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Who's Really the Imposter Here?
**An Examination of the Relationship Between First-Generation
College Students and Institutions of Higher Education Through a
Collection of Oral Histories**

Abby Green

Statement of Purpose

Navigating an elite higher education institution has ignited a reaction of rage, a desire for change, and a hope for liberation for me and my peers. My last four years have been clouded by the exhausting cycles of struggling through college, drowning in imposter syndrome, and feeling the cold absence of honest conversation on the adverse layered realities of first-generation college students embedded in these institutions. These cycles left in a puddle of rage with no outlet. This paper is that outlet, grown from my efforts to speak up and bring awareness of the silenced students forced to navigate college in isolation. My hope is for liberation from the restraints of oppressive institutions, and I know that we cannot get there if we don't discuss why we haven't gotten there- while also honoring and validating those who are brave enough to do so. First-generation (first-gen) students deserve to have an equitable education, and I aim to address and shorten the dissonance between the facade the higher ed puts out and the lived experiences and sad truths of those navigating it through the practice of oral history. I hope to be able to build this paper to function as a alleviating source of honesty and support gifted to first-gen students currently at Mac, and those to come after. Lastly, I am writing this paper for myself. I feel that throughout my time at Mac I lost a piece of myself to this institution. This evoked the unrelenting need for me to investigate what role our college played in contributing to the loss of what used to be mine through institution-generated turmoil.

Keywords: first generation, student, college, institution, higher education, imposter syndrome, inequity, barriers

Introduction

Despite the newfound freedom, fun, and excitement that being a new college student brings, navigating higher education involves a tremendous amount of resiliency. Every student faces challenges and setbacks to their success, but how do those challenges appear differently for students who are first-generation college students, compared to their peers who come from wealthy families with a lineage legacy of college education? Are there hidden setbacks being generated from within institutions that make the college experience, which is already layered with inequities, a steeper hill to climb for those who are first-gen? Imposter syndrome, (the intense internalization of feeling inadequate or as though you don't belong), takes hold in the psyche of many first-gen students as they progress through college, but how do the colleges themselves formulate a facade of support and progress that actively breaks these students down? The question we need to ask is *who's the real imposter?* Are first-gen students convincing themselves they aren't good enough or is that sentiment coming from the institution of higher education themselves?

In this essay, I argue that higher education functions in opposition to first-gen students, from before the application process begins, and continuing after the achievement earning Bachelor of Arts degree. I support this argument by taking a closer look at the relationship(s) between Macalester College and its first-gen students, using the oral history accounts of their experiences navigating their way through this institution. Due to the dangerous risk of retaliation, I chose to identify each student as narrator 1 (Class of 2024), 2 (Class of 2023), and 3 (Class of 2025). Each student is narrating this paper with their experiences, being generous enough to share their stories with the hope that their testimony will illuminate the truths that people neglect to interact with. Each narrator is from a different area of the country, and has varying family

backgrounds, with two of the students identifying as Queer. They all come from low-income backgrounds, which molds a distinct lens to view first-gen barriers.

Macalester College holds its prestige and elite reputation as a small private liberal arts college in St. Paul, Minnesota; representing a single actor in the extensive lineage of continued white supremacy, capitalist priorities, and inequitable practices in higher education. The experiences recorded from students at this singular institution illuminate the urgency to understand the functioning of higher ed as only one system working within the controls of a broader system of power and wealth in the U.S. (for this reason I will be using the terms college, higher ed, and institution interchangeably to represent the systemic power fueling each of them). Once we understand the contexts and see where the problems are rooted in these systems, we can act to increase accessibility to an equitable college experience.

In the process of analyzing the intimate stories, experiences, and truths of students at this school, we can grapple with the ways in which wealthy institutions function and interact with first-generation students. I will be discussing the methodology behind this paper and outlining the previous research conducted on these questions. To follow, I expand out and look into how we define first-gen, outline the different barriers to getting into and graduating from college, and express the silencing culture that lingers at Mac. I support these areas of investigation by providing insight into the financial inequities and difficulties of accessing healthcare and Disability Services/mental health accommodations for students. In order to provide a more encompassing look at the questions being explored, I will look deeper into the roles of faculty and staff in relation to these students before turning a focus on how to move forward. I argue that while liberation cannot be reached through institutional change alone (being a newer generation of a deeper system of oppression in America awaiting its abolishment), concrete calculated improvements and change can create more equitable pathways for first-gen students to in education.

I will be suggesting various cultural and policy changes to be implemented before concluding with an open letter to first-gen students. I want to emphasize that the selection of actionable steps I propose to take are not novel or groundbreaking ideas I've created. Progressing forward requires echoing, uplifting, and expanding off of the

work put in by people before me who have been advocating for change. Low-income folks and people of color specifically have been discussing solutions and change for years without getting the attention they deserve, and need to spark larger discourse across universities in the United States (U.S.) and into our broader society. It is for these reasons that I seek to supplement the existing scholarship with the vast array of informal discourse around first-gen college access within low-income communities, as well as the few incredible scholars who have spoken out against elite colleges. I aim to ground my argument in previously written literature while building context around critical questions surrounding first-gen students through the utilization of nuance brought by my narrators as they navigate the elitist environment of Macalester.

Methodology

In order to gain a better understanding of the relationship between Macalester College and its first-gen students, I've decided to interview three students, ranging in class years from a sophomore to a senior. Being first-gen and low-income myself, I will be contributing my own experiences, which have been villainized by the intersecting, tangled, and sticky webs of power structures at Mac. The overwhelming reality revealed throughout these interviews is that the students I spoke with had never been given the respect or validity to tell their experiences as truthful and honorable accounts of how Macalester treats their underprivileged students. The narrators for this paper have been overlooked and underestimated as scholars who are worthy of respect and tangible support from this school, especially when considering how speaking up disrupts the daily flow of these systems of oppression at work.

This paper is designed to broadcast a look into the hidden inequities that live within the histories of individual and collective groups of students. Each student, alone and together, holds these heavy experiences yet chooses to use education within their own frameworks to actively work toward their vision of liberation for themselves and their communities. Refusing to accept that lived experiences are adequate scholarly foundations continues to set us back even farther from improvement. Gatekeeping education and assigning scholastic worth on a warped elitist scale continue to deprive academia of the vital scholarship that can undoubtedly reform our society. It is crucial that we listen and learn from the extensive knowledge of first-gen students before their

histories perish and become ghosts of collective memory. This is how we capture the urgency for change for those these systems harm the most. In this paper, I intend to honor these accounts/experiences as I seek insight into the questions I pose in this composition.

In an effort to shape a more comprehensive foundation for this analysis, I dove headfirst into the pre-existing research and developing conversation that interrogates the experiences of first-gen students in higher education. Not to my surprise, the data centers its analysis on statistics that have ultimately distanced themselves from the lived experiences of each student. The research brings forward and focuses its attention on large numbers that are weaved with ambiguity and the removes the complexities and depth of personalized experience, which I argue are key to understanding the realities of first-gen students in these places.

The few works of literature and bold articles crafted to expose the inequities in higher education stood as the wisdom supporting and informing how I value seeking insight to the questions of inequity in higher ed, and how to think about moving forward. *From Equity Talk to Equity Walk* by Estela Bensimon, Tia McNair, and Lindsey Malcom-Piqueux is an exceptional roadmap that takes society on direct routes to changing behavior and systems. Each section expands upon the ways in which higher ed can improve and craft change to make it accessible for minoritized students. This book provides bold and honest conversation and research into how white privilege evades, attempts to control, and overall functions in academia¹ and the consequences it has on students. Roadmaps such as this one eliminate the excuse of higher ed to continue to act as though they are oblivious to its issues that so many people are aware of but silent about. It is vital that more academic professionals dedicate a project to stating the honest racial and class dynamics at play within the iron gates of their higher ed institution. This area of literature provided a thoughtful and robust analysis for me to learn from and hopefully model.

The Center for First-Generation Student Success provides an important statistic exposing that “only 20 percent of first-generation college students successfully attain a

¹ McNair, Tia Brown, Estela Mara Bensimon, and Lindsey E. Malcom-Piqueux. *From Equity Talk to Equity Walk: Expanding Practitioner Knowledge for Racial Justice in Higher Education*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Brand, 2020. 35,36

bachelor's degree within six years of entering their post-secondary education. On the other hand, 49 percent of their non-first-generation counterparts attained a bachelor's degree in that time.”² This startling statistic gives us insight into the stark differences amongst student “success”, while further exposing the unwillingness of academia to conduct adequate amounts of research that manage to encompass the multifaceted ways in which colleges knowingly fail students. Institutions function with set intentions that involve calculating their moves to support their own motives even when those knowingly align against supporting the success and well-being of first-gen students.

What should colleges be doing differently in order to help these students attain a bachelor's degree? What support and resources aren't they providing for them? Why aren't they taking the necessary steps to solve these issues? My research functions as a response to the broader silence positioned from the perspective of current college students. I hope to help fill and counteract the ever-deepening, intentional void of candid discourse perpetuated by higher ed by offering a look into a few first-hand accounts of first-gen students attending these institutions themselves. This view is just a glimpse given the small sample of student voices I was able to gather and analyze. There is no uniform pathway for all first-gen students, meaning that there are endless stories, experiences, and perspectives that have yet to be uncovered and included in the process of building solutions. I hope that this analysis will encourage more students to step up and speak out, and for more research to be conducted in order to create a safer space for student voices to exist and expand the ability for us to understand and better address any concerns at hand. The narrators I was able to interview have been denied the credibility to be listened to when speaking up, with their accounts patronized and diminished from being seen as valid evidence of Macalester's wrongdoings from professors and staff.

How Do We Define First-Gen?

² RTI International. First year experience, persistence, and attainment of first-generation college students. Center for First-Generation Student Success, (2019). Retrieved October 5, 2021, from <https://firstgen.naspa.org/journal-and-research/national-data-fact-sheets-on-first-generation-college-students/national-data-fact-sheets>

Much of the conversation and analysis of first-gen students are absorbed by the debate on what constitutes being first-gen.³ The time, energy, and resources that go into trying to label other people's experiences restrict the progress that we could collectively be making. We have the tools to analyze and redirect the core problems impacting these students. We have the resources for what higher education could be doing to alleviate systemic inequities— we just need to use them to communicate and work together. The excessive impulse and neurotic obsession professionals have with labeling, boxing in, and organizing concepts into formats that solely the elite can digest wastes the time and money that the betterment of our society is waiting for. For the purpose of this paper, I will be referring to students who label themselves as first-gen, based on whatever that looks and feels like in their family and situation- I do not wish to take on the time or role of identifying or approving what makes a student first-gen, but rather the role of increasing attention and bringing awareness to their experiences and their voices that have been put on the back burner and neglected for far too long.

First-Generation Struggles Getting to Macalester and Its Roots in Elitism

The barriers in and around higher education don't suddenly erupt once students are admitted to these schools. They exist and flow throughout the process of figuring out aspects such as what college is, what options they have, and how to apply if they determine that attending higher ed is what they want to do. Low-income, first-gen students are faced with the structures that are always whispering in coded phrases but never willing to clearly communicate the fact that they don't allow for a smooth transition into college for these students, especially for Black, Latinx, and Native American students⁴. The white supremacy-based idea that those who experience poverty and don't come from generations of a college education are inherently unable to succeed bleeds into the rhetoric and interactions that students face early on in their interactions with higher ed.

³ The Center for First-generation Students. "Are You a First-Generation Student?" The Center for First-generation Students. NASPA and the Suder Foundation, 2020. [https://firstgen.naspa.org/why-first-gen/students/are-you-a-first-generation-student#:~:text=Being%20a%20first%2Dgen%20student%20means%20that%20your%20parent\(s,you%20navigate%20your%20college%20journey!](https://firstgen.naspa.org/why-first-gen/students/are-you-a-first-generation-student#:~:text=Being%20a%20first%2Dgen%20student%20means%20that%20your%20parent(s,you%20navigate%20your%20college%20journey!)

⁴ McNair, Tia Brown, Estela Mara Bensimon, and Lindsey E. Malcom-Piqueux. 46

While the process of getting into and navigating University may seem obvious to some people, the idea of higher education is often just that for first-gen students: *an idea*. I argue that this is in part due to the fact that colleges market early and society's culture around college expects many teens to have a dream college and fully thought out plan figured out for years before applying. *The Privileged Poor*, by Anthony Jack illustrates that deeper than these issues, however, are the ways that information is not easily accessible to when it comes to understanding how higher ed works,⁵. A disturbing layer to this issue is that being honest about how many first-gen students don't know the "basics" of college is a talking point weaponized by white supremacy to attempt to undermine these students' abilities.⁶ This interpretation stems from racist and elitist structures and individuals who assert that these students are unable to grasp concepts regardless of the actual ability and situation of each student. With that noted and distinguished as a separate route of thought without merit, I can get to the point I am (and what we all should be) asserting—that there is no shame in not knowing what you have never been taught. Not knowing what the process of applying to college is like doesn't make a person less capable, intelligent, or worthy of attending higher ed. We need to openly accept that these students are deliberately deprived of this information and need it to be shared to them in a loving, supportive manner coming from compassion and not judgment. We mustn't abandon the students who need the help because elitism has shamed and judged its way into acting like these are personal detriments and not systemic and structural disadvantages. These students may not always have the support and guidance to have a safe space to ask questions and figure out what the basics even are, and are left at a disadvantage in higher ed premature to their arrival at it.

In her article, "'Lucky Few' Served by War on Poverty College Programs" Sarah Sparks explains that the "federal programs originally intended to bridge high school and college, Upward Bound and Talent Search, were not designed to serve all students, and have not been given the resources to cope with the dynamic and exponentially growing

⁵ Jack, Anthony Abraham. *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019. 19

⁶ McNair, Tia Brown, Estela Mara Bensimon, and Lindsey E. Malcom-Piqueux. 47

need.”⁷ Sparks points out that without analyzing and adjusting support based on need and the potential outcomes of these programs, these structures still fall short of providing adequate support in the ways that *all* students need.⁸ We as a society must first address the reality that even programs designed to help students are mainly built for the most privileged of marginalized folks because it was designed as a motor in the perpetuation of elitist white supremacy. Helping the most privileged of low-income or first-gen students is an easy way to check off the diversity support box without implementing any real programming for more marginalized students. Low-income, first-gen students of color are continually shown that their lives are not valued in these spaces and that these places are not built for them to exist in.⁹

Sparks transitions into outlining the scarcity of existing supportive programs and how they are created with ulterior motives void of any true equity. She writes, “the underlying socioeconomic structure of society always wins unless you are willing to give people special treatment and additional resources just to improve upward mobility...evidence shows the programs most effective for getting disadvantaged students to and through college usually are “labor intensive” and “costly for their operator.”¹⁰ Colleges—yes, even the ones who love to boast that they are non-profits—cover up the ways that they function as businesses and aren’t willing to prioritize the costs of accessibility and equity for first-gen, low-income, and marginalized students. As a result of these long-existing inequities, the application process and journey through college remains gatekept and split unequally by our society’s capitalist structure that has built our sinister understanding of poverty in the first place.¹¹

Narrator 1, a student at Macalester in the class of 2024, opened up about the difficult processes they experienced getting to college and, subsequently, getting through it. They explained that when they began applying to college, they “weren’t presented with any options outside of [their] state’s public schools, so in order to attend a school like Mac [they] had to figure out how to do [their] own research and reach out

⁷ Sparks, Sarah D. “War on Poverty College Programs Still Serving ‘Lucky Few’.” Education Week. Education Week, April 27, 2021. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/war-on-poverty-college-programs-still-serving-lucky-few/2014/11>

⁸ Sparks, “War on Poverty College Programs Still Serving ‘Lucky Few’,” 2021.

⁹ McNair, Tia Brown, Estela Mara Bensimon, and Lindsey E. Malcom-Piqueux. 42

¹⁰ Sparks, “War on Poverty College Programs Still Serving ‘Lucky Few’,” 2021.

¹¹ Jack, Anthony Abraham. 135

to people for help.”¹² Despite their loving parents being supportive and encouraging them to pursue higher education, their family “didn’t have any experience or knowledge”¹³ on how to help get them there. They also mentioned that navigating financial affairs was a whirlwind for them, as was for many other first-gen students, having had no one around who knew “how to help with the process of receiving financial aid and the details with documentation.”¹⁴ Throughout Narrator 1’s interview, I recognized how their experience echoes the shared struggle of first-gen students who, in high school, have to set out by themselves to create a future in higher education only to be left completely alone without little to no sufficient support. This support is crucial in getting someone through high school, and then through a liberal arts college.

Narrator 2, a student in the class of 2023, spoke of their journey to Macalester, having to advocate for themselves and their education from elementary school, middle school, and high school just to receive an education that could give them the support and most importantly, the resources they needed to attend higher education as a first-gen low-income student.¹⁵ In their interview, they mentioned that they had prior experience with the application process because they applied to their private high school, and figured out all of the financial aid and paperwork alone.¹⁶ They also had to take a 40-minute commute on the train and bus every morning just to get to school.¹⁷ Working ten times harder and figuring out the unknown in order to unlock a successful pathway to college is not new to first-gen students when they get to colleges and universities, because it is a regular and expected skill and routine needed to survive, and in turn, graduate.¹⁸

Being thrown into the abyss of application processes causes a chaotic whirlwind of stress and anxiety for first-gen students, inversely showcasing the extraordinary capabilities and strength of these students who aren’t typically recognized for that work

¹² Anonymous Macalester Student, Class of 2024, ‘Narrator 1’. Interview. Conducted by Abby Green. 29 October 2022.

¹³ ‘Narrator 1’, Interview, 2022.

¹⁴ ‘Narrator 1’, Interview, 2022.

¹⁵ Anonymous Macalester Student, Class of 2023, ‘Narrator 2’. Interview. Conducted by Abby Green. 29 November 2022.

¹⁶ ‘Narrator 2’, Interview, 2022.

¹⁷ ‘Narrator 2’, Interview, 2022.

¹⁸ Jack, Anthony Abraham. 19

or allowed to go above and beyond. This is just one fraction of the barriers that begin much earlier than their college orientation week and create the cycle of burnout students feel from navigating multiple task at once. Colleges have the means to be proactive and create more programs that reach more than the occasional student to help with applying, filling out documents, and figuring out what higher ed looks like. The absence of that aid remains jarring and highlights the neglect students are met with from the start of their time in higher education. I bring this into the conversation to remind us all that the “typical Macalester student”, as in other institutions, is expected to have parents who are college-educated and have been planning out the steps and guiding their children to college from K-12 in “elite white spaces.”¹⁹ Potential Mac students are also expected to have parents and/or college counselors who can help, or in some cases even do the documentation process themselves, giving their children an advantaged, easier, and less stressful transition to higher education.

Macalester’s Silence

A blaring absence in the research I came across is the disheartening lack of honest conversation around Macalester and its first-gen students. Searching through the library’s archives, I was unable to find research and discourse that probed the dynamics of how Mac treats the student body, and what the honest narratives are of first-gen students who have navigated it. One honors project I came across, “Getting Educated”: Working Class and First-Generation Students and the Extra-Curriculum” by Taylor Laemmli, lives locked away in the archives outlining how working-class first-gen students have to engage in extracurriculars as a means of extending academic success, as opposed to their peers who have the privilege to opt-in for joy and fun- an advantage that is frequently overlooked.²⁰ Despite the relevancy and power of Laemmli’s work, they hold back from extending their analysis to connect back to Macalester. The intimacies of the personal disadvantages juxtaposed with the barrenness of social disconnections that cultivate in the culture of this elite, wealthy, predominantly white institution have yet to be openly discussed on a larger, more

¹⁹ Jack, Anthony Abraham. 18

²⁰ Laemmli, Taylor, “Getting Educated”: Working Class and First-Generation Students and the Extra-Curriculum” (2011). *Sociology Honors Projects*. 32. https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/soci_honors/32

accessible scale beyond informal student conversation. Narrator 2 expressed that “I think that was the like Macalester community we sort of lost over the years and like, weren't able to preserve as much. But just because of the silence, like it's just an overwhelming amount of silence on campus.”²¹ Silence traps us into losing our connected experiences and relationships throughout time. Turning our research inwards can illuminate the dark corners of higher education and reveal secrets of disparity to be analyzed and worked into starting places for improvement where joy and community can grow.

As a first-gen student who, as I write this, is currently enrolled and about to graduate from Macalester, I have sensed the silencing culture that threatens the survival, continuation of support, and academic standing of students who speak out against the grain of Mac's messaging and facade. I recognize and hold space for the infuriating truth that many students don't have the privilege and ability to write about their experiences freely without the looming threat of backlash and consequences for doing so. Students of color at Mac and other colleges already have to work miles ahead of everyone else for the mere chance to be seen, and speaking out against inequality almost guarantees that the institution will play a more active role in insuring that they are in fact not seen, and certainly not heard. Holding the privileged identities that I do, I feel a responsibility to be willing to say what needs to be said to get over the era of silence at Mac. I also recognize that despite my privilege that allows me to write this paper that far too many of my peers could not, by holding this institution accountable for its actions and harm I risk pissing off the wrong people and facing backlash. I view this risk as a continuation of my history at this school, which has involved seismic patterns of rage and response. The reality that very few students can go about critiquing large power structures is a disgusting and glaringly evident form of the living body of institutional oppression that we must address to move forward.

While it is true that progress has been made in making higher ed more accessible, the progressive culture, specifically at Macalester with wealthy and white liberals, has bred a stuffy, toxic environment that stifles accountability that is necessary to hold in order to spark positive change. These unsaid cultural understandings imply

²¹ Narrator 2', Interview, 2022.

the idea that first-gen students should just be grateful for the progress in the programs that they are “lucky” to receive, and not have critiques or ask for more. When students of minoritized identities speak up to discuss the inequities around them, they are quickly deemed as “problematic”, and categorized as a threat.²² Being first-gen and a student of color amplifies the target put on those who are willing to speak up, especially when their messages disrupt the “established institutional norms”. Trying to find solutions can cause students to be ostracized from campus culture and any existing social support.

When desperate to save thousands of dollars by attempting to attain financial aid for the Macalester health insurance, Narrator 2 was told to take out the extra loans because they won't add up to much and to just be grateful for “being able to have one of the best health insurance plans.”²³ Telling students from largely marginalized, low-income backgrounds to not complain and just be grateful for the handouts echoes the harshness of American culture that endorses the intense shaming of people in poverty to be grateful for social programs, not ask for more, and do everything in their power to get off of government assistance. The hatred that America has for poor, marginalized people is all-encompassing, and has seeped into the foundations of higher ed and triggered a plethora of cultural and structural obstacles for first-gen students.²⁴

Financial Barriers for First-Gen Students

A vital thread woven into the fabrications of Macalester and other institutions of higher education is the stronghold of financial barriers and income inequality. For any student coming into college from a low-income background, the next four years can be absolutely debilitating when having to work one or more jobs on top of the intense class schedule that was specifically built for students who don't work off campus. Narrator 3, a sophomore here at Mac explained that they had to go to the lengths of starting their own business to try and make enough money to pay for basic needs and essentials that they cannot get help with from the school.²⁵ They expressed that the time commitment of maintaining their business while trying to reach Mac standards is unhealthy and

²² McNair, Tia Brown, Estela Mara Bensimon, and Lindsey E. Malcom-Piqueux.

²³ 'Narrator 2', Interview, 2022.

²⁴ Jack, Anthony Abraham. 22, 23

²⁵ Anonymous Macalester Student, Class of 2025, 'Narrator 3'. Interview. Conducted by Abby Green. 10 November 2022.

unsustainable for their mental and physical health. This student also explained that on top of their business, they have “three jobs now because this work-study isn't enough, I can't survive off of work-study. I can't even get \$100 worth of groceries and pay my phone bill at the same time from the same check. I have to decide which one is more important. It's just even when I work as many hours as I possibly can, it's still not enough money, I have to make at least work at least 20 hours, like 14 to 20 hours to get like \$300 just for it to be gone within the span of a week— not because I don't know how to budget, but because inflation is so high, and I just can't afford everything and as a low-income student or a poor student, all the places that surround us are for people with money. So I have to go out of my way to find places that I can afford stuff from.”²⁶ First-gen, low-income students are faced with the reality of having to work outrageous hours in relation to school in order to be able to afford to go to school. Macalester fails to pay their students a living wage, forcing them to be confronted with having to work multiple other jobs to supplement their low work-study income.

Macalester creates its credit hours by taking into account the hours expected to be spent outside of class on homework, under the assumption that students who live on campus have school as their primary, or only work. This was explained to me in my first-year course here at Macalester when discussing the rigorous academic life at Mac. The feeling that stirred in the pit of my stomach when I heard this as a low-income, first-gen, first-year student (who arrived with rose-colored glasses) was one I cannot adequately articulate to make others understand just what that means for students like me. The layers behind the shame, the guilt, the imposter syndrome, the isolation, and the *loneliness* of not knowing if anyone in your class discussing poverty knows a single thing about it in real life add a heavy weight on the shoulders of a lot of low-income students here at Mac. This feeling is only complicated further with *many* additional layers that I am not qualified to express for those with more marginalized identities.

For those who are first-gen and low-income, college has become a vision of a way out of struggle for not only the individual student, but often for their whole families. Some students have to work and send back money to their families while others get rent and spend money every month from theirs. The article, “First-Gen Ed Program Eases

²⁶ Narrator 3', Interview, 2022.

Way for Students Who Are First in the Family” by Michele Steinbacher expresses that this increases the “sense of responsibility not to let your family or yourself down”²⁷, a sense that many first-gen students experience and carry with them. The article detailed a student’s journey in college, expressing the long work hours and weekends needed to sustain their ability to afford to live. Professors don’t always accommodate students who have to work late and work weekends who are then put in situations that cause them to miss class requirements, such as group projects or meetings. The blame for these scenarios are often placed on the individual student and not the uneven limbs of academia that fall short in supporting a range of life experiences lived by low-income first-gen students. Discounting the student’s abilities and character is a weapon of white supremacy deemed “deficit-mindedness”²⁸, a mindset that assumes failure as “natural” to these students and provides assimilation to “fix” them as the solution.

Many first-generation college students have to navigate the real world on a different level than their peers while also figuring out how to decode the customs and unique perspectives created in the bubble of elite higher education institutions. Some college kids take their parents’ credit cards and go out shopping on the weekend while other first-gen low-income students serve them on a work shift. The class divide between the wealthy and low-income has built walls to keep the experience of college students separated by income inequality. Narrator 3 expresses that, “it’s just so hard because this school is not for people that do not have money. If you do not have money, you are always going to struggle here. For books, for events, for anything... And then on top of that, it’s embarrassing to have to keep explaining that you don’t have the money to do everything that everybody else can do.”²⁹ Some students have to navigate a handful of jobs to afford living and getting basic college needs such as books, while others live lavishly without any awareness of their privilege. Institutions are built for the wealthy, and that foundation can lead to struggles outside and inside of the classroom. In the article “First Generation College Students: The Struggle to Graduate”, Megan Bahr and Jessica Banuelos describe the class divide using a study conducted by the

²⁷ Steinbacher, Michele. “First-Gen Ed Program Eases Way for Students Who Are First in the Family.” *Pantagraph* A.1 (2011): 1.

²⁸ McNair, Tia Brown, Estela Mara Bensimon, and Lindsey E. Malcom-Piqueux.

²⁹ Narrator 3’, Interview, 2022.

American Association of University professors. The results showed that students who “work more than 15 hours or work off-campus are not as successful academically and have a lower retention rate.”³⁰

First-gen, low-income students often have no choice but to work multiple jobs off-campus to support themselves and get no institutional support or aid in navigating the consequences of doing so. Instead of receiving the much-needed support, these students fall behind and experience adversities completely unfelt by the larger student population. When interacting with wealthier students, the disparity is unveiled through ignorant and disrespectful rhetoric. *Class and campus life* by Elizabeth Lee describes this, articulating it as “socioeconomic differences [that] permeates campus life.”³¹ I recall the beginning of my long college journey of experiencing this poisonous permeation when being directly told by a peer during my first year that they “subsidize [me] to go here” with how much they are paying, and how low income I [was] based on my financial aid. This casual interaction with someone who I was friends with was just the beginning to the classist interactions I would endure doing my time at this school. As my low-income, first-gen peers and I face income inequality and academic consequences, we also face disrespect from elitist students.

Macalester College, despite its improvements, remains a business formed by the elite, white, and wealthy. Due to this reason, we must consider the intentions of the demographic setting out to divide power unequally in society through education and capitalism. Doing this requires utilizing the same strategies as the rest of the country and other institutions when working to protect their reputation and power. This key strategy in America hones in on an important goal for its protection: containing radical dissent and scattering it in order to stifle it before any damage is done to the institutions. As a first-gen senior, it often felt as though Macalester performed a specific script repeatedly when it came to the discourse surrounding first-gen student needs and retention. They provide very few spaces and opportunities for first-gen students to

³⁰ Bahr, Megan, and Jessica Banuelos. “First Generation College Students: The Struggle to Graduate.” *Universe Narratives*, (21 April 2017), <https://universe.byu.edu/narratives/first-generation-college-students-the-struggle-to-graduate/>.

³¹ Lee, Elizabeth M. *Class and Campus Life : Managing and Experiencing Inequality at an Elite College*. Ithaca: ILR Press, an imprint of Cornell University Press, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501703898>.

connect with each other, making existing programs extra alluring to students to join before trapping them with financial barriers and delicate power plays that keep them guilted into compliance and “satisfaction”.

Identifying a Facade Support

One of the main advertised programs at Macalester, designed for low-income students who are most commonly also first-gen, keeps students under their authority by convincing them to be grateful for having access to one of the only “helpful” programs designed for them. This program was advertised as a robust support system through the process of financial aid for all four years of a student’s career, yet it appeared to keep students in the program under the power dynamic of a financial burden; an off-campus work-study with little structural support. The program requires first year students, to have an off-campus work-study with unpaid commutes that can take anywhere from ten to forty minutes and longer in the Minnesota winter. This impacted Narrator 2 as they explain, “as somebody who’s on foot and walking from bus to train, train to bus, it was just too much. It was just too much. And I was kind of fed up with not having to support...And it just felt like damn, like I’m putting in so much work for such little money.”³² This program also required weekly meetings to attend, making a demanding work-study job as opposed to a supportive financial option for low-income students.

Narrator 2 explains that their cohort went from having 12 students to only 5 in 3 years which I attribute to the program’s demanding requirements and work, lack of meaningful guidance to be successful at Mac, and its frequency in which it upheld and enforced disability inequities that limited students in the program.³³ Before the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the program held an annual “auction” in order to collect funding that was described to the 2023 cohort as “auctioning” off student work in order to fundraise for their trip across the country, a trip everyone was not explicitly aware of when they applied.³⁴ Students would be auctioned off for their skills or labor to faculty, staff, and the Mac Groveland community in order to fundraise for programming.

³² ‘Narrator 2’, Interview, 2022.

³³ ‘Narrator 2’, Interview, 2022.

³⁴ ‘Narrator 2’, Interview, 2022.

I was in this program for 3 years before quitting, and recall our cohort being taken aback that this was something every cohort before us participated in. We wondered why a program for people like us would force low-income and commonly Queer, first-gen, and/or people of color to undergo what I believe is a repulsive, demeaning, and humiliating exchange of labor which left us speechless. Our group found this auction to be dehumanizing and unacceptable immediately largely because we knew that if we were students coming from wealth or extensive privilege this is not something we would be asked to do. You shouldn't have to sign up for an auction that exchanges extensive labor, and time commitments that students weren't able to truly conceptualize, on top of a strange support facade to receive what Macalester has to offer to its students. At a school small enough that the same people have to and are expected to organize all of the first-gen events on campus, it is even more crucial to discuss the successes and faults within these programs in order to move to a place where we can begin to design a more welcoming, beneficial, and equitable support system. Those who are first-gen here are deprived of free, no-strings-attached programming that provides care, community, and resources.

Macalester exposed its natural affinity for hypocrisy in a recent article written for alumni. The article spotlights a faculty member who states that "student voices are critically important as the college seeks to identify and meet the diverse needs of first-gen students."³⁵ This staff member helps lead the previously explained low-income and first-gen focused program, which has never once asked their class of 2023 cohort to hear their voices in feedback or student input on how to do that. According to Narrator 2, the students go through multiple appraisals and feedback processes throughout the year with their work-study, but never once get the opportunity to give input on how the program has been, what needs still need to be met, and how to best support meeting them.³⁶

The article reflects the marketing strategy deployed to gather money from alumni with the hopes that including the testimonials from students will stir emotionally charged

³⁵ Catley, Kim. "They Were First." Macalester College. Macalester College, November 19, 2021. <https://www.macalester.edu/news/2021/11/they-were-first/>.

³⁶ 'Narrator 2', Interview, 2022.

donations and support. When higher ed is built to have to focus on generating revenue, their motives will always be a questionable and opaque mess. Jason Brennan and Phillip Magness's book, *Cracks in the Ivory Tower* outline this marketing strategy describing that "most academic marketing and advertising is semi-fraudulent; colleges and individual departments regularly make high-falutin' promises they do not and cannot keep."³⁷ The message and statements in this Macalester article represent a distorted utopian vision of hierarchy in which Macalester actually seeks out unfiltered student testimony. There is a reason that the article wasn't published for students directly, and that reason is in part due to the reality that honest student testimonials that include any struggle aren't easily circulated to students by the college. Students who have become accustomed to being silenced at Mac know that there isn't a happy ending or resolution to it all, and that any advertisement is just that; advertisement. I believe students would reject blatant marketing to them that pictures a serene college atmosphere that doesn't exist at 1600 Grand Ave- we know this from the fall 2021 sit-in when students demanded to be heard by admin. We know that there isn't adequate effort or respect to include (and then follow through to meet) the needs of diverse student voices in all areas of concern, even when students have to go to extreme lengths of protesting to be heard.³⁸

Narrator 3 explains another face of the "semi-fraudulent"³⁹ nature at Macalester, describing that "going to Macalester makes you realize what you can survive with or without. And for people that think that Macalester is a good place, they've clearly seen worse than this, and Macalester manipulates you into thinking this is what college is supposed to be like. College is supposed to be a time of, yes, a time of stress, but not of overwhelmingness. I don't have a friend that doesn't have anxiety, depression or stress caused by the school. I don't have— I don't have a friend that overall has a good experience. If anything, all my friends are on the verge of transfer."⁴⁰ They continue on

³⁷ Brennan, Jason, and Phillip W Magness. *Cracks in the Ivory Tower : The Moral Mess of Higher Education*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019.

³⁸ Schmidt, Bergen, and Lily Denehy. "Students Demand Administration Response in Five-Hour Sit-In." *The Mac Weekly*. November 4, 2021. <https://themacsweekly.com/80348/news/students-demand-administration-response-in-five-hour-sit-in/>.

³⁹ Brennan, Jason, and Phillip W Magness.

⁴⁰ 'Narrator 3', Interview, 2022.

explaining that they hope to “actually tell people the truth. Because Macalester sells a pipe dream. They tell you all this stuff that's so great. And you get here and you realize what you just signed up for. You won't believe how many Black first years I've met that are literally miserable here. Macalester brings up the worst in some people and it is just, it's just so hard. This is a struggle. This is a struggle and then having struggles outside of it makes it too much for you. So you have to decide what's important, the assignment that you have due in a few hours or your mental health. If you don't have somebody that cares about that you are screwed. I love Macalester for the education it provides me but I also dislike Macalester for how much they made me struggle as a first year to the point where I have literally little to no trust in them.” This powerful account unveils the facade of support that Macalester markets itself on providing as students struggle to get by. As Narrator 3 expressed, many students are struggling and aware of the facade and the issues leaking out from under it, so when are we going to openly address this reality? How many students need to suffer before the campus culture and institution step in and speak to this shared struggle, in order to alleviate it?

Accessing Healthcare and Disability Services at Macalester

The body and bones of Macalester bend to protect itself and its intentions- to be a successful business. Its corporate claws tear away at students who seek financial support and guidance. When first-gen low-income students, such as each of the narrators, seek assistance in navigating healthcare, Mac provides loan options to pay for their insurance plan, which is presented as a top-tier, comprehensive plan. What Mac fails to mention to these students- who express urgent medical need and concern, is that Minnesota Medicaid is a free expansive healthcare option for independents that would significantly aid in alleviating a key component of the financial strain and barrier to adequate healthcare for these students. Macalester knowingly encourages these students to bury themselves in debt to pay for their feeble healthcare plan instead of connecting them to the free care that they can have, and have a human deserving right to have.⁴¹ The excuse for this behavior runs under the assumption that students are dependents of their parents, once again continuing an elitist cultural standard that

⁴¹ ‘Narrator 2’, Interview, 2022.

directly harms students who come from less privilege and aren't under familial authority on governmental paperwork. These students have to figure out how to take out these loans, and then how to get the care they need that isn't offered through the health and wellness center or under the plan, while their peers get to move freely through the medical systems without a thought behind it on their parent's plan.

When referred out, students on the Macalester health insurance have to take yet another extra step into finding transportation to these appointments to providers in-network. The time and cost of traveling to get services-which likely is also time taken off of work- sets low-income first-gen students who relied on that income back once again. This unfortunately separates them further from the college experience of their wealthy peers who don't have to think twice before buying an uber to an appointment. Narrator 2 explained that they sought out mental health care during their first year at Mac, and had to travel using public transportation and walk through below-freezing temperatures in the dark to get to their appointment. The unsafe and time-consuming commute was not sustainable care for them, causing them to stop receiving mental health care.⁴²

Students who require healthcare for their disabilities are discouraged and harmed even further when deprived of the resources on campus to get medical help and certification for their disabilities. When the commute can mean having to take time off of work, school, and homework for an unpredictable amount of time, it can quickly become too tall of a hurdle to hurl oneself over when mentally ill and struggling.

For students who didn't receive adequate healthcare previous to their time at Macalester, this is perhaps their first time with the freedom and ability to try and get disability diagnoses and accommodations, as opposed to peers who've had the opportunity to have undergone the process years earlier. This becomes a highly damaging, egregious layer of this institution when taking a deeper look into the dynamics between disability accommodations and faculty at Mac. When I had Macalester health insurance, I was left to try and receive hearing aids with zero coverage from the school's plan. I had to find a professor who went out of her way with no extra compensation for the extra time to help me search and search for any way to get the device I needed to succeed at college. The process stemmed from my inability

⁴² 'Narrator 2', Interview, 2022.

to hear or engage in lectures and classes during my first year at Mac, where I fell behind and struggled to access learning. After taking the back roads and alleys around healthcare to get the hearing aids on my own, I've had to speak up to have professors take my accommodations seriously. Not all professors are willing to change their class structure to accommodate, leaving me and my peers unable to learn with the same ease as our classmates.

Mental health accommodations at Macalester

When first-gen students face isolation and a lack of community throughout their time in higher ed, mental health struggles loom above as another suffocating obstacle to surviving and thriving. Institutions fail to address the culture shock and imposter syndrome that students feel, leaving them to their own devices to combat the mental toll college takes. The op-ed, "The Reason for My Capstone Tears" written by first-gen graduate, Molly Ruffing, explains that there are increasingly difficult mental impacts of college that are neglected in the larger discourse surrounding first-gen research.⁴³ She explored the little research in existence, explaining that "according to Noel and colleagues, first-generation college students reported significantly more anxiety symptoms than their non-first-generation peers and also significantly lower overall life satisfaction."⁴⁴ Colleges already fail to adequately address the growing mental health crises that college students, in general, are experiencing. Addressing the added anxiety and weight of being first-gen is beyond the services of Mac, leaving students to their own devices to keep themselves alive with raging untreated mental illness(es).

Narrator 3 encountered the consequences of these accommodations when they were experiencing life difficulties that prevented them from being able to morph into the student role expected of Macalester students.⁴⁵ After watching them struggle and face burnout from this situation, their friend—who is also first-gen—felt too defeated and powerless to challenge the mistreatment they received from a Professor who denied their disability services and reprimanded them academically for needing their services and flexibility due to serious, documented illness. When asked if the friend challenged

⁴³ Ruffing, Molly. "The Reason for My Capstone Tears." *The Lawrentian*, (8 October 2021).

⁴⁴ Ruffing, "The Reason for My Capstone Tears," 2021.

⁴⁵ 'Narrator 3', Interview, 2022.

the mistreatment, Narrator 3 described that “No, she honestly was just, she was honestly just over it because she's also first-gen. And being a freshman, It's so hard Macalester. Because this school is honestly for white students that have money. We don't have money-well she does, but she uses it to pay off her tuition. So we all work for everything that we have and we work to the best of our ability and study more than we actually live in college. So it's just hard to know that you can tell a professor everything that you need as a student, and you can tell them the accommodations you need, and they still ignore them. So it's like, what more can you do? And she already saw how I was treated when I had an even worse situation.”⁴⁶ These testimonies are far more common than we as a society like to admit, and students are suffering the consequences of structural exclusion, ableism, and elitism. The deficit-mindedness⁴⁷ has been saturated in the perspectives of Macalester faculty and staff, who view first-gen students as problems to be fixed and dominated regardless of disability.

The Role of Faculty and Staff in Supporting or Harming First-Generation Students

Faculty, despite not being able to control institutions or single-handedly change policy issues, have the power to make an extensive difference in the lives of first-gen students; for their betterment or detriment. As was unveiled by the narrators of this paper, faculty can sometimes act as the glue holding things together for students going through turmoil outside and/or inside the classroom. Narrator 3 explains that for them, having a few caring professors go the extra mile to support them made the difference between being able to go to Macalester or dropping out. They express that, “we need professors like that in college, especially with students that are struggling with their mental health or just go to colleges as prestigious as Macalester.”⁴⁸ The love and care extended by these professors create a safe space, even in the midst of chaos, for students to breathe, exist, and seek guidance. Joy, support, and learning come from professors who take the time to try to understand what students are going through and how to help them succeed. It is unfortunate that these select professors who truly do

⁴⁶ ‘Narrator 3’, Interview, 2022.

⁴⁷ McNair, Tia Brown, Estela Mara Bensimon, and Lindsey E. Malcom-Piqueux.

⁴⁸ ‘Narrator 3’, Interview, 2022.

make a difference for these students often lack recognition, compensation, or support for their efforts.

I argue that professors need to be adopting a flexible, empathetic lens to teach their students in order to create an equitable learning environment, knowing that the responsibility stretches far beyond them to make encompassing change. It is simply impossible for professors to be able to make up for the institutional inequities by themselves without policy change, financial support, and much more. We mustn't place the sole responsibility on people who often work more than they are compensated for, and we mustn't allow for them to be the scapegoat for institutions, whose issues run much deeper than their reservoir alone can cradle.

Acknowledging the prodigious impact professors have on students leaves room for hope that there is good being done to help first-gen students get through their education. Despite the optimism gifted by these professors, we cannot overlook the wave of harm crashing down from the hands of unempathetic, racist, classist, sexist, ableist, etc. professors. When facing student backlash, professors can rest assured that the power structure of the institution will be behind them. Whether to protect its public image, suppress and control student backlash, or appease social, egotistical connections in the fickle political game of academic reputation (one that Narrator 2 touches on and describes as an act of being “elusive” to “play their game.”⁴⁹) , Macalester (and other institutions) are willing to overlook student experiences to believe professors in a situation of conflict.

In my interview with Narrator 3, they shared that they had faced backlash from a professor when they were experiencing an illness. Extreme measures were taken by the professor to shame and demean them, and when they stood up for themselves they were seen as confrontational and disruptive. They explain that “I felt uncomfortable interacting with the professor because I felt like she was constantly belittling me and disrespecting me, but since she was a professor, I felt like nobody believed me. So honestly, you just had to let— just have to lose the fight because it honestly became too much for me.”⁵⁰ When they contacted Student Affairs they described that “they did not

⁴⁹ 'Narrator 2', Interview, 2022.

⁵⁰ Narrator 3', Interview, 2022.

believe me... they told me that I was the problem.” When reflecting on the situation they articulate that “It was just heartbreaking because like, I didn't work so hard and almost burnout in high school to be treated just like I didn't matter.”⁵¹ Their experience mirrors the atrocious abuses of power that are regularly wielded against students for their misfortunes or illnesses. Students aren't afforded the luxury of having the power or backing to be able to dissent against the wrongdoings done to them by select professors. First-gen students, especially those who hold marginalized identities, are left highly vulnerable to professors who can choose to retaliate knowing they have the ability to do so.

Another component of the structural failure of higher education to meet the needs of first-gen students lies within the campus environment, as well as within the classroom that Professors have the power in help shaping. The research article, “The Impact of Campus Environments on Sense of Belonging for First-Generation College Students” by Samuel Museus and Ting-Han Chang details through their research the significance of campus environments on the sense of belonging and success that first-gen students feel. The results emphasize the urgency for institutions and educators to shape the classroom environment, projects, and lessons to allow for the growth of community and connection amongst first-gen students. Neglecting to actively shape education to include the experience and expertise of first-gen students continues to harm and exclude these students from the discourse that allows them to grow individually, but more importantly, collectively. Narrator 2 touches on their experience of this when reflecting that “I think I recognize while education was a tool for me to liberate not only myself, but the communities that I feel responsible to liberate, other students were there because mommy and daddy paid \$300,000 upfront and they just needed a degree and they're gonna get their trust fund and like, that's a fine reality to live. I wish I had it. But it is frustrating, like when you're in the classroom and like, I don't know, I feel like even if I don't do the work, I have a different passion, about the things I read and the way I integrate the concepts that we're learning in classes.”⁵² Institutions refusing to enact these positive changes continue to isolate these students and keep them from coming

⁵¹ Narrator 3', Interview, 2022.

⁵² Narrator 2', Interview, 2022.

together to be able to advocate for a better environment for themselves as a larger, unified group. They also lose the passion and unique strengths that students such as Narrator 2 have and could share to nourish the learning environment and enhance discussions.

When we hire professors who adhere to traditional methods and values without evolution, we allow the dire disconnect to disrupt the well-being of low-income, first-gen students and endorse wealthy privileged students to “analyze” institutions, structures, systems, and concepts without any human connection and context. The article, “Access Without Support is Not Opportunity” by Cathy Engstrom and Vincent Tinto explains that this issue “is not to say that there are not many faculty who are very effective in the classroom. Rather it is to say that as a matter of practice most faculty are not trained to help students learn. It follows that another action colleges must take to promote greater student success is the establishment of effective faculty development programs that require, not simply encourage, new faculty, to participate in professional development activities during their first years at the college.”⁵³ The institutional gaps in higher education are holding professors and students back from success and creating learning environments that are robust in encompassing the contexts around all students’ learning experiences. The colonial structures of knowledge production remain barriers to teaching students in a manner that allows for generational growth and progress in deconstructing white supremacy.⁵⁴ To repeat the cycle of failing to learn how to show up for students in the ways that they need, and failing to teach in an accessible manner, is to aid in filtering the college experience out to be granted to the wealthy.

This article additionally provides a look into the work required to make a substantial change for the better, describing that “institutional improvements such as these do not arise by chance. Nor does substantial improvement in the rate at which colleges graduate their students. What is required is not simply that colleges support such efforts, but that they adopt an intentional, structured, and coherent course of action

⁵³ Engstrom, Cathy, and Vincent Tinto. “Access without Support Is Not Opportunity.” *Change* 40, no. 1 (2008): 46–50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40178285>.

⁵⁴ McNair, Tia Brown, Estela Mara Bensimon, and Lindsey E. Malcom-Piqueux. *From Equity Talk to Equity Walk: Expanding Practitioner Knowledge for Racial Justice in Higher Education*. (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Brand, 2020).

that does not leave improvement to chance but makes it part and parcel of a planned course of institutional action that is sustained over time. The simple fact is that substantial improvement in rates of completion takes time and not an inconsiderable degree of effort by all parts of the institution.”⁵⁵ In order to make the current situation better, it is vital that we all be a part of this process while holding higher ed accountable for installing and not just maintaining, but growing support structures and action.

Moving Forward

First-generation college students face an uphill battle to survive and make it through higher education. The guilt and self-doubt of imposter syndrome consume many but call into question institutions’ efficacy in creating the equitable college experience they market themselves on providing. Narrator 2 expresses that, “Because of the backgrounds that we come from we are not adequately equipped to perform our best at these institutions, even though we are on the same intellectual level as our classmates. But because of limited resources that we are offered, we know what it is like to have less. We begin to internalize things that we didn’t have control of as our fault; because Mac is so small and the percentages of students actually like you are so minimal. It feels like you shouldn’t exist on this campus. It might not be explicit messaging, but it is definitely the impression first-gen students receive because their struggles aren’t even spoken about. I think it’s hard because you spend a lot of time unlearning how you internalize these norms. After four years here, you have to face and confront the imposter syndrome. You know it’s not rooted in anything legitimate, but it affects your time in college immensely. Imposter syndrome is internalizing the ways that systems are failing you.”⁵⁶ This internalization is echoed across first-gen students, and I argue that the institutions are the true imposter when baiting underprivileged first-gen students to attend their school with the promise of a commitment to access and community that they provide little to no follow-through in creating. After trapping students, campus culture gaslights these issues, acting oblivious to the many structural failures and attacks on these students.

⁵⁵ Engstrom, Cathy, and Vincent Tinto.

⁵⁶ ‘Narrator 2’, Interview, 2022.

I assert that Macalester College is failing its first-gen students through different functional processes that were built as integral to its foundation. If we have any hope of creating a better future environment for the students who will come next, we need to initiate honest dialogue and come to terms with the harm being done— no matter how difficult it may be to have these conversations.

The consequences of not having these conversations are outlined in Narrator 2's account that "it was just crazy to like, for an entire semester, I was a student, but I wasn't a student. And like I was not doing well, I was not thriving. And no one would have known that like, and finding out that a student took their life on campus, a Black senior, especially like, that's something that I think weighs on me, I would say probably every day on campus and like speaking with peers who blamed themselves, because they were leaders of orgs who are like, 'we could have done stuff we could have did this, we could have did that'— and never seen the counselor say that, like never seen the school take on any initiative, or any like, plan to help. What is the word that people use? I wouldn't say heal, but just address what is going on. And it's like, the only thing they did was give us back the Pass Fail. And then they literally took the Pass Fail options away from us. And a student had to take their life in order for us to be able to not to have grades during a global pandemic. So it was just hard not to feel like burnt every time that happened."⁵⁷ We cannot move forward without acknowledging the issues expressed throughout this paper and then speaking out so that they don't live solely in the bubble those who experience their burning sensations, but in the minds of everyone interacting with Macalester College, and any higher education institution. Luckily, the start to the solutions already lives in the minds and talents of these students. If we listen and create safe spaces to hear these students — which includes compensating them for their time and work, while following up with real change and action based on their feedback, we can grow a starting point to work from.

First-gen students are experts in fostering hope through adversity and forging community even through isolation. Each Narrator explained the love and resilience they were able to cultivate with friends and the few faculty that they found to support them, building networks of life support to navigate these difficulties. With the strength,

⁵⁷ 'Narrator 2', Interview, 2022.

extraordinary brilliance, and life experiences of these students, we can build off of what they already cultivate into larger, concrete institutional changes. Integrating sustainable and supported peer mentorship programs and allocating money to fund continued regularly scheduled community-oriented events and programming can aid in creating better-connected support systems between students.

These steps can help ensure that these students don't have to get through college alone, and will instead have peer support/validation all throughout their college journey to help redirect the pathway of change. Narrator 3 illustrates the urgency to take these steps when expressing that, "you really have to love the people that you are around and the homey feeling that you get from Macalester, but the institutions and everything, they're not here to help us. They want our money and they just want to use your face to show that they're good so they can call other people."⁵⁸⁵⁹ With the disturbing lack of support felt from the institution, it is even more vital to "love the people you are around" and expand upon the benefits of being in community, as students feel that without it, "You cannot survive here."⁶⁰

The weight of constructing a community all by themselves without institutional funding, support, and structured programming is far too heavy and daunting to be done in a sustainable manner by only first-gen students. When actually backed by resources and institutional support, seemingly small ideas can grow into expansive changes and make a difference for someone feeling alone and without community.

An additional policy suggestion that I have is that institutions be proactive in trying to engage the families of first-generation students to help them understand the obstacles that their young adults are facing while providing guidance and tangible resources on how to support them. Families are often beaming with pride for their child, but confront shame or guilt in not being able to be helpful in the role that they would have wanted to play in the college process if given resources and guidance themselves. Crafting change is a community effort in that families can play a role, one that is currently underutilized.

⁵⁸ Narrator 3', Interview, 2022.

⁵⁹ Jack, Anthony Abraham. 10

⁶⁰ Narrator 3', Interview, 2022.

Acknowledging that not every first-gen student has a family, one that is supportive, or one that for various reasons doesn't have the capacity to support them, other policy changes are needed to increase equity throughout college, particularly in the area of finances. Providing robust financial support that covers expenses beyond tuition is one way to increase college access. Funding textbooks, supplies, food, technology, and other essential expenses and/or extending stipends can remove significant barriers that cause chain reactions of negative impacts on students who have to burn themselves out to afford to live while in school. Factoring in income inequality in the planning and execution of programming, events, and smaller systems within higher ed can begin to mend some of the divides between the college experiences of first-gen students from low-income backgrounds.

Providing free medical insurance that offers comprehensive services can alleviate the mental and physical tolls on low-income, first-gen students. Training staff to be able to aid students in navigating Medicaid and other insurance options is another alternative to increase student access to healthcare. Actually being able to afford services and receive healthcare is life-changing and increases the ability of students to be successful in classes and socially when not bombarded with challenging health issues that clash with the flow of higher ed. Implementing disability services that truly work with health providers to show up for, support, and advocate for students navigating disabilities and mental illness is another life-changing improvement yet to be implemented.

Moving forward, I suggest that higher education institutions grant agency to first-gen students in shaping what an accessible college experience feels like for them. Allowing for flexibility to expand the borders of what success and productivity look like can work to include nuance, skills, and talents that are otherwise deemed as unscholarly, unacceptable, and unprofessional within the rigid curriculum standards. Institutions can support and encourage professors to start taking a more active role in nurturing a learning environment free of a competitive nature. Additionally, they can create classroom standards that remove the elitist expectations that there are "obvious" technical/technology skills or professional concepts expected to be learned previously to when a student arrives in higher ed. They can also discuss what accessible language

sounds like for the class, to establish a respectful and accessible classroom culture that acknowledges white supremacy's work in language division.

Due to the fact that navigating relationships with professors for low-income first-gen students can "paralyze" and deteriorate their "sense of belonging"⁶¹ it is crucial that professors recognize this disconnect and actively reach out and bridge this gap, as opposed to leaning into cultural expectations of only interacting with wealthy students. These are just a few of many classroom changes that can make learning more accessible and approachable for first-gen students who may not be used to learning in schools with a significant amount of wealth and students who come from highly trained academic backgrounds focused on outperforming other students.

In response to the increased life stressors stemming from inequity that can impact the academic success of first-gen students, institutions can change the academic system to support the success of these students. We know that systems of grading and testing were founded in elitist white supremacy that has been used time and time again to exclude people of color and of minoritized people.⁶² Removing the traditional strict letter grading scale and implementing self-grading systems, consequence-free pass-fail designations, contract-for grading options, or ideally removing grading altogether could allow students to focus on learning and not on how to best perform the game of elitism for a letter grade. Institutions need to actively make space and expand the boundaries for students to navigate the college experience and not fall drastically behind in class or be shamed for facing tribulations that impact what academic performance looks like.

Additionally, I urge all students, faculty, staff, and administrators to believe the experiences and oral histories of first-gen students, and accept that in order to move forward we must acknowledge what we are doing wrong. When a collective sees an issue and chooses to be negligent and perpetuate the silencing of those affected, they are ultimately alluding to those struggling to do so in silence and to be willing to sit down, shut up, and accept inequity as it is. Focusing on guiding institutions through love

⁶¹ Jack, Anthony Abraham. 81

⁶² McNair, Tia Brown, Estela Mara Bensimon, and Lindsey E. Malcom-Piqueux. 42

and mindful care and not greed and profit has the power to reshape our future—but will we all choose to be a part of the solution? Can we put our egos aside to work together or will the machine continue running itself into the ground? Macalester College is an imposter in its identity, and we mustn't sit aside and watch it morph into its next capital venture. Students deserve better and Macalester has a burning responsibility to do and be better. The oral histories of first-gen students have begun and must continue to outline where we are failing and how we can advance forward, providing a uniquely honest and powerful look into the silenced experiences of first-generation college students in higher education.

With these changes in mind, I want to conclude this paper by speaking to first-gen students, and first-gen students only.

An open letter to first-gen students

To the first-gen students reading this,

Even with the potential solutions that institutions can implement to alleviate the problems you wish to change, we must remain aware that these places are microcosms of the larger network of government and elite structures with motives for wealth, power, and control that are always in motion. Spend your time learning and understanding the histories and complexities behind this hypocrisy to better understand how to best navigate and exist beyond the restraints of the current institution you navigate, and the ones to come after that you won't graduate from- *liberation exists outside of institutions*. Figure out how to be able to use that knowledge to form community and usher change. Do not sell your future, happiness, or soul away to a society that grounds its everyday life and realities on the suffering of human beings for profit. Don't put your worth into a rigged system designed for you to feel inferior. Uplift, support, and seek to understand each other through the experience of higher ed and make strong long-lasting relationships. Regardless of what you think is the best direction for liberation, we must *live our lives for ourselves while supporting one another*. Prioritize what brings you joy, excites you, and sparks passion. You deserve the right to dream of the same sustained happiness that others get without a second thought. Move forward together, and leave behind the truths of your journey in the collective memory of your institution with

roadmaps for those to come after. Don't let your histories be distorted, silenced, or reworked to be a tool for the censorship of history flowing from white supremacy. You own your history and future, no matter what you are told in higher education.

All my *love* and *luck*,
abby

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