 47 which were collected after only three days after sending emails. 70 identify as first-generation college students (and 19 do not), while 88 identify as low-income (while 1 does not), yielding a pool of 69 FGLI students (**Figure 1**). Of these 89, 3 started college in Fall 2013, 15 started in Fall 2014, 8 started in Fall 2015, 24 started in Fall 2016, and 39 started in Fall 2017. 70 respondents participated in FSY and 19 did not. 70 respondents attended public school, 7 attended a magnet school, 6 attended charter schools (including public charter schools), 5 attended private school, and 1 respondent was homeschooled. Of these respondents, 48 self-identified as Latinx



**Figure 1.** Breakdown of survey participants by demographic background.



**Figure 2.** Responses to the two statements that relate to how Yale culture affects FG/LI/FGLI students. (encompassing responses such as “Latino,” “Hispanic,” “Mexican-American,” “Puerto Rican,” “Peruvian,” etc.), 32 as White (“White,” “Caucasian,” etc.), 25 as Asian-American (“Asian,”

“Japanese,” “Vietnamese,” etc.), 16 as Black (“Black,” “African-American,” “Caribbean,” etc.), 7 as mixed-race (“Mixed,” “Afro-Hispanic,” etc.), and 2 as Native American (“Native American” and “Cajun”); mixed-race participants were also counted under respective race/ethnicities when indicated (so “Afro-Hispanic” was counted under mixed-race but also Latinx and Black).

For the two quantitative questions of the survey, 16 respondents strongly agree, 40 agree, 15 neither agree nor disagree, 13 disagree, and 5 strongly disagree with the statement, “My cultural background is at odds or incompatible to Yale culture” (**Figure 2**). For the statement “Yale culture presents me with challenges in socializing with people or in social events. (i.e. living with suitemates, student organizations, night life, Yale events, etc.),” 20 respondents strongly agree, 43 agree, 12 neither agree nor disagree, 10 disagree, and 4 strongly disagree.

In addition, 13 interviews were conducted from volunteers who completed the survey, chosen to cover a diversity of profiles along racial/ethnic background, participation in FSY, and class year, and whose demographic backgrounds are presented in **Table 1**. Interviews averaged 50 minutes in length and attempted to encompass the diverse background of FGLI students. (Gabi reports as the only person who identifies as low-income but not first-generation, although, as her interview reveals, she did not receive any guidance through the college application process from her household.)

From the survey responses and the interview transcriptions, it is possible to derive commonalities in the experiences of FGLI students generally, although FGLI student profiles and their respective experiences at Yale are quite diverse. Upon arrival, the majority of students hold reservations based on intelligence and academic preparation, and even more so based on their background (being the first in their family and knowing no one on campus, being poor and

having it be prevalent in appearance and interactions). Some cite holding only “usual reservations” of being in a new space, while others state they hold no reservations at all.

<b>Name</b>	<b>First Semester</b>	<b>Racial/Ethnic Background</b>	<b>FSY?</b>
Jon	Fall 2017	Chinese-American	Yes
Bikram	Fall 2017	Middle Eastern	No
Luz	Fall 2017	Black, Caribbean	Yes
Esperanza	Fall 2017	Latinx (Mexican-American)	Yes
James	Fall 2017	White	Yes
Sandra	Fall 2017	Latinx (Mexican-American)	Yes
Gabi	Fall 2017	Native American	Yes
Antonio	Fall 2016	Latinx (Mexican-American)	No
Sierra	Fall 2015	White	Yes
Maggie	Fall 2014	Latinx (Mexican-American)	No
Pham	Fall 2014	Vietnamese-American	Yes
Reina	Fall 2014	Latinx (Mexican-American)	No
Robert	Fall 2014	Black, African-American	Yes

**Table 1.** List of interviewees and their demographic backgrounds.

Their integration into the larger population during their first fall semester gives rise to observations of varying degrees about how social and cultural capital shapes their experiences through the lens of their FGLI identity. It is during this initial period of making friendships, building course schedules, and participating in extracurriculars—all while being subject to answering the question “How are you doing?” with every friendly interaction—that differences in how people socialize, what they reveal about themselves in these interactions, and what they make of the diverse pool of first-years emerge. These differences task FGLI to reflect how they

situate themselves with these other students, often touching on the difficult realization that this institution and its members prefer a particular way of socializing with which the student might not comfortably engage because of cultural differences inherent to their FGLI identity. Maggie and Esperanza, two Latinx students of different years, expand on these realizations that come from differences in language and comfort in sharing spaces with wealthier White students:

**Maggie:** “the northeast is a lot colder like both climate-wise and people-wise like people are just more aloof on the street, they’re, I don’t know, less relaxed, a little more uptight...I remember calling my mom those first couple of weeks crying because I was like “Mom I feel like nobody likes me” and she was like “Why do you think that?” and it was because I remember walking down Old Campus like the people that I would pass, that I was passing by didn’t smile at me.”

**Esperanza:** “I just feel like I can’t speak to people from like higher socioeconomic statuses because they have this like language in which they’re able to speak...I’m really used to speaking Spanglish so whenever I, whenever I’m comfortable with people I, like, speak Spanglish, but I realize I can’t do that here because they’ll just be confused...I just don’t feel like I have the vocabulary that these people have, umm, so it’s definitely intimidating cause sometimes I’m just trying to like catch up as to like everything that they’re saying.”

These social challenges, or lack thereof, influence the friendships formed, many which are sustained in the following years, and FGLI students display a tendency to gravitate towards students that share similar identities.

Regardless of their attitude or how comfortable they are socially with the greater population during their first year at Yale, students are quick to recognize how “Yale culture” is defined generally, namely as that which strives for performative success at all times, success that prioritizes the attainment of cultural capital (primarily in the form of academic excellence, time management, and capitalizing on institutional resources for professional opportunities) and social capital (being very social and having an exciting social life through parties), often to a point where it can become unhealthy and prevents students from engaging in learning genuinely. Many students are critical of this, realizing that while it may not be the culture most Yale students

operate under, it still exerts a pressure over the greater population given Yale's elite perception and therefore affects their experiences, how they behave, and what decisions they make about their academic and social lives. Many offer their own personal interpretations of success, often contrasting the definition of "Yale culture," citing passion, happiness, and a care for others as better definitions of a successful Yale student.

This constant exposure to a culture heavily dependent on the attainment of social and cultural capital results in continuing conversations about identity, as particular identities imply by definition a lack of certain capital. While these conversations could theoretically occur between any students who are understanding of identity, they largely primarily happen between students who hold share similar identities, which, as was alluded already, tend to be closer friends, and, depending on how relevant they see them to their day-to-day experiences, can become something they can easily dismiss or to discuss heavily. Respondents cite the invalidation of feelings, the intellectualization and removal of personal experiences, and the need to use personal anecdotes as reasons why they choose to discuss these topics only with students of similar backgrounds, which they say "can understand" in a way others who are not FG or LI cannot. As for respondents who say they rarely talk about their FGLI identity, they express a belief parts of their background should not overshadow how they are perceived or imply limitations to their capabilities as students, and so focusing on them becomes unproductive.

However, the willingness that students hold to have discussions with people outside of shared identity (as in students who are not FGLI) seem to change with increased time as a student at Yale. Upper level students express that as they get older they realize conversations around FGLI identity and how significantly social and cultural capital play a role in their experiences do not occur as often or as easily enough for meaningful campus-wide change to

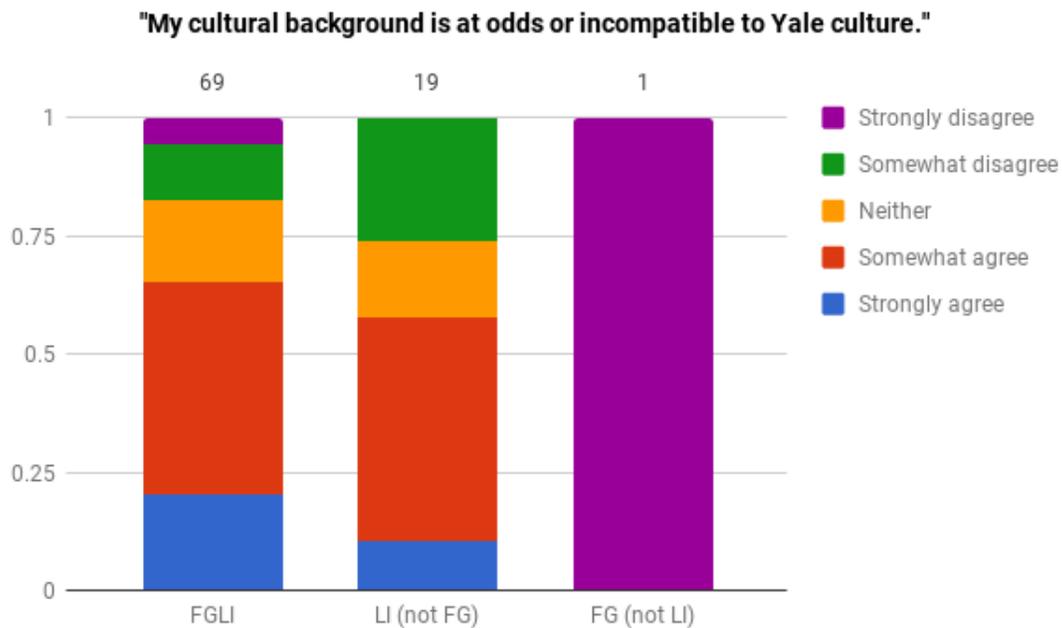
occur. This empowers them to speak about the topic more often and engage in debates when the opportunity arises to change problematic assumptions and perceptions of FGLI students.

What role does FSY play in all of this? Students are grateful for the benefits of receiving a writing credit before starting the fall semester and multiple workshops, but socially the summer program does significant work towards how students begin to engage in these discussions around identity, an element that has not been discussed in the question of improving the experiences of FGLI students at Yale. The introduction of FGLI students to a whole cohort of students who share similar backgrounds and struggles in itself gives students reassurance that they are “not alone” on campus. Moreover, most students express a deep appreciation for the space given to have conversations about identity through hearing each other's stories, both through structured programming like Dean's Time and less formal socializing (in suites, in the butteries). In doing so, students are united through a sense that they are surrounded by people who will listen and understand or attempt to understand their identities, while recognizing the diverse narratives everyone brings to conversations. Just as there is a general understanding that students are entering a college space for the first time, there is also an understanding that people are having discussions about identity, socioeconomic status, migration narratives, and race/ethnicity for the first time as well—an important element in establishing an inclusive space that activist spaces elsewhere can struggle to maintain when discussing identity politics. The large majority of FSY participants express gratitude for participating in the program because of this community space (with exceptions, which interestingly encompass many that did FSY during the summer of 2016), and the lasting friendships that continue past their summer serve as testaments to the powerful effect these conversations have on providing a support system through meaningful relationships with fellow peers and upper level student counselors.

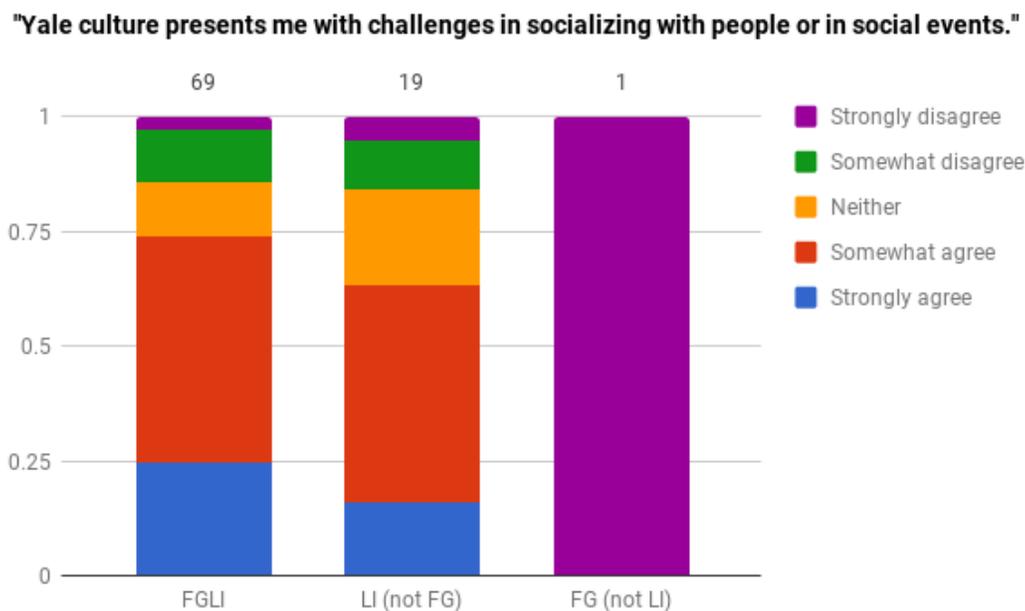
## Distinctions Among Demographic Groups

### *First-Generation and Low-Income*

While generally the trends discussed are seen across all first-generation (FG), low-income (LI), and first-generation low-income (FGLI) students, there are important distinctions revealed when respondents are divided along demographic lines, corroborating the argument of social and cultural capital playing a role in the social experience of students. The most relevant distinction for this investigation is, of course, that between these three groups (**Figure 3**). Of these groups, only 1 identifies as not LI, and they strongly disagree with both statements. FGLI respondents answered most similarly to that of the general responses (**Figure 1**), and LI respondents only deviate slightly in their responses to the question of cultural compatibility, where more people somewhat disagree with the statement than are impartial (answered “Neither”).



**Figure 3.** Responses broken down by whether students identify as FG, LI, or FGLI.



**Figure 3.** Responses broken down by whether students identify as FG, LI, or FGLI.

### *Race/Ethnicity*

After FGLI identity, race/ethnicity is the most relevant variable in this investigation, given students of color are largely overrepresented in FGLI populations and that we continue to live in a racialized society. The role that race/ethnicity plays in the attainment of social and cultural capital<sup>36,37</sup> deems an investigation into its effect on how students answer questions about their culture relative to Yale culture and the social challenges they experience a key component of understanding FGLI experiences. Moreover, given the amount of attention Yale's campus has given to questions about race/ethnicity, it is valuable to ask how the experiences of FGLI students of color compare with students of color who do not identify as FG, LI, or FGLI.

Antonio's interview reveals this topic as he reflects on his experience during Cultural

<sup>36</sup> Yosso, Tara J. 2005. "Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8(1): 69-91.

<sup>37</sup> James, Erika Hayes. 2000. "Race-Related Differences in Promotions and Support: Underlying Effects of Human and Social Capital." *Organization Science* 11(5): 493-508.

Connections, a pre-orientation program “designed to introduce freshmen to Yale’s cultural resources as well as to explore the diversity of student experiences on the Yale campus, with emphasis on the experiences of traditionally underrepresented students and issues related to racial identity”<sup>38</sup>:

**Antonio:** “there’s definitely a huge amount of extroversion and people, I feel like...like, I, I don’t know if it’s like genuine or not but a lot of people act like they sort of like known each other their whole lives, like at the end of the week and I can’t really, like, like...like say that or act that way...I was like ‘Wow, if I, uh, if I don’t fit in here like how could I fit in when, like, everyone else comes at Yale.’ I remember one night— I don’t— it was so weird in retrospect, it was like a really big social regression but I tried to like chill with a group but uh I forgot who but she was like ‘Oh this is like family time’ and I felt really stupid for like chilling with them cause I kind of like got kicked out of the table, like I just went to my room and cried.”

Jon expands how FGLI identity continues to divide people into the school year, specifically in the cultural houses:

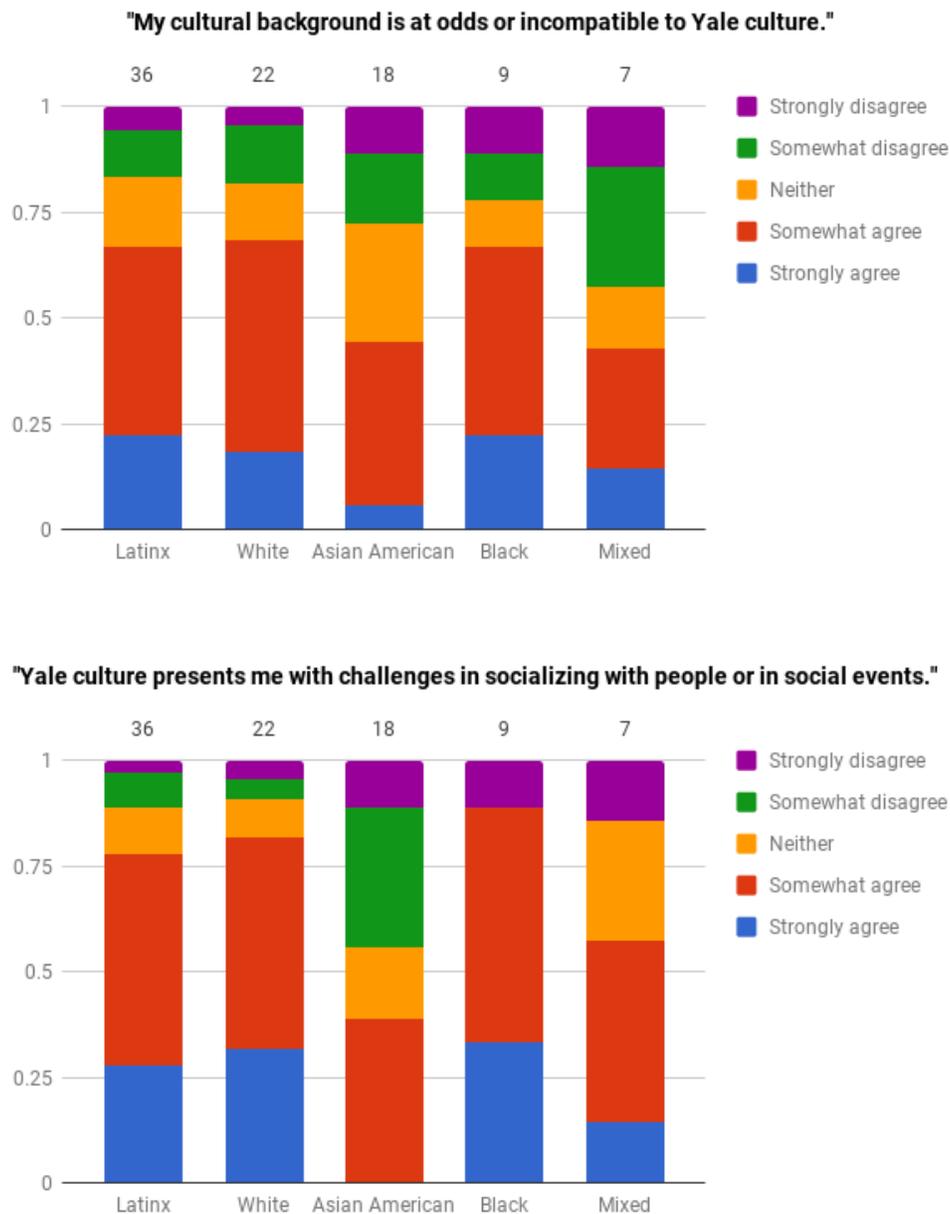
**Jon:** “I wouldn’t say there’s like a big community outside of FSJ circle, I wouldn’t say that at all. Umm, not even in the cultural houses because culture, like if you go to like AACC— okay the one common there is that you’re all Asian, but there are lot of type of us, they’re subdivided with social elite status, and in fact a lot of like AACC people there are very very wealthy, just like in any cultural houses, so like being in the same cultural house doesn’t mean that you can share like being from like first gen background, that you can like openly express it. There’s never an intended space for it, but it’s okay you mention it in the AACC, but you will get some stares or like some opinions and questions about it.”

White respondents’ insecurities center largely around their low-income identity over other characteristics, which makes sense given culturally and racially they are not as stark differences between them and the traditional Yale student (who holds high levels of social and cultural capital) at a predominantly White institution. Interesting to note, however, is the fact that even so, White respondents tend to somewhat agree and strongly agree to the two statements regarding incompatibility with Yale culture and social challenges.

---

<sup>38</sup> Yale College. 2018. Accessed at: <https://culturalconnections.yalecollege.yale.edu/>

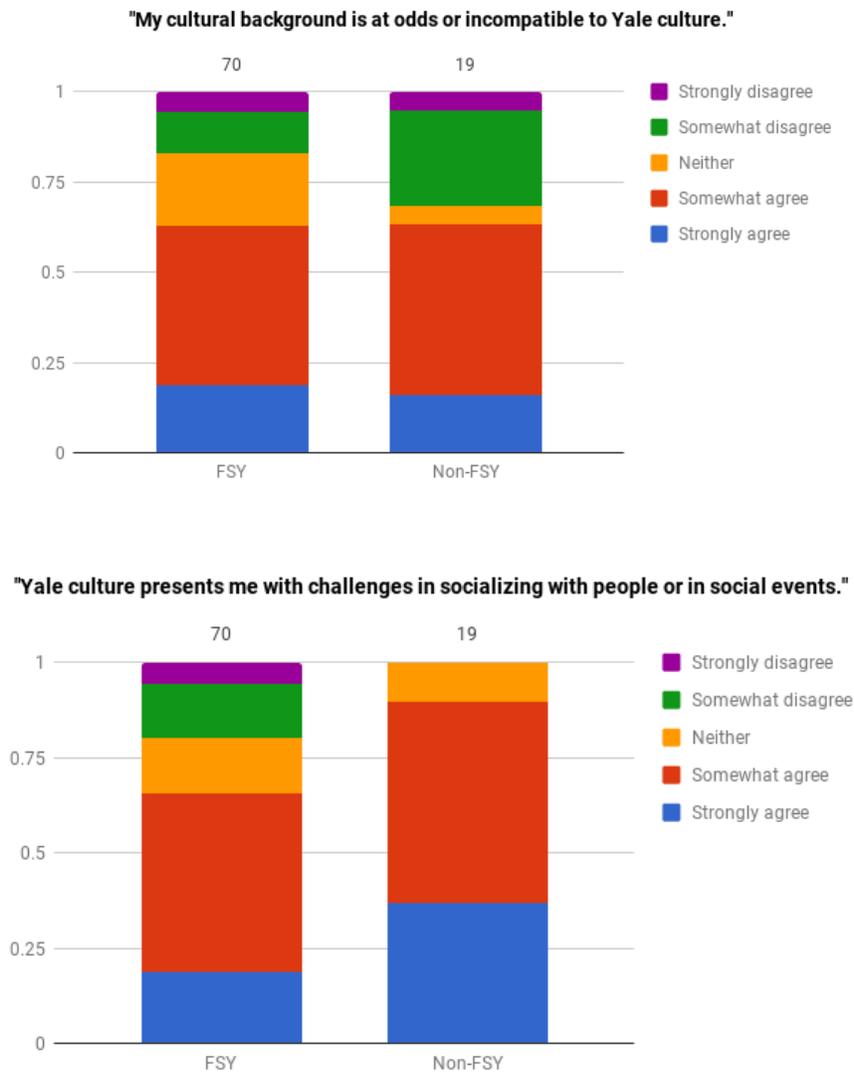
Out of other respondents, Asian-American students the most from the general responses trend observed in **Figure 1**. While the shape of responses is similar for the first question (around cultural compatibility), there are Asian-American respondents who are almost evenly split into agreement and disagreement with the statement about social challenges—in fact, 2 students strongly disagree with the statement, and no students strongly agree with it.



**Figure 4.** Responses broken down by racial/ethnic background of students.

*FSY Participation*

Finally, respondents are divided by whether they participated in FSY (**Figure 5**). FSY participants respond similarly to respondents generally, but non-FSY participants seem to somewhat disagree with the first statement (cultural compatibility) more than they strongly agree with it. Additionally, no non-FSY participant responded disagreeing with the second statement (social challenges) with almost all of them responding as somewhat agreeing and strongly agreeing.



**Figure 5.** Responses broken down by participation in FSY.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

### The Oppressive Nature of Yale Culture

It is intriguing to find that a breakdown of students who experienced reservation prior to and during their first semester of Yale generates little useful data, as programs, institutions, and characteristics that might provide some social and cultural capital to students (Whiteness, LEDA, private school, etc.) do not always alleviate concerns about social challenges that might arise as a result of having a background distinct from the rest of the student body, namely that of being FGLI. While prior preparation (in the form of how to use college resources, how to socialize with wealthier White students, etc.) might eventually play a role in making a specific student feel better about their place in the university, and for some students it does, there is no evidence that it consistently also alleviates students of social apprehensions of attending an elite institution like Yale, and the prestige of this specific institution might be the cause of these apprehensions. There are few places like Yale that have such renowned academic prestige; maybe there is little mental preparation any place or program that has a similar perception can produce. It is more difficult to reason how student who report having little to none formal preparation into attending places like Yale hold no social reservations.

The fact that Yale culture is widely understood, and even more so that some students recognize that it does not need to be embodied by even the majority of students to have an effect on all students, indicate such reservations are not entirely unfounded. Perhaps it is the fear to feel out of place and pursue a well-defined definition of success that makes Yale culture so prevalent, but regardless of why it persists and how students react toward such a pressure, Yale culture reinforces the perception that a specific persona is valued over others, one that is not naturally at reach for students who come into Yale lacking the specific capital that translates into success. It

is this realization that gives rise to the dangerous and insidious implication that these students do not belong in this institution. Indeed, Yale's historical student composition of until relatively recent of White men and almost entirely upper-middle class and wealthier students reveals this to be the case for the large majority of this institution's existence, too recent to reasonably expect the campus to feel welcoming of students outside of this demographic. Rob summarizes this idea by interpreting being first-generation as "occupying a space that very much was not designed for you". FGLI students find themselves having to reconcile the two apparently contradicting elements that identify them, namely their cultural background and their academic persona: the fact that 31, or 35% of, respondents cite academic spaces (sections, seminars, etc.) as places they feel most uncomfortable (in addition to the racialization, 19 or 21%, and class-association, 17 or 19%, of these spaces, e.g. responding with "white people" or "wealthy people") serves as evidence of this consequence, for often FGLI students feel alone in such spaces. Many students, like Gabi, are able to explain the specific ways the fear of reinforcing this false dichotomy of the student's background and their academic ability manifests itself in the classroom:

**Gabi** "Growing up I learned words that I know through reading, like they were never said like over dinner table or like in a classroom...so like in a seminar setting if you like see a word that like you know of but like never like heard it pronounced out loud it just like becomes an awkward thing where like, where is like you know like what the word means but like it's gonna like seem like you don't know what it means...I feel like part of it also is because I usually have my laptop in class and so like on my laptop I have the Yale Native sticker on it and so I don't want them like hear me pronounce the word wrong or say something stupid and then see the sticker and then like be like 'Oh it's because she's Native American,' yeah."

This attitude further adds to the marginalization of FGLI students through indirect implications that they lack ownership of the success of their academic career, and that their desires to invest in what they are passionate about runs contrary to "what they should be doing" to escape their past. This conflict becomes even more consequential when FGLI students wish to

pursue questions and topics that relate to themselves in some way—in invalidating the value of work in which these students see themselves, the conflict creates a dichotomy between where the student comes from and what the student should deem interesting and promising, like the traditional careers in medicine, law, or finance. While the general population might relate to such a notion, FGLI students find themselves with the particular pressure that they must capitalize on an opportunity rarely granted to people like them. They must prove themselves of their place here, because people certainly question it, or constantly justify why they deserve to be at Yale.

It is reasonable to predict that these perceptions also affect interactions between students of different educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. Under Yale culture, interactions where the FGLI student challenges the integrity of a system that relies on social and cultural capital by talking about how FGLI and students of color are disadvantaged—through how they talk about it (language, dialect, etc.), what they talk about (the specific critiques), or both—become uncomfortable and are therefore avoided. FGLI students, then, find themselves having to experience a pressure to either conform to socializing in way that is more comfortable to the greater population by limiting how they speak and why they speak, and in doing so validate the established method of obtaining social capital, or accept the fact that “being themselves” will be an inherently uncomfortable process because of the historic marginalization of FGLI students.

Jon expands on this dilemma as they talk about a conversation they had with wealthier friends:

**Jon:** “on the way from English class to chemistry, my, me and my friends were talking about it...I outed myself like ‘Oh yeah I went to FSY and all us low income first gen kids like always joke about like only Canada Goose jackets’ or something like that and then one of my friend who’s like upper middle class who live in California was like ‘Oh really wow that’s a lot of stigma against us’ and then at that moment I was like ‘Oh he really cared and took that as an offense like he took that as a criticism!’ so I immediately felt like ‘Oh, oh, probably I shouldn’t out myself that often because some people really care about these things and they get offended’ so, so I don’t I stopped outing myself as much”

When students like Jon finally feel comfortable taking ownership over their identity as low-income and allow themselves to make light of the reality they live in (Canada Goose jackets are indeed prevalent around campus as any undergraduate can attest, and a form of cultural capital), they are placed responsibility for making the interaction awkward, and so the comfort of higher income students are prioritized over the voices of FGLI students. It is no surprise, then, that FGLI students naturally gravitate towards each other to have conversations about identity and the issues that come from being FGLI and tend to limit these discussions only with those people. Those incapable of relating to their experiences approach the conversation in a way that shows they are not dismissive of the issues at hand but with enough distance to prevent too much discomfort, but in doing so trivialize questions and arguments that relate to FGLI students personally.

#### Race/Ethnicity and FGLI Identity

The consideration of how race plays a role in the experiences of FGLI students further proves the social difficulty that exists in having these conversations under a culture that strictly stratifies students into specific communities and identities. The fear of White students invalidating and trivializing the experiences of FGLI students who are majority students of color can often leave White FGLI students feeling excluded from FGLI spaces—but, because of their low-income upbringing, such student cannot always immediately retreat to the greater wealthier Yale student population, contrary to what students of color might believe. James talks about some of his perspectives on what his low-income identity has taught him, and how these perspectives lie in contrast to the general attitude towards academics at Yale:

**James:** “My, you know, family is very poor but the one thing I was is, I was very happy, like um, even though we were poor, we couldn’t afford much, like, just the love that we gave each other was enough and then like the time we spent together with friends and family was very fun and very fulfilling...here you need to, you

know, they kind of tell you get involved in more stuff, everything, and that you need to do good on your grades and everybody thinks that way, when in reality you can, you can really just do what you want to and then you could still be happy”

For James, being FGLI means coming from a social background that is prioritizes people and happiness, which contrasts the prevalent indefatigable ambition for opportunities and academic success at Yale and can make him feel out of place and difficult to relate to other students. Thus, White low-income and White FGLI students are prone to feeling they must traverse their identity without a supportive community. It is likely this explains why White FGLI students respond in similarly relative to the general FGLI population, even though their race grants them certain social and cultural capital in a predominantly White institution. Given national conversations about the White poor of the U.S., specifically those that discuss feelings of social marginalization,<sup>39</sup> it is very likely these narratives will continue to be relevant as long as we study FGLI populations.

The stereotypical perception of Asian-American students as the “model minority”<sup>40</sup> provides additional insight into how racial perceptions influence social treatment and therefore attainment of social capital. To have Asian-Americans perceived as naturally belonging in higher education, and, in this way, grant them social and cultural capital through receptive socializing from wealthier White students, might makes it easier for them to believe FGLI identity and issues related to it aren’t as relevant or important to their social experiences. It may not be, then, that the Asian-American FGLI student has proven that FGLI identity does not translate to social challenges with the larger student population, so much so as that they have been provided social

---

<sup>39</sup> Vance, J. D. 2016. *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

<sup>40</sup> Petersen, William. 1966. “Success Story, Japanese-American Style.” *New York Times Magazine*, January 9, 1966.

and cultural capital through stereotyping that allows them to remove themselves from their FGLI identity to be more socially agreeable.

Proof of this possibility can come from a look at another FGLI student who has the social capital of being able to interact with White students but identifies as Latinx instead:

**Sandra:** “I came from a school that wasn’t as like...what’s the word like, like homogeneous?...all my friends [at Yale] like if they’re all like minority like as like a race like being in like the actual school like they weren’t like they were still part of like the majority group umm, and I wasn’t, I was...one of like very few like, like Hispanic kids in my classes and I think I have realized like how much, I think it’s had its benefits...I felt a lot more comfortable being around White people or people that aren’t like me, cause that’s how I grew up, that was my school...”

Here, Sandra distinguishes her lack of reservations among White people from other Mexican-American FGLI students who grow up in communities that look like them. While some students of color might come in with the ability to socialize more comfortably with White students, and even though that has direct implications to how their experiences at Yale shape up and are relevant, race/ethnicity still prevents this ability from providing a net benefit when the perception of that race/ethnicity is negatively stigmatized as the Latinx ethnicity is, as Sandra expands on the consequences of being one of the few Latinas in predominantly White classrooms:

**Sandra:** “being the like only minority...in my classes I felt, I think, like a lot of pressure on me like to not mess up...I was like the one that a lot of people looked up I think because I was like this like I don’t know like the Latina, like AP classes getting all these good grades and I think I, it has painted an image...it would be a lot more noticeable if I were wrong than if somebody else were wrong, people would take, it would be like ‘Oh [Sandra]’s wrong’ and then like think about it a lot more, like like what? as opposed to someone else who they were wrong and it’s like, ‘Okay next person,’...I still feel that way, like I don’t, it’s scary to be wrong here, yeah, yeah. And I think people, friends that it’s...they were in that group were like if they messed up, it’s like ‘Okay,’ it was fine because there were so many people similar to them, yeah.”

Studying these different FGLI profiles, we can think of race as a venue in which social and cultural capital might be granted because of internalized associations of how “at home”

students can be imagined in an elite institution, which could largely be based on current educational trends along race/ethnicity,<sup>41</sup> thus causing distinctions among FGLI students of different races/ethnicities. While this does not ultimately dictate that White and Asian-American FGLI students suddenly feel comfortable at a predominantly White institution (students like James still do not agree with such sentiments), it certainly can provide them with choice. Among students who state they do not talk much about their identities, the justification that they do not want their past to limit their future points to a choice that not every FGLI student has: the ability to frame background as part of the past and independent of where they are now and of their future. This explanation requires the student to be able to exist independent of an identity associated with a lack of social and cultural capital, for a student who lacks the social means (vocabulary, jokes, mannerisms of the larger White Yale population) of obtaining such social capital cannot arrive at the same situation. Thus, the ability to regard FGLI identity as irrelevant or dismissible is still dependent on social and cultural capital, meaning whether social and cultural capital affect experience is not simply a matter of attitude.

#### Reacting Through Redefinition

I have already discussed how FGLI students tend to lean on each other to have conversations about identity; amongst others from similar backgrounds, they find people who validate their feelings and experiences. But until now, I have only considered how students interact as a consequence of how the identity disadvantages such students, meaning these conversations play the role of providing for each other social support they are missing. And while this work is important, thinking of FGLI experiences strictly from a deficit model limits a comprehensive understanding of how that identity can shape a student and give them an

---

<sup>41</sup> Kao, Grace, Elizabeth Vaquera, and Kimberly Goyette. 2013. *Education and Immigration*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

approach through which they grow in deeply personal ways, and, by extension, what a community of FGLI students can look like.

A look into how students interpret their FGLI identity in the context of a community displays not only an understanding but an appreciation and even comedic, but nevertheless alive, pride for their backgrounds:

**Esperanza:** “How do you like, it’s also so diverse and so like, ethno— what’s the word? eth— ethnically (*laughs*) ethnically? So it’s like you won’t know who it is unless they like actually came up to you and told you like ‘Hey! I’m a fugly’ (*laughs*) Umm, so yeah. FGLI [pronounced ‘fugly’] (*up close on mic*) FGLI (*laughs*): being first gen low income (*laughs*), I’m trademarking it, I started that....It’s like a, cause I started telling to like the FSY people and it’s like funny to all of us, but it’s also sad! Cause we’re FGLIs! (*laughs*)”

**Jon:** “There’s definitely a community already, yeah, definitely, umm, I think, I don’t know for your cohort but our year like we didn’t treat it as a stigma we turned around and like, like, made it and become something like our identity something we embrace something we joke about like we even joke about it a lot which is...horrificing but terrific, yeah, like at one point [Jordan] changed his groupme name to “Liff-guh,” low-income first-gen, LIFG, like for like a good month or two and we just joke about it, calls himself a liff-guh.”

It is not like anyone within these FGLI communities are simplifying or disregarding the practical reasons they are drawn together, nor the importance of their social cohesion, but by focusing on the actual interactions they have among each other and how they can exist as individuals within a close group allows FGLI students to redefine what it means to be FGLI so that it is an experience they can better control. Being FGLI is no longer about surviving in a seemingly (or actually) hostile and foreign environment; it is also meeting people who will laugh at your *pendejada* jokes despite leading entirely different lives from different cities around the country. It is about talking about having sleep for dinner or reusing butter containers for salsa without necessarily bringing people down. It is about finding people who are too tired to have performative conversations and can answer the question “How are you doing?” truthfully and thoroughly. It

becomes an identity and a community that students can find beauty in and grow invested in sustaining, a space where vulnerability and intentional relationships become the norm.

Having developed this intimate community, it is reasonable to expect senior FGLI students to feel more comfortable discussing issues affecting FGLI populations with people who cannot relate to their experiences; having an understanding of the importance of challenging the pursuit for social and cultural capital and a firm belief in the promises of FGLI communities grants the student confidence to change people's perspective, and maybe do even more than that. This would be in line with theory that suggest the need of social support is needed to challenge students, in this case by defending an underrepresented identity.<sup>42</sup> It is clear that even the youngest FGLI students on campus have a fairly good understanding of what issues they face and can offer potential solutions towards them; what students need most to move from conversations to action, then, is continuous support and empowerment through a reassurance that they are capable, resilient, and full of potential.

The less students have to concern themselves with the bureaucracy and formalities of implementing programs and ideas, which are additional stresses to those they have expressed as a result of being FGLI, the more they can take part of community building. Previous FSU cohorts have taken initiatives such as A Leg Even, which provides profession advising and academic support, community building with fellow peers, and academic year sponsorships for students on the highest financial need.<sup>43</sup> They have also found informal multigenerational communities through existing extracurricular activities, the most apparent through the cultural houses, but others as unexpected as the Yale Precision Marching Band, which currently has FSU members of every year. The 2017 cohort has taken a mixed approach through the formation of

---

<sup>42</sup> Sanford, Nevitt. 1962. "Sanford's theory of challenge and support." *The American college: A psychological and social interpretation of higher learning*. New York: J. Wiley Publications.

<sup>43</sup> A Leg Even website. Accessed at: <http://www.alegeven.org/>

the Yale Avalon Club, which organizes weekly meetings to play board games and watch movies (a tradition that started during their summer weekends) and originally consisted entirely of FSY students but has since opened its door to the general student population. While these initiatives may not always be undertaken with the intentional goal of making inclusive spaces for FGLI students, they are still constructed by students who will at the very least know how *not* to exclude other FGLI students, which actually does a lot for a social space given the difficulty of FGLI students finding such spaces. In some ways these informal communities can do the most work because of how little resistance they have to implement anything that takes too many resources, while prioritizing the social aspect between its members.

Ultimately, the most appropriate and productive approach students have taken in response to the pressures of attaining social and cultural capital and neglecting their own backgrounds has been the redefinition of success and of what is interesting, what is powerful, and what is beautiful. It involves thinking about one's experiences as a student at Yale and, as lonely one might feel in doing so, find value and empowerment in how monumental that journey has been and what one has learned throughout it. Intentional conversations among students from underrepresented—meaning at some point truly unwanted—identities places their experiences in a larger context of the work that is increasing inclusivity in historically exclusive systems. That the student feels out-of-place, unseen, and unheard transforms from a moment of feeling lost to a moment of inspiration with the realization that the student can only feel so because they are leading their own paths through these spaces. In doing so, they shape Yale in a unique way through challenging what it means to engage in meaningful discussion, how it is done, and for what ends. Academic success, social satisfaction, cultural richness, overall fulfillment—these are things that FGLI students have failed to obtain from the institution because of friction arising

from social and cultural differences, and so the student must in turn redefine what they look like for themselves. This might not change much about the social experiences FGLI students face throughout their time here, for they must still operate in spaces that are dependent on social and cultural capital, but it does affect their attitude and their sense of control and agency towards their own education. This independent process translates into spaces where solidarity and community are prioritized when these students engage in communities, and in understanding how they themselves are socially marginalized they better equipped at deconstructing social hierarchies.

### **Moving Forward**

The fact that these narratives touch on a diverse array of factors that shape their experiences indicates this data, as well as that of FGLI respondents who did not respond fully or at all the to the survey, has promising potential in future studies to get a more nuanced understanding.

A crucial question for a better iteration of this study should examine the relationship of FGLI background identity as it relates to migrant experiences. Given that the majority of respondents are Latinx with immigrant families, and that a good number of respondents of color also come from immigrant families, these findings point to a potential strong correlation between FGLI identity, that of inhabiting academic spaces made to exclude you, and immigrant identity, that of inhabiting a state that legally excludes you. Indeed, interview respondents bring up the topic voluntarily to explain their own cultural identity, even more so considering the high levels of discipline and commitment students must develop *alone* to get to Yale's campus:

**Reina:** “I think the fact that my parents are migrants to this country, umm, influences a lot of who I am today because...they always emphasize to me if they came to this country it's for me to do better than them, in terms of economics, like make more money, find a better job, a job that doesn't require me to engage in hard labor like they had to all their lives....growing up I had to, I learned basically just suck it up, keep going despite anything that happened to me, so like if I was

depressed that didn't matter, if I was umm like even just like young people things like I had a break up or whatever I had, this or that or even just puberty stuff like that, all that had to be afterwards and, I think that impacted me kinda negatively because I always put my emotional or my physical health after you know material, maybe material things or even just like grades and stuff like that"

**Esperanza:** "I mean the reason it resonates— I'm an immigrant, umm so like just on paper like I'm not from here like I'm, even if I wanted to, even if I've lived here my whole life like on paper I'm not, so it's always like a cognizant thing— why am I getting emotional?! (laughs) Umm...umm, I don't know, that's been my whole life, like there's nothing outside of that I know or that I've been exposed to cause my whole community has also been Latinx and Mexican. Umm, so now here, uhh, I don't think I can be anything else or like accept anything cause otherwise I just feel like that's a part of me that isn't me"

Future studies, then, should at least ask about family migrant background (if applicable), and how that aspect of their background affects what they make of their education and shapes their identity in places like Yale.

Another important observation from FGLI profiles is the correlation between being able to talk about FGLI identity and how supportive the student felt during their integration to Yale to have these conversations. Many FSYers who go into the school year with other FGLI students believing they have a community here participate in discussions about identity and background early on, acknowledging the real tension that exists as a result of coming from an underrepresented background. Considering research on the effectiveness of combating stereotype threat by directly addressing it,<sup>44</sup> these observations might suggest that addressing the challenges of being FGLI students explicitly might be the most productive approach to prepare students and give them a sense a belonging. Pham reflects on how a roundabout approach that avoids addressing why FGLI students might feel excluded was actually counterproductive for her:

---

<sup>44</sup> Ben-Zeev, Avi, Yula Paluy, Katlyn Milless, Emily Goldstein, Lyndsey Wallace, Leticia Marquez-Magana, Kirsten Bibbins-Domingo, and Mica Estrada. "Speaking Truth' Protects Underrepresented Minorities' Intellectual Performance and Safety in STEM." *Education Sciences* 7(2): 65.

**Pham:** “I guess I felt really like special that I would be selected to, you know, because that’s how they framed it, they’re like, ‘You’ve been selected to be a part of this like program,’ and so I was like ‘Oh man!’ you know, doing really cool stuff! And then when I got to the program I realized that like after a while it sort of felt more like remedial, like umm, yeah like there was a lot, there was a lot of dialogue about ‘You belong here,’ umm, and I was like, ‘Okay,’ you know, like, ‘why are they emphasizing that much?’ and and, umm, you know I, I guess it’s like in a way it kind of reversed— I feel like as the program went along more I felt more and more like I didn’t belong, yeah, because, it was, I guess because the emphasis was so much like, you know, ‘Remember!’ like, ‘You belong here!’ Umm, so I’m like, ‘Okay, you know, what about Yale makes it not like, you know, like I belong here?’”

The reality for FGLI students is that there are important answers to questions like “What about Yale makes it not like I belong here?” that, as problematic and unsettling as they might be, they must hear so that they can understand why their experiences might be different than that of their peers with more capital. There might be little anyone can do to change these answers right now, but mentors can definitely be a part of how students deal with them and how they engage with their experience as a FGLI students—but this cannot happen without being transparent.

In enacting this work through FSY and other programming, one final consideration must be made that asks us to consider the purpose of these programs and the spaces made as they relate back to social capital. The vast majority of respondents who participated in FSY state how important it was to have a group of people they know going into the school year so that they do not come during the fall semester feeling alone. This is helpful, but we must be careful in thinking of the program as a way of providing social capital for FGLI students. Unless the program expands to include all FGLI students that it admits, the university will have FGLI students coming into the summer without this “social capital” of a network of FGLI students. And so, while FSYers do gain an important community coming in, it should not be framed as valuable because others do not have it, which is resonant of the framework for social capital.

**Figure 5** shows that FGLI students who did not participate in FSY overall agree more with the

sentiment that Yale culture presents them with social challenges, and this could very well be because of the lack of the network and experience that FSY provides.

Moreover, moving away from the framework that causes the social challenges of FGLI students provides for an opportunity for the FGLI community to be more inclusive of students who might not fit certain criteria precisely. While I argue FGLI students should be prioritized for the reason that they lack most opportunities to attain social and cultural capital, FG and LI students can share very similar experiences and feelings (as **Figure 3** suggests), even if there are important differences in experiences and circumstances, and so their voices can contribute to a conversation as well. These students might not require the support FGLI students do, but a space where they can relate with the similarities they do share can be more productive than creating divisions between students who are marginalized in some way. Sierra talks about her ability to participate in FGLI events and spaces despite having apprehensions about whether she belongs there:

**Sierra:** “technically I don’t think I count as first generation because my mom does have like a bachelor’s degree from a four year university but she went and then quit and then went then quit and ended up getting it after a while...I had the support and idea that yes you’re going to college always but it wasn’t like I know how to do all of this kind of like support. So like, personally I feel weird in that identity sometimes, like I felt, part of me felt bad about, I was involved with like IvyG [pronounced ‘Ivy G’], the first-gen conference last year and I was like, ‘Man, is this my place?’ but then I decided like, like I have the same struggles that like, in this community. I don’t think that a technicality can like, should negate an identity”

### The Reach of These Findings

I have so far chosen to focus primarily on the experiences of FG, LI, and FGLI students, in particular the last group, for the reason that they are most likely to be affected by an “objective” lack of social and cultural capital (i.e. a lack of experience socializing with wealthier students, a lack of money to dress fashionably, etc.). Doing so allows us to consider how tangible

resources specifically affect the experiences of students at Yale, and points to a clear manner in which this pursuit of capital at an elite institution marginalizes specific students.

However, inherent in calling this approach “objective” is the contradiction that comes from the previous argument that it is a *perception* of a lack of social and cultural capital that plays the role in shaping students’ experiences, given the constructed nature of capital in elite academic spaces. The logical acknowledgement of the sources of these perceptions still stand, are relevant, and are significant, but it is how one perceives specific social interactions to be telling of one’s identity that actually produces social marginalization and exclusion. This partially explains why we see students who do not consider FGLI identity to be significantly influential that do not feel socially or culturally out of place, despite their real differences in background compared to wealthier and more “cultured” peers.

It is here that this limitation allows us to arrive at a secondary realization about the findings discussed, one that will interest a larger audience: parts and versions of these perceptions also affect the identities and the experiences of students who have had a more general sense of feeling out of place. In other words, students that do not necessarily identify as FGLI may find themselves relating with many of the elements discussed in this project, and could additionally benefit from the effort to make spaces more inclusive for FGLI students. Here, the tendency for a capital-based system to emphasize the lack of capital makes these social and cultural challenges less confined to those that apparently lack it most. Yale University’s legacy as a globally renowned academic world and its influence on “Yale culture” is most relevant in broadening the reach of social and cultural challenges. Indeed, the feelings of not feeling smart enough to belong at Yale and of lacking the means to form meaningful connections with peers can be quite common to hear from even students that were objectively well-prepared to attend a

school like Yale, and we cannot negate these feelings and their effects on the experiences of these students, however privileged they may be. And, to take the vision a step further, it could be that through this similar—not equal—experience of feeling excluded that can continue expanding the conversation on how students are socially and culturally marginalized and, in this way, foster the formation of connections between students of different backgrounds. This has already begun to happen, although to a very limited degree, with White FGLI students who, despite the clear privilege they have racially, can relate to experiences of financial stress.

It is imperative that this statement be made with the note that this final vision remain a *secondary* goal. Just as White FGLI students have a very different experience than FGLI students who are also students of color (i.e. migrant family background, racial underrepresentation, etc.), the FGLI narrative must be fully heard and understood before becoming distracted by this later vision. To do so will not only make us fail to understand how social and cultural capital affect identity, but will also further validate the perception that the institution does not care about these students by denying students the ownership to engage in discussion with the space and time that their voices require.

### Recommendations

In order to prioritize understanding how social and cultural capital affect the experiences of FGLI students as the topic of the discussion in this project, I have only mentioned FSY (First-Year Scholars at Yale) to contextualize the experiences of FGLI students that have participated in it. It would be inappropriate, however, to recognize the work that has been placed by those involved in its recommendation, piloting, and continued development when discussion where students and faculty are currently in supporting FGLI students and where to go from this point. As noted, the large majority of students have positive feelings towards their participation in the

program, a testament to the effort that the institution has made towards providing students a community and resources that will benefit their academic careers in the following years. The existence of the program, then, is itself a foundational first step in recognizing the need to focus on the FGLI experience and making an active effort to preparing students for their transition into their first fall semester. The expansion of the program from 30 students to double that size today, the incorporation of FGLI counselors (and a first-generation Dean in recent years), and the increased effort to allow students to speak about their experiences are all developments within the short five years that the program has existed that reveal a continuous desire to make the program better.

First and foremost, then, the institution should continue to support the existence and development of FSY. This support should extend past the summer, and to do so requires an inquiry into how this support can look like.

To this end, the most productive progress towards addressing the needs of FGLI students should start with the act of listening with humility. This can actually be a difficult thing to achieve as a mentor or administrator (as Pham explained the harm of well-intentioned words), and it begins with how people engage with FGLI students, for how they ask questions can play a big role in how students feel about mentors and administrators. James notes this dynamic when he started meeting people he would depend on during the academic year towards the end of FSY:

**James:** “I kind of feel sometimes that [staff and faculty] feel you’re at a disadvantage, which I mean obviously it does seem like we are since we have less money to do things...but I don’t really think that puts us at a disadvantage in the sense that they’re treating us....whenever they talk about ‘How’s the transition?’ and everything, you know they’re talking about how’s the transition going from no money to being surrounded by wealthy people and everything and they, and it just seems like they think that you’re at a disadvantage...so they feel like they have to help you more just because you’re low income or come from a poorer educational background.”

With the proper approach and attitude, namely one that assumes nothing of the FGLI experience, faculty and administrators can provide the platforms so that FGLI students lead this conversation and this movement. This cannot happen, however, before being provided the support and empowerment from having spaces to form communities and validating those communities.

These spaces require intentional programming that alleviates students of the logistics of organizing, getting together, and socializing. In this way, the institution can provide support by providing a **physical** space that students find convenient to access and can claim as theirs, as well as dedicate employees or fellows to work out the logistics of event planning (but not the actual content), and, of course, financial support in terms of funding for events and initiatives.

The FGLI community should be deemed accessible to all FGLI students on campus, and to do so programming like FSY should expand to allow more students to benefit from the community that already exists.

### **Conclusion**

This is by no means a comprehensive study of the first-generation low-income experience at Yale University, although many of the findings do hope to contribute significantly to how such students are perceived and to arrive at a better understanding at how this identity shapes personal development through social interactions. Instead, the questions posed and conversations noted seek to begin a conversation that attempts to prove that the largest learning that can occur when FGLI students are given a platform to express themselves and take ownership over a conversation that relates to themselves deeply. Even so, some general points should be taken from this project, with the understanding that the diversity of the FGLI community plays a role in each of these arguments.

1. FGLI students experience social challenges, stemming largely from exclusion, of varying degrees as a result of lacking social and cultural capital, and therefore need social support in the form of spaces that validate and seek to understand their experiences.
2. FGLI students are capable of understanding the nuance in how they are affected by social and cultural capital, how to shape spaces to reflect and debate collaboratively, and to envision what needs to change, but require support from within their own community before being able to express their thoughts comfortably and engage critically.
3. The work to enact these changes must come from the students, and the institution should empower its students to lead this change and listen with humility throughout the process.

Let this project, its findings, its implications in the array of topics it touches, and the work it will inspire, then, be but another example of the promises in empowering a student who sees themselves as contrary to their educator. Let the vision of the author humble the most eloquent researcher of students from marginalized backgrounds to consider the possibility of redefinition and of the novel work that occurs when a student who has been made to feel excluded and alone finds the opportunity to deconstruct the means in which this occurs, so that a new reality based on love and community can exist instead. Let this be among the many endeavors of those inspired to imagine fearlessly.

## References

- Aisch, Gregor, Larry Buchanan, Amanda Cox, and Kevin Quealy. 2017. "Some Colleges Have More Students From the Top 1 Percent Than the Bottom 60. Find Yours." *The New York Times*. Accessed at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/18/upshot/some-colleges-have-more-students-from-the-top-1-percent-than-the-bottom-60.html>
- Bailey, Matha J. and Susan M Dynarski. 2011. "Gains and Gaps: Changing Inequality in U.S. College Entry and Completion." *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 17633*.
- Ben-Zeev, Avi, Yula Paluy, Katlyn Milless, Emily Goldstein, Lyndsey Wallace, Leticia Marquez-Magana, Kirsten Bibbins-Domingo, and Mica Estrada. "'Speaking Truth' Protects Underrepresented Minorities' Intellectual Performance and Safety in STEM." *Education Sciences* 7(2): 65.
- Berger, Roni. 2015. "Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research." *Qualitative Research* 15(2): 219–234.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1985. "The forms of capital." In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory research for the sociology of education*: 241-258. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Ciancarelli, Luke. 2017. "Report shows income inequality at Yale." *Yale Daily News*. Accessed at: <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2017/02/03/report-shows-income-inequality-at-yale/>
- Crockett, Lisa J., Maria I. Iturbide, Rosalie A. Torres Stone, Meredith McGinley, Marcela Raffaelli, and Gustavo Carlo. 2007. "Acculturative Stress, Social Support, and Coping: Relations to Psychological Adjustment among Mexican American College Students." *Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology*: 299.

- Dennis, Jessica M., Jean S. Phinney, and Lizette Ivy Chuateco. 2005. "The Role of Motivation, Parental Support, and Peer Support in the Academic Success of Ethnic Minority First-Generation College Students." *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(3): 223-236.
- DiMaggio, Paul. 1982. "Cultural Capital and School Success: The Impact of Status Culture Participation on Grades of U.S. High School Students." *American Sociological Review* 47(2): 189-201.
- Gable, Rachel L. 2016. *Pathways to Thriving: First- and Continuing Generation College Student Experiences at Two Elite Universities*. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- Gable, Rachel L. 2017. "Mastering the 'Hidden Curriculum': How some colleges help first-generation and low-income students succeed." *Harvard Magazine*. Accessed at: <https://harvardmagazine.com/2017/11/mastering-the-hidden-curriculum>
- Jack, Anthony Abraham. 2015. "(No) Harm in Asking: Class, Acquired Cultural Capital, and Academic Engagement at an Elite University." *Sociology of Education* 20(10): 1-19.
- James, Erika Hayes. 2000. "Race-Related Differences in Promotions and Support: Underlying Effects of Human and Social Capital." *Organization Science* 11(5): 493-508.
- Kao, Grace, Elizabeth Vaquera, and Kimberly Goyette. 2013. *Education and Immigration*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Ladson-Billings, Gloria. 1994. *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Ladson-Billings, Gloria. 2014. "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the Remix." *Harvard Educational Review* 84(1): 74-84.

- Long, Bridget Terry. 2007. "The Contributions of Economics to the Study of College Access and Success." *Teachers College Record* 109(10): 2367-2443.
- McCarron, Graziella P. and Karen K. Inkelas. 2006. "The Gap between Educational Aspirations and Attainment for First-Generation College Students and the Role of Parental Involvement." *Journal of College Student Development* 47(5): 534-549.
- Milner IV, H. Richard. 2007. "Race, culture, and researcher positionality: Working through dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen." *Educational Researcher* 36(7): 388–400.
- Meraji, Shereen Marisol. 2015. "Why Many Smart, Low-Income Students Don't Apply To Elite Schools." *National Public Radio*. Accessed at: <https://www.npr.org/2015/03/16/393339590/why-many-smart-low-income-students-dont-apply-to-elite-schools>
- National Center for Education Statistics. 2015. "Postsecondary Attainment: Differences by Socioeconomic Status." Accessed at: [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe\\_tva.pdf](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_tva.pdf)
- Núñez, Anne-Marie. 2008. "Modeling the Effects of Diversity Experiences and Multiple Capitals of Latina/o College Students' Academic Self-Confidence." *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 8(2): 179-196.
- Orbe, Mark P. 2004. "Negotiating Multiple Identities Within Multiple Frames: An Analysis of First-Generation College Students." *Communication Education* 53(2): 131-149.
- Pascarella, Ernest T., Christopher T. Pierson, Gregory C. Wolniak, and Patrick T. Terenzini. 2004. "First Generation College Students: Additional Evidence on College Experiences and Outcomes." *The Journal of Higher Education* 75(3):249-284.
- Petersen, William. 1966. "Success Story, Japanese-American Style." *New York Times Magazine*, January 9, 1966.

- Saenz, Victor B., Sylvia Hurtado, Doug Barrera, De'Sha Wolf, and Fanny Yeung. 2007. *First In My Family: A Profile of First-Generation College Students at Four Year Institutions Since 1971*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.
- Sanford, Nevitt. 1962. "Sanford's theory of challenge and support." *The American college: A psychological and social interpretation of higher learning*. New York: J. Wiley Publications.
- Sleeter, Christene E. "An agenda to strengthen culturally responsive pedagogy." *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* Vol. 10(2): 7-23.
- Thayer, Paul B. 2000. "Retention of Students from First Generation and Low Income Backgrounds." *Opportunity Outlook, the journal of the Council for Opportunity in Education*: 3-9.
- Vance, J. D. 2016. *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Walton, Gregory M. and Geoffrey L. Cohen. "A Brief Social-Belonging Intervention Improves Academic and Health Outcomes of Minority Students." *Science* 331(6023): 1447-1451.
- Wells, Ryan. 2008. "The Effects of Social and Cultural Capital on Student Persistence." *Community College Review* 36(1): 25-46.
- Wells, Ryan. 2008. "Social and Cultural Capital, Race and Ethnicity, and College Student Retention." *Journal of College Student Retention* 10(2): 103-128.
- Yale University Office of Career Strategy. "Yale College First Destinations: A Four-Year Report, Classes of 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016."  
<http://ocs.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/First%20Destinations%20Classes%202013-2016.pdf>

Yale University Office of Career Strategy. “First Destination Report: Class of 2017.”

[http://ocs.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/OCS%20Stats%20pages/Final%20Class%20of%202017%20Report%20\(6%20months\).pdf](http://ocs.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/OCS%20Stats%20pages/Final%20Class%20of%202017%20Report%20(6%20months).pdf)

Yale 2016-2017 Factsheet. [https://oir.yale.edu/sites/default/files/factsheet\\_2016-17.pdf](https://oir.yale.edu/sites/default/files/factsheet_2016-17.pdf)

Yosso, Tara J. 2005. “Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth.” *Race Ethnicity and Education* Vol. 8(1): 69-91.

## Supplemental Information

### Recruitment Materials

Hi [name of student]!

I hope you are starting off February warm and well! My name is José López (FSY 2014) and I am reaching out to you because I am conducting a research project on first-generation low-income students as part of my senior project for Education Studies, and I need your help by participating in an anonymous survey. Being an FSY Counselor this past summer was one of the most fulfilling experiences of my Yale career, and I am excited that I get to focus my senior project on the voices of the students that FSY serves. Regardless of how you feel about the program, I would greatly appreciate you setting aside some time to respond to the survey as completely and honestly as possible, as this research will hopefully guide the program and the university towards servicing our communities more appropriately. (Your voice matters!)

Just to give you some details about what I'm asking: this anonymous survey is focused more on the social adjustment upon arriving at Yale, and can take as little as 5 minutes or as much as 20 minutes, depending on how much you'd like to share. However, I would set aside some time to answer the questions as they can take some reflection before being able to answer. The link to the survey is here: [https://yalesurvey.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_6WICftnuAVEc6vb](https://yalesurvey.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6WICftnuAVEc6vb)

One other thing: if you know any students who are first-generation low-income and did not participate in FSY, please do forward this email to them!

If you have any questions or concerns, don't hesitate to email back. Thank you so much for your time and support in advance, and I wish you a wonderful day and a promising semester!

Warmly,

--

José Y. López  
B.A. Chemistry; Education Studies Scholar  
Yale University, '18  
P.O. Box 203973  
New Haven, CT 06511  
213.399.6425  
[jose.lopez@yale.edu](mailto:jose.lopez@yale.edu)

## Survey Questions

### Part I: Participant Background

1. When was your first semester at Yale? (Fall 2013, Fall 2014, Fall 2015, Fall 2016, Fall 2017)
2. Do you identify as a first-generation college student? (Yes or No)
3. Do you identify as low-income? (Yes or No)
4. How would you describe your racial/ethnic background?
5. Where are you from? Where did you grow up before coming to Yale?
6. What type of school did you attend? (Public, Private, Charter, Magnet, Other)
7. Did you receive support prior to or throughout the college application process through a structured program or network (e.g. LEDA, Emerge, etc.) If so, where did this support come from, and to what extent were you supported? (If not, write N/A)
8. Did you participate in FSY? (Yes or No)

### Part II: Social Life at Yale

1. Did you have reservations about making friends and socializing with people prior to arriving at Yale? What about upon arriving at Yale? If so, what were they?
2. Who are your closest friends at Yale? How did you first meet them?
3. Are the friends you have now the same ones as the ones you first made here?
4. With what type of people do you feel comfortable discussing underrepresented identities (first-gen, low-income, student of color, etc.)? Why?
5. How often do you talk about such things in general? What about with your closest friends? In each case, why or why not?
6. How do programs like FSY play a role in providing a space for you to engage with these questions, if you think it does at all? Please be as specific as possible with details (e.g. Deans Time, relationship with counselors, experiences, etc.). If you did not participate in FSY, write N/A.

### Part III: Yale Culture

1. Describe “Yale culture.” What does a successful Yale student look like? What skills, attributes, abilities, personality, etc. do you have to embody to be successful?
2. Where do you feel the most comfortable being yourself?
3. Where do you feel the most uncomfortable being yourself?
4. Do you agree with the following statement: My cultural background is at odds or incompatible to Yale culture? (1 strongly agree - 5 strongly disagree)
5. Do you agree with the following statement: Yale culture presents me with challenges in socializing with people or in social events. (i.e. living with suitemates, student organizations, night life, Yale events, etc.) (1 strongly agree - 5 strongly disagree)
6. Consider the following definitions for social and cultural capital: Social capital: “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu 1985, p. 248). Cultural capital: “instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designed as worthy of being sought and possessed” (Bourdieu, 1977). Based on these definitions, please reflect how social and cultural capital affect your Yale experience, if at all.

### Part IV: Following Up (optional)

1. Are you interested in allowing me to follow up with you on any of the topics discussed and are willing to schedule a time for a one-on-one interview?
2. If yes, please provide your name and email: \*Reminder: this survey is completely anonymous; providing your name and email will *not* identify your responses as yours (as in, your answer will not be connected with your responses to the rest of the survey).
3. Any additional questions, concerns, clarifications? Questions I did not include that I should have?

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about where you come from and what your educational background prior to Yale was like.
2. What parts of your social and cultural background are important to you?
3. What does being first-generation low-income mean to you?
4. (If applicable) Tell me about FSY. How did you feel when you were invited for it? How did you feel when you first arrived and during those first few days?
5. (If applicable) How was FSY for you? What did you enjoy? What didn't you enjoy? What was helpful? What wasn't?
6. Talk to me about arriving at Yale for the first time in the fall. What did that mean to you? What things did you feel?
7. Has the social part of being at Yale been challenging for you, as in making friends, finding groups that you feel comfortable with? Why or why not?
8. Do you get a chance to talk about these challenges that you or people you know about experience? When and with whom?
9. Do you think there is a sort of community (whatever it might be and as large as it is) you have been able to develop as a result of having spaces to talk more openly about the social and cultural challenges that come with being a student here? How does this community exist for you? If it doesn't, why do you think it doesn't exist?
10. Do you think there should be more of a systematic effort for these types of communities to be created and maintained throughout your time here? Why or why not?
11. If you could change something about how people interact with you at Yale, what would you change? How would an ideal, accepting, and socially fulfilling Yale look like for you?

## FSY (First-Scholars at Yale) Information

### **SUMMARY OF PROGRAM**

The First-Year Scholars at Yale (FSY) program was created to help students transition into college life. FSY provides a cohort of incoming first-year students with the opportunity to engage early on in the Yale experience by living and studying on campus for five weeks in the summer. First-Year Scholars participate in activities, coursework, seminars, and trips designed to facilitate and enhance their transition to Yale. They start their first semester having already been immersed in many of Yale's resources, including the close-knit residential college system and Yale's vibrant intellectual culture.

First-Year Scholars are a part of a larger community of college learners in Yale Summer Session. During their five weeks on campus First-Year Scholars became familiar with the city of New Haven, the Yale campus, and the people at Yale who will continue to support and interact with them throughout the year.

### **PROGRAM GOALS**

#### ***ACADEMICS***

Assist with the transition into college academics by offering academic work that will result in the completion of a freshman writing course (ENG S114) worth one credit, along with a familiarization with the range of available STEM paths, career options, research opportunities, and co-curricular pursuits.

#### ***CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT***

Provide students with an introduction to the Yale community that will model how to engage with the many layers of resources available to Yale College students and offer workshops that focus on the kinds of study skills that will enhance success as an entering Yale undergraduate.

#### ***COMMUNITY***

Familiarize students with the Yale University campus and with New Haven. Provide students a sense of community through trips, study breaks, intramural sports, and the many, many other events that are available to all Yale summer students in residence. Students will enjoy getting to know other Yale students on campus, including their counselors, and interacting with a diverse and international group of the very best students from around the world.

### **SELECTION CRITERIA**

There are a number of factors considered by the admissions office when deciding to invite a student to participate in the FSY program. While it is a holistic approach, here are the main components:

- the student must have confirmed that they will be matriculating at Yale in the fall
- the student has not had access to the type of college prep that a typical Yale student might have had (for instance, attended an under-resourced public high school)
- the student comes from a low-income background (for instance, the 2017 cohort was limited to students with an expected family income contribution of \$3000 or less)

Taking these factors (and more) into account, the admissions office tries to select the students whom they think would most benefit from taking a Yale course, engaging with the campus, and developing a sense of community at Yale in the summer prior to matriculating in the fall.