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Roped In or Left Out: How First-Generation College Students Understand and Build Soft Skills at Universities of Varying Prestige

A Bachelor's Thesis in Sociology

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ABSTRACT

Emerging literature on higher education suggests that the benefits of prestigious universities may not adequately reach first generation, low income (FGLI) students. However, these analyses fail to examine student benefits of attending prestigious universities in comparison to peers at non-prestigious universities, where the majority of FGLI students attend. Research also fails to look towards non-academic measures of success and outcomes of university, such as the development of soft skills (applied intra- and interpersonal non-technical skills that relate to how one interacts with others and navigates their environment) especially among FGLI students. Drawing from 19 in-depth interviews with FGLI female-identifying undergraduates of color from 4 universities (2 prestigious PUs & 2 non-prestigious NPUs), this study aims to comparatively understand student experiences understanding and building soft skills using the following research questions: How do first generation students understand and build soft skills? How does this differentiate across universities of varying prestige? And, considering soft skills as built through interpersonal relationships and connections, do PUs provide an edge over NPUs in regard to soft skills despite fewer cultural connections for students on campus? The study finds more similarities across varying university types than differences. Firstly, students understand soft skills as adjacent to Whiteness and privilege. Secondly, students build soft skills through generalized university programming but were most successful when involved in FGLI specific, specialized university programming that emphasized and appreciated the unique needs of FGLI students. Regarding differences, students at PUs had more FGLI specific programming available but felt a larger cultural disconnect between themselves and the wider university, resulting in more successful relationships with university staff in service positions over relationships with professors. At NPUs, students faced the "commuter problem" where they lacked an understanding of campus resources due to limited time spent on campus and interactions with members of the university community. Further implications of this research emphasize the need of universities to recognize and address FGLI needs and that crucial interpersonal skills exist outside of traditional SS created by and catered to privileged, White, upper-class stakeholders. However, this is only the first step in truly providing a space to prepare them for social mobility in an ever changing and multicultural society.

INTRODUCTION

In 1846, pioneering American educator Horace Mann stated that, "Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men." For over 150 years, this declaration has permeated the widespread perception of the American education system– a meritocracy that promotes the most deserving. But for some, higher education rather serves as the great magnifier. Magnifying inequalities, doubts, fears, and difference.

In 2024, 40.2% of 25 to 29 year old Americans had earned a bachelor's degree or higher, almost double the 22.5% of people with a bachelor's in 1980 (National Center for Education Statistics 2024). Viewing education as the great equalizer would suggest these surges in enrollment would in tandem lessen achievement and opportunity gaps between White Americans in high socioeconomic classes and their marginalized counterparts. Yet despite the hope this declaration brings, educational and income inequalities and opportunity and attainment gaps continue to exist (Hanushek 2019), all the while students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are continually promised the American dream of social mobility through higher education.

Although the majority of first-generation, low-income students enrolled in 4 year degree programs attend public institutions (Renn 2022, Rothwell 2015, Redford, Ralph, and Mulvaney Hoyer 2017), the brightest of these students carefully calculate the value of college choice for their future success and aim to attend top universities to improve their life chances through accelerated access to the opportunity structure (Cho et al. 2008, Stanton-Salazar 2001, Kolluri and Tierney 2018, Landers 2018). These top universities, often ranked near the top of national and global reporting sites like U.S. News & World Report, Times Higher Education, and

Quacquarelli Symonds, are known for offering world class education, unmatched connections, networking, internships, and other opportunities. In recent years, these elite institutions have increasingly recruited diverse student populations while funding attendance for students from low-income backgrounds (Barshay 2022, National Bureau of Economic Research 2019). However, recent research challenges the idea that prestigious universities offer their benefits equally to students from varying economic backgrounds and generational student status, particularly students identifying as first-generation and/or low-income (Jack 2019, Gable 2021, Klein 2021, Lee 2016, McGrath 2013, O'Sullivan, Robson, and Winters 2018, Sánchez 2018, Stephens 2009). Despite many efforts to create a diverse student population and increase enrollment among first-generation, low-income (FGLI) students, prestigious universities often fail to create an adaptable culture for these students to thrive in the same manner as their high socioeconomic status (SES) and continuing generation peers.

As an immersive environment, the college experience is much more to students than graduating, passing classes, or having a good grade point average. When judging universities, it is vital to consider non-academic measures of success, such as the importance of clubs, friendships, and identity formation in the university experience itself. These non-academic factors often have influence in future career outcomes. One evaluation of workforce readiness is a student's soft skills. Soft skills, non-technical, intra- and interpersonal skills that relate to how you interact with others and navigate your environment, are increasingly becoming a competitive edge in hiring and promotions following graduation (Succi and Canovi, 2019; Deloitte, 2019). Because soft skills often lay within the "hidden curriculum" (Gable 2021, Snyder 1971, Jackson 1968), few studies have assessed how universities directly and/or indirectly prepare students for this aspect of their future careers. At prestigious universities specifically, less focus is placed on

soft skill instructional assistance, as much of the student population enters college having presumed high levels of cultural capital (Carnevale and Rose 2004, Bowen and Bok 1998, Bowen et al. 2005, Astin and Oseguera 2004, Karabel 2005, Wilkinson 2005, Lee 2013, Soares 2007).

With this considered, I seek to investigate the intersection of first-generation, low-income student experiences and university prestige in regards to soft skills as a measure of collegiate success. To do this I first ask how first generation students understand and build soft skills? How does this differentiate across universities of varying prestige? And finally, considering soft skills as built through interpersonal relationships and connections, do these elite universities provide an edge over less-prestigious but more widely first-generation and low-income serving institutions in regard to soft skills?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the United States 54% of all undergraduate students, 8.2 million people, identify as first-generation college students (Firstgenforward 2025). Students from low income backgrounds that qualify for Pell grants represent 31.6% of all students in the 2022-2023 academic year, and about half of all first generation students fall into this category (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d., Saenz et al. 2007). For students from these first generation, low-income (FGLI) backgrounds, enrolling in university places them on divergent paths from their parents and community members, forcing them to face this new and challenging environment without familial guidance (Saenz et al. 2007). The select handful of students from FGLI backgrounds that gain admission to the country's most elite universities are promised the benefits of university

exponentially, but often face an environment of high risk and challenge in order to reap these high rewards.

The cultural consensus that a degree from institutions like Harvard, Princeton, and MIT will bring wealth and prosperity incomparable to local and state colleges is an appealing call to students from disadvantaged backgrounds who itch to escape monetary hardships. Students from all backgrounds are told the prestige of their university's name alone will take them far. Graduates from Ivy League schools reportedly have higher average annual earnings than peers who graduate in the top 10% of other colleges (Rim, 2023). Further, FGLI students at elite colleges have higher graduation rates than the national average (Carnevale, Rose, and Century Foundation 2003, Lee 2013). Statistics like these cause thousands of high achieving students to strive to attend prestigious institutions for potential exponentiated benefits, rather than choose local and state universities serving higher levels of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Leonhardt and Wu 2023, U.S. News and World Report 2023). Still, FGLI students are significantly underrepresented at elite universities.

Institutions of higher education traditionally and continually cater to largely high SES, non-first generation, White populations who have an advanced understanding of how to navigate the college system; this stands exponentially true for prestigious universities (PUs) (Carnevale and Rose 2004, Bowen and Bok 1998, Bowen et al. 2005, Astin and Oseguera 2004, Karabel 2005, Wilkinson 2005, Soares 2007 as cited in Lee 2013). However, recent pushes for diversity and increased financial aid opportunities have increased PU enrollment numbers for students from FGLI backgrounds. Elite campuses now face a complex challenge: how to balance an increasing number of marginalized students with their long-standing traditions and public image to ensure continued alumni donations and enrollment from affluent, White, and legacy applicants

(Espenshade and Chung 2005, Engle and Tino 2008, Espenshadeet al., 2004, Karen 1991, Stevens 2007 as cited in Lee 2013).

The benefits of attending an elite college, or any college, come from all aspects of the academic institution. FGLI students often fail to fully experience or even consider the invaluable aspects of college life such as extracurriculars, alumni networks, faculty connections, study-abroad, research opportunities, and internships (Lee 2013, Kinney 2017). At PUs, adapting to predominantly White, affluent universities can induce culture shock for first-generation students due to contrasts with their affluent, White peers and conflicting expectations about higher education arising from their family's socioeconomic background compared to institutional norms (Gable 2021, Jack 2019). Although socioeconomic gaps in navigating the education system exist starting in childhood (Lareau 2011, Calarco 2011), they become increasingly evident in post-secondary education. This is largely attributable to a misalignment between the independent nature of many institutional expectations in college—such as self-advocacy, independent learning, and navigating bureaucratic systems—and the family and cultural values of intradependence, community support, and prioritizing collective well-being that are frequently emphasized in FGLI students' upbringing (Covarrubias et al. 2018). This cultural mismatch can create significant barriers to success for students whose foundational experiences have shaped a different set of expectations and norms.

A vast majority of FGLI students attending 4-year universities do not attend elite institutions (Renn 2022, Rothwell 2015, Redford, Ralph, and Mulvaney Hoyer 2017). While Ivy-Plus colleges have the highest success rates for economic mobility, less selective institutions with high numbers of low-income students provide good outcomes and offer higher levels of access, all the while toting similar levels of successful economic mobility as PUs (Renn 2022,

Chetty et al. 2020). Cultural mismatch theory would corroborate this finding and suggest that FGLI students would have higher levels of success navigating the college system at universities better culturally aligned to themselves. Stephens et al. (2012, 1181) argue that students will "be advantaged when they experience a cultural match between their own norms and the norms represented in the university culture…The extent to which students experience a match or mismatch depends not only on cues in the immediate situation but also on the larger university cultural context (e.g., which norms are typically included, represented, and valued in that context)."

Garza (2021) substantiated this, finding that although exposure to dominant class cultures found at PUs provide opportunities to nurture cultural capital, the limited engagement with sidelined class cultures hindered students from developing their working-class cultural skills while also practicing mainstream, middle-class ones. In comparison, universities serving larger populations of students from marginalized and non-White backgrounds, which are often non-prestigious (NPU) in ranking, were able to successfully transmit ethnic and working class cultural capital and skills (Garza 2021). These forms of non-dominant cultural capital, such as family and community-oriented values, linguistic codes, interactional styles, and informal knowledge networks, are traditionally devalued in spaces shaped by White, middle-class cultural standards (Garza 2021, Carter 2003). Carter and Garza thus suggest that spaces which validate and integrate non-dominant cultural knowledge, such as NPUs, are not just more inclusive but potentially more effective at fostering holistic student development.

At the same time, students at NPUs do still struggle with integration, largely because the vast majority of students, 85% across all American universities, commute to campus rather than live in close proximity or in university housing (Jacoby 2020, Kelchen 2018, U.S. News and

World Report 2024). In comparison, most PUs have on-campus living requirements for underclassmen (Scholarships.com 2023, U.S. News and World Report 2024, Urban Institute, n.d.). But cultural mismatch theory suggests that students at NPUs with a higher population of students from FGLI and marginalized backgrounds should still better understand and navigate their collegiate environment than peers at PUs.

Despite this, FGLI students who attend PUs experience higher levels of traditional success. They are statistically more likely to graduate, earn higher salaries, and to experience lower rates of underemployment than their peers at NPUs (Berg Dale and Krueger 2002; Burning Glass Institute and Strada Education Foundation 2024). However, while PU graduates may secure jobs after graduation, this does not necessarily guarantee upward mobility, career adaptability, or success in transitioning across industries. Research shows that once hired, a degree alone carries limited influence when it comes to navigating labor market shifts, opportunities for promotion, and evaluations of success (Succi and Canovi 2019). Such outcomes are often shaped by what Tomlinson (2012, 20) refers to as a "positional advantage over other graduates with similar academic and class-cultural profiles"—a competitive edge gained through cultural capital rather than credentials alone.

Soft skills have been suggested as the key to this advantage, with employers highlighting their importance in hiring decisions, assessing employee performance, determining cultural fit, and driving long-term organizational success (Harvey 2000, Archer and Davison 2008, Deloitte Access Economics 2017 as cited in Succi and Canovi 2019). Although the literature fails to collectively decide on a specific definition, generally, soft skills (SS) are defined as non-technical intra- and interpersonal skills that relate to how you interact with others and navigate your environment in professional settings (Laker and Powell 2011, Charoensap-Kelly et

al. 2015, Marin-Zapata et al. 2021, Guerra-Báez, 2019). Their value lies in their flexibility; unlike technical skills, soft skills are not tied to specific tasks, making them critical for adapting to shifting roles, industries, and workplace environments. Skills one would display on their resume and speak to in job interviews, such as communication, leadership, teamwork, problem solving, networking, and time management all play important roles in securing and maintaining employment opportunities. In turn, the effective demonstration of soft skills contributes to an individual's perceived professionalism, the combination of behaviors, attitudes, and appearances that signal competence and alignment with the expectations of a specific role or organizational culture (The Britannica Dictionary 2024, Krueger 2024).

A growing discourse on professionalism challenges the notion that the SS needed to navigate workplace norms are unbiased. This can be seen both through changes in cultural ideology on physical appearance in the workplace such as a growing acceptance of tattoos and piercings, laws challenging discrimination in the workplace like the CROWN act (The Crown Act 2019), and through challenges to norms surrounding workplace behavior. Literature on the subject has shifted to position what is commonly understood as "professionalism" as a construct deeply influenced by and favoring White and Western cultural norms, consequently placing individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds at a disadvantage (Gray 2019, Moss and Tilly 1996, Krasas 2018, Krueger 2024). This disadvantage causes individuals from minority groups to use techniques such as "Code Switching." Originally coined by sociolinguist Einar Haugen in 1954 to describe the practice of alternating between languages, the term Code Switching has since broadened to include behavioral shifts that individuals make to align with dominant cultural norms in order to increase their acceptance or success in a given space (McCluney et al. 2019, McMinn 2019, Rumage 2024, Harris 2019). Within professional settings,

the ability to effectively deploy soft skills can facilitate this process, helping individuals navigate environments where conformity to dominant expectations is often implicitly required.

Despite their importance in career success, soft skills, unlike hard skills, lay within the "hidden curriculum," or the set of implicit values, skills, and rules not formally taught in the classroom of higher education (Gable 2021, Jack 2019, Snyder 1971, Jackson 1968). This hidden curriculum tends to favor students who already possess the cultural knowledge required to navigate institutional norms, reproducing class-based inequalities by reflecting the values and behaviors of middle- and upper-class culture. As a result, those with higher base levels of cultural capital are better positioned to benefit from institutions and successfully glean knowledge from the hidden curriculum (Bernstein [1971] 2003, Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

This reliance on implicit learning through the hidden curriculum is compounded by the fact that more formalized strategies designed to promote soft skills, such as workshops and group training, are often underused in educational institutions. As a result, the burden of developing these skills often falls on students themselves, requiring individuals to be significantly committed to personal development on their own time (Guerra-Báez 2019, Mangrulkar et al. 2001). In addition, when students are presented with numerous opportunities for soft skill development in an unstructured format, like optional seminars, self-assessment tools, and extracurricular activities, but receive little direction, they often struggle to engage with and take full advantage of the resources available to them (Roksa and Silver 2019).

One successful way universities have supported FGLI students in developing their SS, and their overall integration into the wider university community, is through programing tailored

to their needs. Summer bridge programs, first-year experience programming, and tailored student cohorts have all been linked to long term student success, especially when they involve mandatory meetings rather than opt-in programming, trusting relationships with program staff, and social and academic programming and validation (Kezar and Kitchen 2019, Bassett 2021). These programs act as 'cultural guides' by explicitly and systematically teaching students how to seek help. This targeted support strengthens students' academic, career, and major-related self-efficacy, while also fostering a greater sense of belonging and persistence through college. Additionally, these programs improve students' understanding of university systems and structures and encourage more effective use of campus-based resources (Kezar and Kitchen 2019, Bassett 2021, Richards 2020).

As outlined, students who experience cultural mismatch and feel less integrated into their institutions are often less likely to engage in opportunities that promote soft skill development. This tension calls into question how cultural mismatch theory accounts for the development of cultural capital through the mode of soft skills. While the theory emphasizes the challenges students face when institutional norms conflict with their own, it remains unclear whether the structural supports at prestigious universities, such as specialized programming, increased on-campus living, and access to dominant cultural capital, can offset these mismatches. To address these unresolved intersections in current literature, the following study explores how institutional context shapes the development of soft skills among FGLI students, offering new insights into the intersection of cultural alignment and student success.

METHODS

This study investigates the intersection of university prestige, soft skills, and the experiences of FGLI students through 19 qualitative interviews. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol detailing student experiences developing and utilizing soft skills at 4 institutions: Lake University and River University, both prestigious, and Cloud University and Willis University, both non-prestigious. Using U.S. News & World Report rankings to determine prestige, River and Lake University were both ranked within the top 15 universities in the United States and had acceptance rates < 10%. Cloud and Willis University were outside of the top 50 rankings and had acceptance rates of > 70%. All universities were located in the same geographic area surrounding a large American city.

Interviews were 60-75 minutes long and were conducted over Zoom. Because soft skills are subjective and vary within the workplace and by personal experiences, qualitative interviews allowed for flexible interpretation on the interviewee's end. This format allowed participants to share their personal experiences and possible nuances that arose such as contextual and individual factors affecting soft skill accumulation could be explored and probed upon, which could not be done through quantitative methods or surveys.

Prior to interviewing, all participants completed a pre-screening survey to ensure they met the following criteria. Including enrollment at one of the aforementioned universities, all participants were first-generation, low-income students, were enrolled in a 4-year degree program, identified as female and as a person of color, and had at least one prior work experience since matriculation. Interviewees were all domestic and traditional college going students. Specific qualifications for this study were chosen to control for differences in gender,

socioeconomic status, and race. Further, the target population was chosen since women currently outweigh men in higher education and the majority of FGLI students identify as students of color. Specific racial categorization was not required for the purposes of this study as all research sites were Primarily White Institutions (PWI). Students of color at PWIs often exist and operate in similar spaces and juxtapositions to White students. Furthermore, much of the literature discussing FGLI students does not strictly control students from varying racial backgrounds, if at all.

Participants were required to have experience working since matriculating into university, through internships or other employment, as a means of measuring applicability of learned soft skills. Requirements were not exclusive to internship experiences as students from NPUs often have less access to internship opportunities. Because soft skills are transferable and, in theory, can be applied in any field, the specific job context in which they were used did not affect results. Participants were in a non-STEM or business degree program and/or experienced an employment opportunity outside of these fields. All criteria involved self-selection.

Participants were recruited through in-person recruitment, email/mailing lists, flyers, and snowball sampling. Due to initially low recruitment numbers, students at NPUs received $20 in compensation via an e-gift card following the completion of the interview. Interview questions were designed to target the participant's personal understanding of soft skills, how they came to have them, and their overall university experiences that may have contributed to their skills. Responses from students at PUs were measured against students from NPUs following interview transcription and qualitative coding by hand of reemerging themes. All names and identifying information has been deidentified.

FINDINGS

Across university types, students had more similarities in experiences than differences. First, I examine how FGLI students understand SS as a method of assimilating to the privilege and capital held by their non-FGLI, White peers. Second, I analyze how students build SS through general programs and resources offered through their universities and through specialized programs targeted at FGLI students. Finally, major differences between PUs and NPUs are broken down through an analysis of PU students' heighted experiences of cultural disconnection and NPU students' "commuter problem." A breakdown of individual participants, their university, involvement in programming, and racial identity can be found in table 1.

Name	College	Programming	Racial Identity
Lucia	Cloud University	yes, FGLI specific	Hispanic / Latine
Adriana	Cloud University	no	White, Hispanic / Latine
Layla	Cloud University	yes, not-FGLI specific	Middle Eastern
Elena	Cloud University	yes, FGLI specific	Hispanic / Latine
Beatriz	Cloud University	yes, FGLI specific	Hispanic / Latine
Liliana	River University	yes, FGLI specific	Hispanic / Latine
Marisol	River University	yes, FGLI specific	Hispanic / Latine
Rose	River University	yes, FGLI specific	Hispanic / Latine
Mariana	River University	yes, FGLI specific	Hispanic / Latine
Claudia	River University	yes, not FGLI specific	Hispanic / Latine
Nia	Lake University	no	Black / African American
Julia	Lake University	no	Hispanic / Latine
Amara	Lake University	no	Black / African American
Angela	Lake University	no	Hispanic / Latine
Megan	Lake University	no	Black / African American, Hispanic / Latine
Carmen	Lake University	no	White, Hispanic / Latine
Veronica	Willis University	no	Hispanic / Latine
Jennifer	Willis University	yes, not FGLI specific	Hispanic / Latine
Sanya	Willis University	yes, not FGLI specific	South Asian

Table 1

I. How Do First Generation Students Understand Soft Skills?

SS as assimilation to privilege

Before providing participants with a uniform definition of SS, I asked them, "When you hear the term 'soft skills,' what does that mean to you?" Although responses varied, and some respondents knew the definition more clearly than others, everyone at least attempted to provide an answer. Students, even if they were unfamiliar with the dictionary definition, generally described SS as something to do with communicating with, or to, others. Overall, students found SS somewhat difficult to quantify, yet emphasized that the application and development of these skills extend beyond professional settings to foster effective communication, teamwork, and collaboration in various contexts. Respondents' stories and experiences showed that they understood SS as more than simply conversing, but as a way of communicating a palatable version of who they are in certain spaces.

A commonality that surfaced quickly was that students described SS as adjacent to the values of their more privileged peers from White, upper-middle-class backgrounds whose parents were college educated and in opposition to their own communities consisting of people of color from FGLI backgrounds. This opposition manifested in sentiments of detachment between student's descriptions of SS and their lived experiences and identities. In this sense, because SS comes less naturally to my participants, they not only develop SS, but they learn how to interact and behave around White people according to White standards.

For many of my respondents, success means choosing wisely who you are in what spaces because of how others will perceive you. Thus, students expressed this disconnect by altering their identity presentation in White-majority contexts. Through her time at Cloud University

(NPU), Lucia, a Hispanic student, has “learned what identities to bring to the table and what identities not to bring to the table.”

> I’m sometimes the only Latina in the room, so having to process that and understand who I am at that moment and then code switch has definitely been a thing that I feel like has prepared me for the future. I have to balance what I'm bringing to the table depending on that. I'd also say code switching is definitely a soft skill because as a Latina woman you just have to be aware of how to communicate depending on the spaces you're in.

Code switching, coined by Einar Haugen, refers to people’s ability to move between languages and dialects. In many contexts, especially in relation to English speakers in America, this term implies more than simply the language spoken, but the word choices, attitudes, and means of communication used.

Marisol, a Hispanic student from River University (PU), echoes this idea. When asked how she had been exposed to SS before college, her response began with, “a big way had to be through my godmother who is White.” Before listing her high school extracurriculars, her part-time job, or speaking about her courses, Marisol described the influence her godmother had in shaping her perception of how others would receive her identity.

> [My godmother] came from a very affluent background on the east coast, and when my mother immigrated from Mexico, she sort of helped my mother find a job and some sort of stability…I think through her I learned how to communicate with people in a very particular way, that there are certain parts of myself that I need to hide to seem a little bit more palatable to who I'm speaking to.

Marisol continues this sentiment of code switching through detailing her experiences with the rich and well connected students and families at her majority-White, private high school,

> I think a lot of those soft skills that I learned were either from my godmother growing up and later on, going to high school with kids that definitely don't look anything like me or have the same sort of background. I also learned from teachers how to navigate these kinds of spaces that I felt were not really for me. But at the same time, I didn't really feel that different because I had already learned how to navigate such spaces through my

> godmother. I think my mom also encouraged it as a protective measure for my image and how people perceive us and what people want to see.

For Mariana, a Hispanic student, attending River University has not only taught her to interact and assimilate with White people, but to do so with the upper echelon of high society. She tells me,

> This is very, very specific to being in a famous university, but I'm learning how to speak to "high status" people and being in the presence of people with power. I think we're leaning like rich people etiquette. Not that everyone's a rich person, but just knowing etiquette for another sphere of people. Like one of my former advisors is now a VP at a prestigious international bank. So I just learned how to speak to her and interact with people like that.

Mariana's understanding of SS positions those who have them as distinctly different from herself. In her view, SS are a means of learning to communicate with these "high status" individuals. Like with Marisol's godmother, the affluence associated with SS in addition to the Whiteness adds a layer of disconnect between FGLI students and the cultural capital they seek to gain.

Disgruntled feelings about the nature of SS and student's personal identities seeped into discussions across participants about specific SS. Networking, a staple SS, exemplifies this disconnection. Many students expressed a particular discomfort with networking because it felt like they were using others for personal gain, something in opposition to values imparted from their communities, cultures, and families. Participants stated this plainly, such as Rose, a Hispanic student from River University,

> I always felt like networking was meant to be like making connections with people so they can help you in the future. But for me, I had to reinvision networking as trust and connection between people as individuals. It's not necessarily a reciprocal thing where I expect you to do the same, but in the sense where it's coming from a place of genuine care. I think a lot of my soft skills were built off of what it meant for me to be part of my community. We always prioritized community.

Carmen, a White and Hispanic student at Lake University (PU) concurred, “I feel like there's a part of me that's really against [networking], it feels ingenuine to be making connections with people for the purpose of them being able to help you in some way. It just doesn't feel right to me so I actively avoid it.”

Some participants attempted to reckon with their discomfort through bridging their personal values with traditional networking because they understood the usefulness and necessity of the skill. Layla, a Middle Eastern student from Cloud University admits,

> I still wanna learn how to be able to network while making a genuine connection. I'm sure people get like thousands of LinkedIn messages a day, just trying to meet with them for a coffee chat and make use of their time. I want to not feel like I'm wasting their time. I want to be more assertive in that manner because these people are taking the time out of their day to meet with me. I want to make sure that I'm not just there for a referral for a future position, but I'm also there to learn more about them on a personal level as well.

Despite SS emphasizing interpersonal communication, students expressed that networking felt like an impersonal quid pro quo in which individualistic values and needs took precedence over genuine connections. The unfamiliarity of the values associated with networking pushed students away, potentially reducing opportunities to build networks and develop professional connections.

The clash of values that made networking feel impersonal to students similarly influenced their perception of companies that emphasized SS, often associating those companies with the same individualistic norms. Traditional white collar jobs, in which employers value traditional SS, not only have historically catered to White, upper-middle-class, continuing generation graduates but also push for, institutionalize, and uphold the values of those groups. This is evident in my discussion with Rose, a Hispanic student from River University, about campus employer partners. The values held by such companies sometimes push FGLI students away

from pursuing these otherwise excellent opportunities. Rose admits a discomfort with the jobs her PU pushed students towards pursuing,

> I don't really love those experiences [with university partner companies] that much. The people who tend to work with River University are just like eh… for me, the things that would be really important in an employer are the mission of a company, who they employ, their culture, and things like that. I feel with campus partners like it tends to be more individualized and competitive and capitalist. And some people are like, "yes, I want that job!" Personally, I don't want that job. I don't want to be part of that environment and that's like…it's hard to explain sometimes, especially as a student of color where people think you should take what's offered if it's a good opportunity.

For students who expressed a desire to work with underrepresented, marginalized, or otherwise non-business spheres and communities, traditional SS did not aid their resume. They felt their current repertoire of SS left them unprepared to navigate their current and future workplaces and provide for the needs of communities they wished to serve. This emerging conflict between a desire for authenticity and connection against the superficial reality of SS created a knowledge gap in practical skills when not interacting with White, middle class, continuing generation stakeholders. While some SS were transferable in these spaces, the skills and non-dominant cultural capital sought out by these employers, like empathy and community connection, were not prioritized in higher education spaces. Claudia, a Hispanic student at River University, says that "in theory, yes, I'm prepared to work with these [marginalized] communities." But she acknowledges that while employers will value that she is able to work in teams, they also value "being able to make genuine connections with people in community and neighborhoods. I definitely need to gain that on the ground experience."

Marisol voiced similar sentiments about her summer internship as a research assistant introducing middle school students of color to STEM, social emotional learning, and creative explorations. When asked if her experiences in college helped prepare her to work in the professional environment of her lab, she replied "surprisingly, no."

> They [the lab] didn't care for the whole professional demeanor. That wasn't what they were going for. When I applied my bosses were like, “you typically don't fit what we look for because you are coming from a [university] background that is very privileged…what are you gonna bring to the table if your background has to do with the more traditional professionals?” I think that's why it's really interesting that the skills that you would assume you would need for a workplace did not, and would not have helped me in this particular scenario because of the ways that they weren't looking for that. They don't care. They care about, are you relatable? Are you going to interact with students ethically in a way that you're not harming them in the future? I think the only soft skills that I really needed to lock in for was problem solving …but I never did that alone. I think that's part of the reason why a lot of the soft skills that I thought I would need didn't really work in that setting.

Marisol’s experiences in the workplace validate the inclinations of other participants. Not only did her lab value community and empathy, but they actively scrutinized her isolated and centered experiences with the “the more traditional professionals” coming from her schooling experience. Even her utilization of problem solving was less contingent on her personal mastery. Rather the support from her team helped bolster skills that traditional professionals might typically employ alone.

How students understood the concept of SS reveals a complex interplay of identity, privilege, and institutional expectations. While SS are generally defined as interpersonal abilities necessary for effective communication, their application and perception among students from marginalized backgrounds are layered. Respondents highlighted that SS are often aligned with the values and norms of more privileged, typically White, upper-middle-class peers whose parents are college-educated. For students from FGLI backgrounds and communities of color, this alignment creates a sense of disconnection and the need to navigate or even mask their identities to fit into these White-dominated spaces.

Many respondents expressed that while SS are crucial for professional success, they also embody a set of cultural values and behavioral expectations that do not naturally align with their

own lived experiences and identities. This discord is especially evident in their discomfort with networking, which they perceive as impersonal and contrary to the community-oriented values handed down from their cultures and families. Further, conversations revealed traditional definitions and applications of SS can leave students unprepared for nonbusiness or community-oriented roles. These roles often prioritize empathy, relatability, and ethical interactions over the conventional professional demeanor emphasized in higher education.

This theme continues into the discussion of how students build these skills. SS are traditionally not taught in the classroom, rather they lay within the hidden curriculum of institutions of higher education. Through classroom discussions, social interactions, campus involvement, and engagement with academics and advisors, students are expected to develop these crucial skills through latent exposure. However, this internal opposition between personal values and those of their universities make soft skill acquisition less intuitive for FGLI students than for their non FGLI peers.

II. How Do First Generation Students Build Soft Skills?

Integration into campus life and community is crucial for SS development. If soft skills have to do with communicating and interpersonal interactions, how can students possibly build them if they have no positive relationships on campus? Self advocacy, a highly mentioned SS, is pivotal for students without pre-established connections. Unfortunately, without a foundation of self advocacy students fail to take the required leap into new environments. The students that succeeded most in developing their soft skills and integrating into campus received extra help through FGLI specific programming and allies across the university.

General programming.

The typical college campus in the United States has much to offer outside of classroom education. Things like student services fees, an additional cost tacked onto tuition bills, provide students with access to the supplemental services and benefits that are offered to enrolled college students. Health services, libraries, student organizations, recreation facilities, and career services are all ways in which universities aim to support students and their new lifestyles as independent young adults. They are also ways in which students can build and practice their SS.

When asked about what resources were available on their campuses, students always named something. No one was completely unaware of what their respective colleges had to offer. Financial aid offices, FGLI resource centers, multicultural centers, career centers, student health, and academic advisors were named most often. Unfortunately, although students are paying for these services (or they are included in their financial aid packages), they don't always take full advantage of them or know the full spectrum of what is available. Everyone interviewed spoke about an instance where they, or their peers, struggled to find and/or utilize resources.

For many, their perception of resource accessibility came down to how they first found or interacted with these resources. Students mentioned social media, printed flyers, emails, and word of mouth as useful ways of learning about offerings around campus. The sheer amount of resources often intimidated and overwhelmed students, causing a sort of choice overload, in which students ended up avoiding accessing resources at all. Claudia tells me "Yes, we have a lot of campus resources." But, "It took me a while to find because I feel like they're not in a consolidated place, especially for FGLI students just coming into River University. There are a

lot of generalized resources you can use on campus like, you can go to different websites to find different things. And a lot of that is helpful, yes, but for a FGLI student, it's not helpful."

Claudia was not alone in this feeling. Elena, a Hispanic student at Cloud University, suggested a similar issue for herself.

> I think the problem with me is that I take in the information and then sometimes I procrastinate and then I end up forgetting. Also, while resources are there to me, especially scholarship opportunities and everything, I say I'm gonna do it and I have it in my calendar and then I automatically just forget or I procrastinate towards it.

Julia, a Hispanic student at Lake University, reinforces this as well,

> I'll be honest, I don't utilize them as much as I should. I'm still kind of learning to do that…you kind of have to reach out to things. You have to find the people that have the same interests as you and you have to find the offices that tend to like support things that you like or things that you are, and it's, it's hard.

Across universities, students repeatedly emphasized the struggle they faced when trying to make sense of the new abundance of opportunities and assistance made available to them. Although they knew there were resources, making use and making sense of them was less intuitive than expected. This affected not only direct school resources, but also extracurricular involvement.

Amara, a Black student at Lake University, struggled to engage with extracurricular activities her first year of college due to the sheer amount of offerings. She tells me,

> [the fair advertising different campus clubs] is very overstimulating and just a lot. There are a lot of clubs at our school, but having them all for one day just be on the quad…like there was definitely a lot that piqued my interest, but I don't think like any of the clubs that I'm part of I joined through the fair itself. I got involved because my friends were in it and convinced me to join. Or for one, I was in class and they came and they advertised and I became interested and joined. But I don't think I found any through the clubs fair, which is kind of crazy because that's like what the fair is for…it just seemed too intense and too much at the same time.

Simply passively displaying university resources helped little, rather, direct connection to resources through explicit advertising or word of mouth worked best.

As the Greeks said, “the gods help those who help themselves.” The message rings true for FGLI students who are faced with information overload. To successfully utilize campus offerings, students needed to lean on themselves and employ the skill of self advocacy. Students who were not overtly motivated to use resources simply did not. Veronica, a Hispanic student at Willis University (NPU), tells me,

> (Veronica): I'm pretty sure we have a type of career center. We have a writing center. I've only heard good things...They advertise it a lot, and I think it's a very successful resource.
>
> **Interviewer**: Have you ever used it?
>
> (Veronica): No.
>
> **Interviewer**: Why don’t you use more resources?
>
> (Veronica): I already have I have everything I need *discusses monetary resources first* and like with the writing center, I always get good enough grades on my essays, I feel like I don't need to go.

Veronica's limited use of resources stemmed not from a lack of awareness, but from her perception that they were unnecessary, as her good grades convinced her that she did not need help from the writing center despite hearing good things about their services.

Similarly, Nia, a Black student at Lake University, attests that resources “are available, but you have to be willing to like to use them.” Self described as proactive, Nia has little issue navigating her college’s vast array of opportunities. However, she does acknowledge the struggle she’s seen her less outgoing peers face,

> During your first year they do a good job of holding your hand; you're forced to meet with advisors and stuff. But like after that, you're kind of on your own and I've seen a lot of my friends struggle. I don't want to say that I'm so accomplished, but the only reason that I've been able to do so many things is because I've put myself out there and I seek out the opportunities. If you aren't willing to do that, then it's gonna be hard because there's so many people here and a quarter is so short. It's easy to just kind of get lost. But for the people that are willing to ask for help and seek out the resources, they're there and very helpful.

The struggle of finding resources plays into a back and forth, where students who fail to navigate resources then fail to use them, repeatedly. This phenomenon was often noticed among proactive students about their peers. Lucia, who works at Cloud Unviveristy's TRIO office, a federal support service designed to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeed in higher education, said this of her classmates,

> Students need to know how to communicate what their needs are. Um, I see that a lot when working with students in general. They are like, "oh I'll figure it out, or I don't need to ask for help," and I'm like, do ask for help, like it will make your life 10 times easier. So it's just the way of how we're raised. Like I also didn't ask for help, but like with the TRIO programs we're like a, "girly we got you" type thing.

Failing to use these resources also reflects a failure to recognize their value in soft skills development. I shared a moment with Veronica, who earlier admitted she did not use her campus's resources, after the formal questions of the interview ended. When I asked her about how her university could better support her developing SS, she originally responded, "I don't see how the school could help us at this point." However, as we wrapped up the interview she asked me about why I was researching this subject. I explained myself a bit and spoke about my personal experience as a FGLI student. This prompted her to say,

> You know what? That answer to the last question you asked me about what the university could do, I wish they would make it more clear what they like expect of us–financially and academically. I feel like because a lot of us don't have the resources, we're not aware that these resources are available. But then, kind of condescendingly, they place the blame on you for not using what they have and then make you deal with your struggles alone because it's too late to use those things.

Veronica had a poor understanding of how SS, and the resources designed to enhance them, could assist her. This was partially because she never accessed and successfully utilized resources in the first place. Students like Veronica have a hard time even conceptualizing what

resources there are and how those resources can help them. Interviewees who access less resources also spoke with less confidence about SS, further demonstrating this connection.

In contrast to students who struggled to use available resources, those who effectively utilized resources for soft skills development had received formal introductions and instruction on their use. This initial guidance often propels students to engage with the wider range of opportunities available. Lucia, a Hispanic student at Cloud University, tells me,

> The career center has these 2 credit courses instead of the full 4 credits that you can take to develop your skills. The assignments are like, make sure that you make a LinkedIn, update your resume and your website and things like that throughout the quarter. It's super cool because often you keep thinking about doing it and you never do it, but you have to do it since it's for a class.

The course aspect of the career center's strategy makes it necessary to do tasks that otherwise seem non-pressing to FGLI students. Their uncomfortableness due to unfamiliarity with the importance of pre-professional tasks is stripped away, showing students face-forward how to navigate new opportunities.

Not surprisingly, it is even better when those formal introductions include details about programming that focuses on the needs of FGLI students. Rose's experience shows how her perspective shifted after an office at her university showed continued emphasis on the services they offered.

> The office for undergraduate research has this one employee who would go to a bunch of our required first year college seminars. I remember them entering these spaces at least 3 different times in 3 different spaces I was in. And they would go just to present about research opportunities. I was never interested in research, but I guess with them coming to these spaces so much I decided to give it a try. They have this one program specifically meant for FGLI students slash students who have never done research before. On top of that, it's for students that are interested in humanities because they know that like research tends to be STEM focused when you think about it and things like that. So I was like, all three components are applicable to me, maybe I should look into this. And I got involved.

Her positive experiences allow her to easily reflect on how this emphasis has shaped her process of navigating resources. She tells me, “I think before my time people would just throw resources at students and then be like, ‘here it is, now you have it, you know, you can't say anything,’ because you're FGLI or you're minoritized.”

Lucia reaffirms this. One of few people to mention study abroad offices as resources, she tells me that at her university the space has specific resources for first-generation students.

> The specific programming for first-gen students is really special because I feel like when they're targeting specific first-gen students or like providing scholarships for them, they understand the fear that maybe we can't pay for it or we haven’t done it before. So they make sure to provide us with more scholarships and things like that. So that's super helpful when applying or like talking to them so that they understand what that identity brings in a thing like studying abroad.

Lucia emphasises the importance of acknowledging the specific challenges that come along with a student’s FGLI identity when navigating opportunities, like traveling outside of the country, that many from FGLI backgrounds do not have the ability to experience before college. Through resources targeted at FGLI students, her university’s study abroad offices understands and acknowledges just that.

Julia recounts a similar situation. Like others, she told me “Yeah, so I don't think most of the resources help me.” However, that attitude dissipated when she described her university's FGLI resource center's approach, which emphasized resource distribution through proactive outreach and instruction.

> ...the FGLI resource office also has great things about the core classes. When they invite professors, it's like the best thing ever. I wish I could’ve had that last year because it's genuinely so so so good just having a professor tell you that they care about you, even if they're not your professor. It makes you realize there are some people like that on campus.

Similarly, FGLI-specific community groups and organizations on campus offered students the focused attention necessary to address their unique challenges. Claudia emphasises a FGLI community group on her campus,

> I think the one other thing I wanted to emphasize is our Questbridge group we have on campus. It's a student organization, so it's led by students, but honestly it's the reason I've been able to find out more about these resources was through them. They have a lot of workshops with a lot of these different offices. They exposed not only me but a lot of incoming freshmen to the campus resources available at River University.

Sometimes these in-group interactions lead students to connect with university-provided specialized programs. Before interactions with other FGLI students, Layla had not strongly considered her campus's FGLI specific resources, as she was not sure she needed them. She recounts,

> I wasn't sure if I wanted to apply [to TRIO] just because I wasn't sure if I needed the help. One of my friends kind of talked about how helpful it was to her, especially since she was having issues with tuition assistance, she just kind of wanted some extra help navigating that since she was working two jobs at the time. She talked about how great it was and how welcoming everyone was, and how it's a great way to meet people on campus. So I decided to apply.

Although she initially resisted seeking help, the praise of TRIO's services by Layla's friend opened her eyes to how the resource could positively benefit her university experience.

While universities offer a wealth of resources intended to support student success, FGLI students often face barriers in accessing and utilizing these opportunities. Information overload, lack of awareness or self-advocacy, and a misunderstanding of how resources could benefit oneself all kept students from getting engaged. These challenges, though significant, are not insurmountable; successfully connecting students to resources requires a proactive approach through formal introductions to programs that emphasize FGLI student needs.

FGLI specialized programs

General resources help students to build SS. However, specialized programming for FGLI students was able to bolster the effectiveness and utilization of resources overall. Although not specifically asked about in my interview guide, many students brought up their experiences in specialized programming as means of accessing campus resources and building connections with staff and students. By specialized programming, I refer to specific university programming occurring over sections of the summer and/or academic year aimed at fostering student communities, increasing knowledge of campus resources, and acclimating students to life as a college student. These programs combine the aforementioned proactive introduction to resources and emphasize FGLI student needs.

These programs take shape in different and unique ways based on the university and its goals, but many are specifically designed to meet the increased needs of students from marginalized backgrounds. Like before with programming that includes an intentional targeting of FGLI students, specialized programming acts as more than a financial resource. Aiming to level the playing field between FGLI students and their continuing generation peers, these programs set exclusive student cohorts up for success outside of their current coursework through exclusive activities, information, and resources.

Of 19 respondents in this study, 11 had participated in specialized programming in some form. Most of these programs were FGLI specific, largely catered to FGLI students, or had aspects otherwise tailored to provide students a boost in collegiate success. Mirroring patterns from how students access general resources, those who got the most from their programs were placed in or explicitly pushed towards the resource by an outside player.

When it comes to accessing resources outside of a student's specific program, students' early engagement and exposure better equip them to seize opportunities presented by the wider university. Rose beams at the help and confidence her summer program presented her,

> Being part of [my program] helped me a lot in finding these resources at River University. Through [the FGLI office] we have winter gear funding, we have grants for if you just wanna loft your bed. Learning about these things has helped me so much…My research program is also for students who identify as FGLI or have never done research before. And then on top of that I did like another program…that was meant for minority students, students of color, FGLI students.

Rose's positive experiences with her program, and her resulting confidence in navigating university resources, stood in stark contrast to the struggles reported by interviewees not involved in programming. She explicitly stated that she would "Absolutely not. Absolutely not" have been as comfortable finding resources during her first year without the program's support.

Liliana, a Hispanic student, had similar positive experiences and benefits from her summer program at River University. She acknowledges the resources on her campus are not promoted well, and that her peers "don't really know about [resources] unless they are told that they are there." But unlike many of her peers, she easily understood and accessed campus resources.

> I was told all this [resources] through students and [the program's] workshops, because that was the whole point—we had different meetings just to talk about the resources that we have on campus. But generally, they are not really known unless you're specifically part of those spaces where people are pushing resources. Like I told someone in their second year about the winter coat grant that was for FGLI and he didn't know about it at all. Like, OK, that's a little concerning you didn't know that this was a part of the school.

Outside of increased knowledge about resources, themes of home and belonging were often expressed in discussions about these FGLI programs. The strong sense of community and allyship were highlighted and deeply valued by students. Liliana tells me that,

> When I arrived on campus for my program, it felt like home. Because of the people there, we have similar experiences and are able to connect in that way…We were always encouraged to try new things and see what fits since we didn't have to worry about whether we're getting good grades or not. I found out about it from a Questbridge student's social media story talking about how [my program] really helped her. I hadn't even thought about joining a summer program but I refreshed the page waiting to apply.

Essentially, the benefits from involvement in specialized programming expanded far beyond a boost in resource utilization. Liliana's transition was so successful that resources felt second nature, revealing shock when others did not know about crucial resources. Rose notes a similar joy in being surrounded by students of similar backgrounds, "[My program] helped me financially because I feel like that's just a fear like period, but also just finding more community with people that are like me. I've learned that the friends I like to love and cherish are people that have similar experiences as me…"

For students less inclined to build connections on their own, participation in FGLI programming created a safe space where students could, with some help from program staff, connect with university personnel and peers. Mariana tells me,

> The only real connection I have is with my cohort advisor from the FGLI resource center, specifically because [of my program]. They pick you, like they literally selected me to do it [the program], when you're admitted, so even before you're a full student here you're already sort of in a group. The point is to have meetings with those advisors to help you communicate with other people in the same cohort. And the goal is that you always have like a friend group throughout the entirety of the 4 years that you're in school. And if you're going into grad school, then they'll also kind of accompany you through grad school. It's not necessarily showing you how to get through grad school, it's just like, "I am here present with you."

This enlarged sense of community proved especially important when students later faced cultural mismatch paired with a difficulty making friends with non-FGLI peers. As Rose explains,

> My first day at the program, and it's a space that's a lot of students of color, a lot of low income students, I was still like, "No, this is so different [from where I'm from], there's so much privilege here." and I already didn't like it. So, I can only imagine what my reaction would have been if my first impression of River University was in a space like

> the majority of the university, which is more wealthy. And I experienced that, I ended up being in a Humanities program my first quarter where it wasn't centered on our identities being minoritized and I realized, "oh, I don't like this cohort." I hated my first quarter classes as well. I can only imagine how lonely I would have been, how deprived of resources I would have been without my program. Especially because they are available here in River University, we have a lot in comparison to some other schools. I would have just had a way worse time.

The programs, therefore, provided not just access to resources but also a crucial sense of belonging and validation, mitigating the cultural shock and potential isolation that FGLI students often experience in predominantly White and upper-middle-class university settings

The sense of community and care fostered by specialized programming not only strengthened peer connections but also proved particularly beneficial in navigating cultural differences between students and staff. When Lucia, who came to Cloud University at the advice of her high school TRIO advisor, began to have imposter syndrome and thoughts of leaving school, it was her campus's TRIO office that helped her retention.

> …so when I started thinking that I should move back home, that I didn't feel like I was gonna be able to do this, I had the TRIO program. They have been a huge resource, communicating with them and telling them that I need support with this or I can't buy these textbooks; they are willing to help me buy the textbooks and the students that verbally go to them, they will help. Our advisor also suggests that if you can't pay, go write a letter to appeal your financial aid and get more money…like you have advocates.

Elena's experiences at the Cloud University's TRIO offices express similar positive experiences.

> I'm in this other program, it's called um TRIO. My high school counselor went to Cloud University and he told me about it. They have resources that help low income students. I've met students who are low income also and I think that kind of helps me alleviate the feelings, those uneasy feelings, about school here that I get sometimes. I don't know, just having them as a backbone sort of, I can feel more comfortable. They were very nice and open and accepting of anyone there. I felt really at home, it felt really warm in there. They give me a lot of advice on things I don't even think about, like where to get my taxes done for free or they encourage me to be more outgoing and to step out of my comfort zone.

Marisol entered programming after transferring schools within her university. Following a push from new advisors and some behind the scenes string pulling, Marisol secured a last minute spot in an academic program housed in her new college. Not only did the program strengthen her FGLI community ties on campus, but she was exposed to an environment that honored and cared for marginalized backgrounds in all aspects of learning, from nontraditional grading aimed at meeting students where they are to cenetring voices that represent the students enrolled. She tells me,

> In my program we took a look at the alternate perspectives that you don't hear from instead of those very westernized, very dominant narratives. And we also read a lot of authors that are part of marginalized communities…and we took a really deep dive into why voices like [ours] matter in what we do. It was just this super cool program that allowed students to feel like they have a space on this campus in the sense that they are seen through the readings and the lectures that we consume. Seeing that kind of representation and having professors that care about you, it was an experience that changed how I thought about college. I hadn't encountered that a lot and I think it definitely altered my perspective on what I believe education to be and what it could look like.

Marisol acknowledges the uniqueness of a space specifically for FGLI, “One of the program’s courses is for people that don't identify as FGLI, and one of them is for people who identify as FGLI. I think that's pretty purposeful in the sense that our professors have an idea that students do struggle to find a space where they feel seen.”

Not everyone involved in programming was in a FGLI specific program. However, students still greatly benefited when programs uplift and emphasis needs that highly pertain to FGLI students. Experiences in university honors programs exemplify this through targeted events, such as FGLI mixers. Layla enjoys that,

> You get to talk to other students who are in the same boat as you. We'll share some advice like, “I heard that this wasn't working for you, this is what I did. Let me know if that works for you.” And I feel like that's how I've actually met some of my close friends on

> campus. I kind of had that connection with them cause they do understand what's going on and they are someone to talk to when other people don't understand.

Other programming often leans on the specific needs of FGLI students, even if not by name. Sanya, a South Asian student at Willis University, participated in an internship matching program that guided students through the basics of research. She tells me,

> There's this thing at Willis University for the psych department that matches you with research opportunities. It's basically an informational meeting about the different types of psychology based research experiences you can get involved in that are currently accepting applicants. From there you just get a major list of like different professors, what kind of research they are doing that you'd like to help out with, whether they're paid or unpaid, etc. And so I feel like in that aspect, they really do understand that some students may not have those like direct faculty connections coming into university, and so you kind of need to still help them understand that there are a lot of open positions. I heavily leaned towards seeing what the matchmaker offered because it would just let me know that this is what's being provided actively.

Similar to Sanya's experience, Claudia benefited from a program that combined internship experience with a related academic course, which helped her develop pre-professional skills. The course offered content specific to her internship, as well as broader knowledge and guidance about employment. As with other successful programs, Claudia learned about it through consistent advertisements and peer recommendations. As she explains,

> When I was looking for internships, the program had a list of partners, and you are able to look through those partners and see what positions they have available for the summer. It was nice to be able to directly leverage the fact that I was in the program to send my information to certain companies, certain organizations… they also had a lot of online resources to help you build your resume, how to best prepare for interviews, and even interview prep with alumni of the program.

The usefulness of specialized FGLI programming also shined through in the responses to my question, "how can your university better support you in developing soft skills?" Students *not* involved in programming described allyship, workshops, and educational programming that hummed a similar tune to the experiences of their peers who *were* involved.

Jennifer, a Hispanic student at Willis University involved in a non-FGLI specific program, wished for more focused support and allyship for FGLI identities. Jennifer wishes that the overall university was,

> …more candid about the fact that not everyone knows everything. Like I said, I didn't know what a syllabus was. I didn't know about how college worked at all. I do remember like my first week at school, I had a discussion section–I can't remember for what class–but the TA asked us, "is anyone here first gen?" And a bunch of people raised their hands and the TA herself was also first gen, and then she was like, "OK, cool," and then moved on.

Although in an honor's program with many exclusive resources, Jennifer longed for additional support that targeted her specific needs and identity as a FGLI student.

Not involved in any programming, Amara, who before struggled with choosing extracurricular activities, expressed a want for more overall institutional guidance early in her academic career. She tells me,

> Just like the school hosts different companies and stuff, they could also host workshops or panels that deal with accumulating soft soft skills or how to like practice and identify soft skills and stuff like that…I also think doing it in our first year. If they were to make something where students had the choice to learn all these things, it would be important.

The desire for programming was clear, but, similar to students' difficulty in understanding the benefits of general resources, those not involved in specialized programming often struggled to envision what additional resources could aid them. Even as they suggested ways their universities could better support their soft skills development, they blamed themselves for their perceived deficiencies. Like Amara, Angela, a Hispanic student at Lake University not involved in programming, suggested required events during a student's first year in school. Yet, as with other students not participating in specialized programs, she blamed herself for failing to access more resources instead of faulting her university for not proactively connecting her to them. Angela answered my question with,

> I don't know, maybe like I guess if they [the university] required us to attend events, like if they forced us to go as a first year. I know we have to meet with our academic advisors each quarter during first year so maybe they also require us to attend networking events or something like that, that could have been helpful. I don't know, I think the lack of understanding or whatever is coming from my part and not from Lake University itself cause they give us opportunities. I just haven't gone yet. So I can't think of a way they could better support.

In conclusion, while general resources play a crucial role in supporting students and fostering connections on campus, specialized programming for FGLI students stands out as a particularly effective strategy for building SS. These specialized programs, designed to address the unique needs of FGLI students, help bridge the gap between them and their continuing generation peers by providing targeted support and fostering a sense of community and belonging.

III. How Does this Differentiate Across Universities of Varying Prestige?

Contrary to what I hypothesized when embarking on this project, there were more similarities than differences across university types. However, the differences in students at PUs and NPUs were distinctive and important. Students at PUs had more access to the crucial aforementioned FGLI specific programming. But they also had a higher level of perceived cultural disconnection, often sidelining relationships with professors in favor of campus service workers. In contrast, students at NPUs faced the “commuter problem” where students felt unfamiliar with their campus and unaware of the resources available due to limited time physically in their collegiate environment.

PUs, likely because of a higher level of funding, had more specific institutional support and funding available for FGLI students. Students from River University alone mentioned over 5 different specialized FGLI programs. Students at both PUs also mentioned a vast array of FGLI

specific funding sources such as grants and internal scholarship opportunities. In comparison, students from both NPUs only mentioned programming within their major's honor's program or through the federal TRIO program. For instance, Lucia, a FGLI student leader at Cloud University tells me,

> Thinking about the money and like the resources they could be using for students, we don't always need t-shirts. Like, give more scholarships, put that money somewhere else. We feel like, to an extent, it's a waste of money when they don't listen to our desires…With TRIO we have like 5 advisors, we try to make it feel like it's home, but we dislike the way our office is set up because we're in the basement thrown somewhere in the corner.

Upon conversations with other students at Cloud, I learned that the TRIO office has a long waitlist of students who want to utilize their resources. Layla has been waiting to access TRIO resources for over 2 years. However, the larger distinction was between who students formed relationships with. In particular, students at PUs told me about specific bonds they had with university personnel who worked in service positions, while students at NPUs did not.

Prestigious: Cultural disconnection is more apparent

Prestigious universities are more populated by continuing generation students that are from White, privileged backgrounds than their non-prestigious counterparts. This difference in student demographics caused FGLI students at PUs to find and connect with members of the university community who looked like them, even if that meant first developing non-traditional relationships with staff in service positions rather than professors.

When asked about relationships with university personnel, several students at PUs mentioned dining hall, janitorial, and front desk staff before mentioning professors or administrators. For instance, Rose told me,

> I think the first like real connection I had was with the dining hall workers and cleaning staff. I feel like they would see me and just remind me of home because that's the kind of jobs that some of my [Latino] community tends to work. They even connected with my parents when they came to visit. Beyond that, professors were always hard relationships to build.

Julia says similarly,

> I actually talk a lot with like the cleaning staff here at [my dorm]. I know all of them that were on my floor last year and when I was having a really hard time, it was really nice to like have them around to speak with. Those are people that I think I know best beyond my professors on campus, and when I came back from summer, they were excited to see me again. They were always like a source of like community for me here. Same with the front desk people and dining hall staff. Honestly professors, they're not people I'm closest with, not really.

Even for students who mentioned relationships with professors and student-facing university personnel, their bonds with service workers were important. Megan, a Black and Hispanic student at Lake University, explained,

> …so I did have those favorites I mentioned in my major, but I've also built friendships with the dining hall staff and the front desk people. The dining hall people I'm probably a little closer to cause I talk to them on a daily basis. We always greet each other and check in. With my professors not as much just because they're kind of out the way. They're not really super cool.

Students' juxtaposition of positive relationships with dining and janitorial staff with harder, less accessible relationships with professors emphasises the disconnect they feel between their identities as FGLI students against the general population at their elite universities.

In a similar vein, Carmen admits to me she does not have many "adult type connections." She primarily interacts with the adult supervisors who both live and work in her dormitory as part of her role as a Residential Assistant. She tells me these relationships are, "more relaxed, they're just kind of there to talk to you and get to know you outside of academics. It's more comfortable. With professors, I feel like I'd have to go there with a purpose–like if I have a question or need clarification. The conversations aren't 'real.'" Unable to conceptualize

interactions outside of direct aid, Carmen expresses that professors felt more distant and thus had few meaningful interactions with them outside the classroom.

Although students across university types understood the goal of SS as assimilating to the values of their White and more privileged peers, the demographic difference at PUs forced students to reckon with this disconnect more directly. When in classes and spaces with students from more privileged backgrounds, FGLI students felt less respected due to an inability to easily equip the SS others can express instinctively. Rose tells me a story about feeling dismissed in the classroom because of this. She says,

> It always felt like what was valued [by professors] was this certain student that speaks a certain way, looks a certain way. I would curse in class more and use filler words just because that's the way that I speak. But professors preferred buzzwords and jargon. I would say basically like the same thing as other students but in simple words that weren't, I guess, as articulate, and the professor would just move on without acknowledging me.

Negative experiences, both in and outside of the classroom, such as feeling unheard in class discussions or being dismissed during office hours, contributed to the perceived disconnect and distance FGLI students felt from professors. At PUs, the larger number of affluent students often led to FGLI students' perspectives being overshadowed in favor of more traditionally valued forms of academic expression. These repeated negative interactions made it harder to build relationships between students and professors. Consequently, students sought out relationships with cleaning, dining hall, and other staff, which felt more approachable due to the non-academic, non-judgmental environment and nature of those interactions.

Although students reported a spectrum of interactions, not all professor-student relationships were antagonistic. Meaningful and supportive relationships often blossomed when university personnel took proactive and authentic steps to connect with their students. Similar to the advantages of FGLI specific programming, professors and advisors who made themselves

explicitly available and expressed genuine care and allyship for their marginalized students tended to foster stronger and more beneficial relationships. These faculty members, often themselves people of color or from FGLI backgrounds, were able to empathize with and support students through shared experiences and an understanding of the unique challenges faced by FGLI students. By doing so, they contribute to a more inclusive and supportive academic environment where students feel encouraged to seek resources.

Despite similarities between student experiences at NPUs and PUs, this draw towards relationships with cleaning, dining hall, and other service staffers at their universities was unique to students from PUs. The "high status" aura created an unapproachable distance between students and professors, causing them to lean more heavily on these otherwise untraditional collegiate relationships due to cultural similarities and ease of connection.

Non-prestigious: the "commuter problem"

Students at NPUs struggled to connect and become involved with the wider university community, but for distinctly different reasons than PU peers. At both NPUs, students described the "commuter problem." In efforts to save money, many students at NPUs choose to live at home or otherwise commute to campus rather than live in close proximity or in university provided housing. Not only do commuter students often keep to themselves and remain uninvolved in campus life due to time constraints, but they lack a crucial understanding of resources available to them because of an unfamiliarity with campus.

When Jennifer arrived at Willis University, she lived in the dorms, felt a strong sense of community, and was aware of general campus happenings, much of which has fizzled out as she began to commute to and spend less time on campus. This reduced engagement due to commuter

status is a trend seen with other students as well. Although Elena knows about many resources offered at Cloud University, her commuter status prevents her full utilization. She laments, "there's a bunch of resources that I don't really use that I would really like to, but it's just something it's kind of out of my schedule."

Lucia, a Hispanic student at Cloud and a commuter herself, recognizes this issue amongst her peers,

> There's always gonna be that gap between students that go straight home and students that are leaders on campus. Cloud University is a commuter school, the students just come to campus and then leave after class, which makes it difficult for them to get involved and to know about the opportunities. To an extent, I don't think the school does a well enough job to advertise all the opportunities that the school is doing.

Adriana, a White and Hispanic student, does not dorm at Cloud University; but in opposition to most she remains on campus for a significant portion of the day to maximize her time and money.

> I know so many students who just come to their class and leave and that's it, you know. I don't, I basically spend my whole day here because it's not just about classes. My commute is a bit far and I don't like traffic, so I don't want to leave when that's bad. I also like working out too, so I try to work out on campus whenever I can. I feel more exposed, like the more I'm around here at the school, I get to explore and be like "oh, what's that office, or what is this, what is this room, what do they do?' It sounds cheesy, but I just started looking at poster boards and like flyers and stuff like that, and that's how I started learning what's offered, to be honest.

Despite her commuter status, Adriana is able to access and have an understanding of the resources available to her because she physically interacts with campus more than the average student.

Unfortunately, as Layla confirms, spending extra time on campus is not a possibility for most due to travel time and outside commitments such as employment or family responsibilities. Although she was in Cloud University's honor's program, her hour and a half commute to campus each day made the program "difficult to stay involved in" since "they kind of geared it

more towards if you lived on campus. If you were in the dorms, it was easier for you to attend the events, especially since they were pretty late at night…there wasn't really a lot of like segue for me to be involved."

In essence, commuter status presents a significant impediment to FGLI students' full participation in the university community and their ability to access and utilize available resources. This, coupled with access to fewer FGLI specific specialized programs, limits students' awareness of opportunities and their ability to integrate into the social and extracurricular fabric of the institution.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Prior literature identifies a disparity between the idealized vision of higher education as a great equalizer and the reality of first-generation, low-income students' lived experiences. While the growing presence of students from marginalized backgrounds at prestigious universities is a positive trend, these institutions frequently struggle to adapt their cultural norms and practices to effectively support these students, who encounter difficulties navigating dominant cultural capital that clashes with their own cultural backgrounds. The disadvantage for students without pre-existing cultural capital is particularly evident in the acquisition and application of soft skills, which are crucial for career success but often less accessible because they are embedded in the "hidden curriculum" of higher education.

This study aimed to investigate how first-generation, low-income (FGLI) students understand and build soft skills and whether prestigious universities provide an edge over non-prestigious universities. Findings from this research underscore the significant challenges FGLI students face in navigating university environments, both prestigious and non-prestigious,

in their efforts to develop soft skills (SS). These challenges are rooted in the framing and application of SS, which often align with the values and norms of more privileged, White, upper-middle-class peers, creating a sense of disconnection for FGLI students of color. The concept of SS, as understood by FGLI students, reveals a complex interplay of identity, privilege, and institutional expectations. Respondents highlighted that SS often require them to choose aspects of, or even mask, their identities to fit into White-dominated spaces, leading to discomfort with individualistic practices like networking, which clashed with their community-oriented cultural values. This discord accentuates the need for universities to broaden their definition of SS to encompass values and practices that align with the diverse backgrounds and aspirations of their student body.

Although both beneficial in the development of SS, I found that specialized programming for FGLI students, rather than generalized programming available to all, is particularly effective in building community and belonging, alleviating isolation, and empowering students to navigate and utilize campus resources. The experiences shared by my respondents highlight the multifaceted benefits of specialized programs. From increased awareness and utilization of campus resources to the development of confidence and lasting relationships with university personnel and peers, specialized programming empowers students to navigate the complexities of university life. The programs offer a safe and supportive environment where students can explore opportunities, connect with others who share similar backgrounds, and access essential resources that may otherwise go unnoticed. The sense of home and belonging cultivated within these programs further proves crucial in helping FGLI students overcome cultural mismatches and the challenges of finding community among non-FGLI peers. The comprehensive support provided by specialized programming ultimately sets students up for success, making it an

indispensable component in their academic and personal growth. By creating spaces that acknowledge and address the unique struggles faced by these students, universities can significantly enhance their overall well-being and academic achievement.

Moreover, though most findings were applicable across university types, significantly distinctive themes also emerged. At prestigious universities (PUs), FGLI students faced higher levels of cultural mismatch between themselves and the wider university community. This causes students to seek relationships with university personnel from similar backgrounds as them, such as dining and janitorial staff, instead of with “distant” professors who failed to acknowledge them or their FGLI identities. Heightened distinctions between FGLI students and their non-FGLI peers contributed to negative perceptions of professors and feelings of isolation. At non-prestigious universities (NPUs), students faced the "commuter problem," where they struggled to engage with university life and were often unaware of campus resources due to limited time spent on campus. This unfamiliarity, coupled with fewer FGLI specific university programs, further impaired NPU students’ SS development and utilization of university resources.

When considering the final research question, “do PUs provide an edge over NPUs in regard to soft skills despite fewer cultural connections for students on campus?” the answer is extremely nuanced. However, through the understanding that specialized FGLI programming is most effective in connecting FGLI students to community, resources, and instilling self-advocacy in them, the answer leans to yes. Despite, or rather due to, higher levels of cultural disconnections on PU campuses, more specific programming and structural supports exist for FGLI students. This, coupled with an overexposure to White, privileged peers, provides them an

edge over their counterparts at NPUs when building the dominant cultural capital that shapes the understanding of SS.

Overall, this study highlights the critical need for universities to recognize and address the unique struggles faced by FGLI students in university environments in order to create productive environments in which they can develop SS. But more than that, it must be acknowledged that crucial interpersonal skills needed to succeed in many careers exist outside of traditional SS created by and catered to privileged, White, upper-middle-class stakeholders. While universities can create inclusive environments, invest in specialized programming, and encourage the fostering of meaningful relationships for FGLI students, it is only the first step in truly providing a space to prepare them for social mobility in an ever changing and multicultural society.

To build on this research, future studies could employ larger and more diverse samples, including different geographic regions and types of institutions, student gender identity and race, and variance across degree programs to capture a broader range of FGLI experiences. Mixed-method approaches combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the nuanced ways SS are developed and understood as well as institutional offerings. Additionally, longitudinal studies following FGLI students throughout their college years and into their early careers would provide valuable insights into the long-term impact of SS development and specialized programming. Finally, research should also explore the specific mechanisms through which SS foster professional success and how these may vary across different fields of study and career paths.

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