Vassar College

Perceptions of Mattering Among First-Generation College Students at Vassar

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by

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In August 2018, before I officially matriculated at Vassar as an incoming first-year student, I attended the Transitions[1] pre-orientation program "Foundations," a week-long program that Vassar offers to a select group of students: those who are first-generation, low-income, and/or undocumented. My very first week on this campus was an incredible experience for more reasons than I have room to articulate in this introduction, but the most memorable aspect was the program's emphasis on belonging. Student leaders, administrators, and faculty— even the back of the shirt I was gifted at the end of the week— told me repeatedly "You Belong Here."

Little did I know that sense of belonging would be a concept I returned to time and time again over the next four years at Vassar. The spring semester of my first year, I found myself sitting in a course titled "Accessing the Ivory Tower," where we learned about the history of higher education, including when different groups of people began to gain access to this so-called 'ivory tower,' as well as the contemporary experiences of various groups of students, including first-generation college students like myself. The works of scholars like Terrel Strayhorn, Anthony Jack, Jennine Capó Crucet, and even Vassar's own Transitions Research Team[2] led by Professor Rueda resonated with me— they emphasized the importance of institutions focusing on more than just college access and doing the necessary work to ensure that students feel like they belong once they're in college.

At the beginning of my sophomore year, I joined that very same research team, and for the next three years, I interviewed dozens of Vassar students who were first-generation and/or

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[1] The Transitions Program at Vassar is an institutionaly-supported program designed to serve students who are first-generation, low-income, and/or undocumented throughout their four years at Vassar. Read more here: https://offices.vassar.edu/transitions/

[2] The Transitions Research Team is a group of students who, under the guidance of Professor Rueda, Associate Professor of Sociology at Vassar, study the experiences of low-income and first-generation students here at Vassar, with the goal of identifying ways to help this student demographic succeed and thrive throughout their undergraduate career. Read more here: https://pages.vassar.edu/transitionsresearch/transitions-research/

low-income. While listening to and analyzing the experiences of these students, I found myself drawn to this same concept of belonging, trying to identify the ways that Vassar and the people here had promoted and/or inhibited a sense of belonging among these students as well as the ways they were active in fostering their own sense of belonging.

When it came time to choose a topic for my senior thesis, I knew I wanted in some way to continue the kind of research I was already doing. I loved getting to hear from students with whom I often shared similar experiences, and the same importance I placed on belonging during my first year had stuck with me into my senior year. I knew both first-hand and through my interviews how important it was for students to feel connected to their college community. However, I also knew how critical it was for students to feel cared for, to feel important, and to feel valued by their school and the people in it. In my early literature reviews, I was searching for something that went beyond belonging, and this was when I came across the concept of mattering.

The idea of mattering spoke so clearly to me. Like many students, I have not found my time at Vassar to be particularly easy. And during these more difficult times, especially when I found myself struggling with my mental health, it was experiences of mattering that helped me through it. There were times when I felt replaceable, like there was nothing remarkable about me, but my mentors at Vassar and beyond took the time to speak with me about the value they saw in my work. Other times I felt insignificant, like it would make no difference to anyone if I remained at this school or dropped out, but then I was reminded of all the ways I had contributed to communities at Vassar. And there were also times I felt particularly lonely, but my friends went out of their way to show that they cared for me.

Given how critical mattering was to my own success at Vassar, I found the lack of emphasis on mattering within the literature on higher education and the policies that guide many college programs alarming. It's clear that if students don't feel as though they matter at their school, their experiences and the benefits they reap from their education will be limited. Students have the resiliency to survive and graduate without feelings of mattering, but not without incredible, unnecessary struggle. And I chose the phrase 'unnecessary struggle,' because I believe there are ways that schools can instill feelings of mattering in their students to promote their well-being and success. Interviewing students about how Vassar has (or has not) done this and asking how we can do better is what I wanted to contribute to the literature. The specific questions that guided my research were:

1) How do first-generation college students define mattering? And how do they understand mattering in relation to belonging?
2) Do first-generation college students at Vassar feel like they matter? And how have these feelings fluctuated throughout their time at Vassar?
3) What makes first-generation college students at Vassar feel like they matter?

Chapter Overview

Chapter 2 is a review of the literature relevant to my thesis topic. It starts off by situating the experiences of first-generation college students at Vassar within the larger trends for this demographic on a national scale and explaining why the study of first-generation college students is important. The chapter then provides an overview of mattering, including its definitions, characteristics, and various types. It also explains the impacts this concept on the general population, college students, and specifically marginalized students. The same process is then followed for belonging, a concept that is highly related to mattering. The current

understandings of the differences and relationships between belonging and mattering held by social psychologists and scholars of higher education are also discussed. After explaining why feelings of mattering are particularly important for first-generation college students, this chapter explains Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth and how I will be applying it to feelings of mattering among first-generation college students. The chapter concludes by highlighting the limited research on the positive effects of various forms of cultural capital on minoritized college students before explaining the reasons why I use this as a framework.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of my methodology. This chapter walks the reader through the various stages of my research process, including the considerations that went into my research design and choosing a specific population of students to study. Chapter 3 also explains my recruitment process and highlights the demographic information of my participants as well as the several iterations my interview design and schedule went through. How I utilized MAXQDA software to perform my data analysis is also included in this chapter. Chapter 3 concludes with the limitations of this study and my positionality statement.

Chapters 4 and 5 are dedicated to my findings. Chapter 4 answers the first of my research questions: How do first-generation college students define mattering? The first section of the chapter highlights the factors of mattering that were most salient to the students I interviewed. These factors are examined in relation to existing definitions and prior studies of mattering in college students, identifying where my findings fit within the existing literature, where they challenged it, and where new ideas came about. The second section of chapter 4 examines student feelings of mattering in relation to belonging. Student answers are compared and contrasted to existing theories regarding the differences and relationships between mattering and

belonging, and where students offer potential new insights into these questions is highlighted at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to two of my research questions: Do first-generation college students at Vassar feel like they matter? And What makes first-generation college students at Vassar feel like they matter? The chapter is divided into the three section. It begins with differentiating between the two main types of mattering that came up for students: interpersonal and institutional, and highlight whether or not the students I interviewed feel like they matter institutionally and interpersonally. The second section explores the causes of mattering among first-generation college students. It first focuses on the ways students activated various forms of cultural capital to instill their own feelings of mattering. This section then highlights the ways that the people around first-generation college students adopted deficit or asset-based approaches in a way that hindered or promoted feelings of mattering, respectively. Chapter 5 ends with a commentary on the transactional nature of mattering and highlights a form of mattering that came up with very rarely in my interviews but has great potential in instilling stronger feelings of mattering in all college students: unconditional mattering.

Chapter 6 is the final chapter of my thesis. It begins with suggestions on how Vassar can better instill feelings of mattering among college students, featuring suggestions that came directly from the students I interviewed as well as from my own suggestions born of the analysis of the interviews overall. The chapter also provides recommendations that scholars can use to guide future research, based on the questions that came up but I was ultimately not able to answer. This chapter ends with my closing remarks, highlighting the key messages I hope readers take away from my thesis.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

First-Generation College Students

General overview of first-generation college students. Over the last few decades, more and more students have become the first in their families, or among the first generation of their families, to enter college. In 1992, 28% of 12th graders were first-generation college students, and by 2016, 56% of students in undergraduate colleges and universities identified as 'first-generation' (RTI International 2019). First-generation college status is commonly granted to "postsecondary students whose parents did not complete college degrees" (Beattie 2018:171). For the purpose of this thesis, a first-generation college student will be defined as a student whose parent(s) did not complete a baccalaureate degree in the United States. Given the rise in first-generation college student enrollments, there has been an increase in attention to this demographic in the fields of education, and more recently, sociology. The focus of studies on this student demographic within the literature has been on how their identities as first-generation college students intersect with other dimensions of inequality, how these identities lead to unique experiences before and during college, and how these experiences differ from those of their continuing-generation peers.

First-generation status often intersects with other identities. For example, first-generation college students are more likely to come from households with lower incomes than their continuing-generation peers. According to the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, the median family income in 2015 for first-generation college students was $37,565, while the median family income for continuing-generation students was $99, 635 (Pappano 2015). Those who fall within this joint category – first-generation and low-income students – are more likely to be older, to be female, to be students of

color, to have a disability, to be non-native English speakers, to have been born outside of the U.S., to have dependent children, to have earned a high school equivalency diploma, and to be financially independent from their parents (Rine 2015).

In addition to having difference backgrounds than their continuing-generation peers, first-generation students are also more likely to have different pre-college academic experiences. First-generation college students are more likely to have attended public rural or urban high schools, rather than the private schools or better-funded suburban schools more frequently attended by continuing-generation students (Warburton et al. 2001). First-generation college students are also less likely than continuing-generation students to complete advanced mathematics courses and other activities that predict college attendance (Horn and Nuñez 2000). High school experiences combined with demographic characteristics create a unique set of circumstances that lead first-generation students to enroll in college in lower rates than continuing-generation students (Cataldi et al. 2018).

For first-generation students who do enroll in colleges and universities, they are more likely than continuing-generation students to delay entry into postsecondary education after high school, attend schools that are closer to home, and attend or begin their education at two-year and for-profit higher education institutions (Engle 2008). While in school, this demographic of students are more likely to live off-campus, attend school part-time, and work full-time while enrolled (Engle 2008). In college, this student demographic is less likely to engage in study groups, interact with faculty, participate in extracurricular activities, develop relationships with peers, and utilize support services, all of which are activities that are associated with successful completion of college (Engle 2008). These factors contribute to the fact that low-income first-generation students are significantly more likely to leave school (26%) than students who are

neither low-income nor first-generation students (7%) (Engle 2008). Data from the 2003-2004 school year indicates that 11% of first-generation, low-income students had earned their bachelor's degree compared to 55% of students who were neither first-generation nor low-income (Engle 2008). These demographic and college-attending characteristics have been proven to be 'risk factors' that decrease the likelihood of degree completion for first-generation students (Cataldi et al. 2018; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin 1998). Compared to their peers, graduates who are first-generation and low-income are also less likely to report being satisfied with their college experience (Balz & Esten 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005).

First-generation college students at small, elite schools. Although first-generation college students may be more likely to attend two-year and for-profit institutions, that experience is not universal among this demographic (Engle 2008). In fact, compared to larger public and private universities, small to mid-sized private higher education institutions actually enroll a higher proportion of first-generation students (Rine 2015). Although the experiences of first-generation college students enrolled in small, private colleges may not be representative of the entire demographic, their experiences are still significant. Rine's (2015) research into how different types of schools support first-generation and low-income students demonstrated the many benefits that small to mid-sized schools offer this population of students. Compared to their counterparts at larger institutions, first-generation and low-income students at small to mid-sized schools are less likely to graduate with student loan debt, more likely to engage in high impact educational practices and experience high-quality interactions with faculty, and more likely to participate in extracurricular activities (Rine 2015). For all of these reasons and more, first-generation students at these institutions are more likely to graduate and express a higher

level of satisfaction with their education (Rine 2015). These benefits, however, do not erase the struggles faced by first-generation college students at elite institutions.

It is clear from the research that highlights the experiences of first-generation college students that just because they are gaining access to elite institutions in larger numbers, this doesn't mean they automatically feel included and are able to thrive at these institutions (Jack 2014, 2016, 2019). Many of the key struggles encountered by first-generation students extend from their lack of generational knowledge and the cultural mismatch between their backgrounds and elite, higher educational institutions. Continuing-generation students can often rely on their parents to learn how to successfully navigate higher-education institutions, while first-generation college students often do not have the same extensive college-education networks (Pascarella et al. 2004). Collier and Morgan (2008) demonstrated the disparities between faculty expectations and students' understandings of those expectations, which can lead to academic stress and poor performance. Phillips et al. (2020) highlighted the cultural mismatch that exists between higher educational institutions that prioritize independence and the interdependent cultural norms many first-generation college students grew up with and linked it to a lowered GPA, subjective sense of fit, and subjective social status. Additionally, because often first-generation students are also students of color, the cultural mismatch, sense of isolation, and awareness of discrimination may be even higher for students who fall within both of those identities. Museus & Maramba (2011) demonstrated the lower levels of sense of belonging among students of color compared to White students at similar institutions. Access to elite spaces does not guarantee inclusion for first-generation college students.

First-generation students at Vassar. The student population at the center of this thesis project, first-generation college students at Vassar, fall within this second, smaller demographic

of first-generation scholars. Studying this student demographic is important not because they have lower graduation rates than their continuing-generation peers, but rather because their backgrounds lead to unique experiences on a campus where they make up a fraction of the student population; for example, in the class of 2024, 13.5% of students are first-generation (Vassar College 2021). The study of this demographic at Vassar is not a new phenomenon, and research has already demonstrated the need for such a focus. During the spring 2017 semester, the Transitions Research team interviewed over forty Vassar students who identified as first-generation and/or low income and compiled the findings into a report (Rueda et al. 2017). They found that these students relied strongly on institutional resources while simultaneously being discouraged from accessing such resources due to "invalidating, stressful, confusing, and often unhelpful" experiences (Rueda et al. 2017: 13). Students also expressed difficulties establishing supportive connections with faculty and peers, exacerbated by the fact that they often lacked familial or home-based networks that could provide them with logistical advice on how to navigate college. The report emphasized a need for an ethic of care across the college, both in reaction to the lasting impressions that negative interactions had left on students, as well as the powerful impact that faculty and administrators had had on other students when they were able to connect with them beyond the surface level and made it clear that they cared about the students. While first-generation students at Vassar may not be dropping out of college at higher rates or struggling more academically than continuing-generation students, they still experience challenges associated with social, administrative, and financial aspects of college life, and ensuring that students feel cared for, that they belong, and that they matter are all key to promoting their success.

Mattering, Belonging, and Why They Are Important

Definition and characteristics of mattering. The concept of mattering has been a focus of study within the field of higher education for over thirty years, but our understanding of it is limited. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) were some of the first scholars to define mattering. Their research identified a relationship between parental mattering (the idea that one matters to their parents), self-esteem, and other mental health indicators. They also outlined four main components of mattering: 1) attention, or being noticed in positive ways or commanding interest; 2) importance, or feeling cared about or the object of someone else's concern; 3) ego-extension, or "the feeling that other people will be proud of our accomplishments or saddened by our failures"; and 4) dependence, or feeling needed by others (Rosenburg and McCullough 1981:164). Schlossberg (1989) was one of the first to apply Rosenburg and McCullough's concept of mattering to the study of college student experiences. Her work highlighted the relationship between mattering—and its counterpart, marginalization—and lower levels of academic stress and higher rates of college drop-out, respectively, but also expanded Rosenburg and McCullough's definition of mattering to include a fourth component: appreciation (Schlossberg 1989).

Prilleltensky (2020) more recently outlined mattering to include two complementary psychological experiences: feeling valued and adding value, which can also be understood as receiving from others and providing for others. Also important to note are key characteristics of mattering. Mattering has been argued to be a motive, the desire to matter is sufficient to drive human behavior (Rosenburg 1981). Additionally, it has been suggested that mattering is malleable and dependent on how individuals make meaning of their interactions with others, rather than a global stable trait (Marshall & Lambert 2006). Mattering is not only changes with context, but also has the ability to change over time. For example, scholars have already noted a

decline in feelings of mattering among college students during the Covid-19 pandemic (Ning et al. 2021).

Types of mattering. In their original conceptualization of mattering, Rosenburg and McCullough (1981) outlined various forms of mattering. They described interpersonal mattering as relating to mattering to specific individuals, while societal mattering is related to society as a whole. In addition to general societal mattering, scholars have also defined a specific form of societal mattering: "university mattering," in which a students experience a sense of mattering to their university itself (Cheat & Li 2020: 176). Important to note about these different types of mattering is that they can operate independently, and the existence of one type of mattering does not imply the existence of another (Kashak 2011).

Impacts of mattering. The concept of mattering has largely been studied within the field of psychology, specifically to evaluate the relationship between mattering and relationships, self-esteem, loneliness, and depression (Elliot et al. 2011; Marshall 2001; McComb et al. 2020). Specific findings include that mattering to parents and friends had a positive effect on the psychological well-being of children; low levels of perceived mattering have been correlated with depression, anxiety, worry, and somatic symptoms; and a strong sense of mattering significantly decreases suicidal ideation (Mak and Marshall 2004; Rosenburg & McCullough 1981; Elliott et al. 2011). Looking specifically to the study of college students, Dixon and Kurpius (2008) found, in a study of 455 college students, that higher levels of mattering were associated with less depression and lower levels of stress. Additionally, a study of 246 university students found that reduced levels of mattering were associated with elevated depressive symptoms (Flett 2012).

Measurements of mattering. Research on mattering, compared to other concepts like sense of belonging, is lacking. The dearth of literature on the concept and experiences of mattering in higher education has been attributed to the fact that the instruments designed to measure it are "focused on parental and friend-based relationships rather than on connections within the educational settings" (Tovar et al. 2009). Additionally, Darnell et al. (2020) argue that the a lack of literature focused on mattering for low-income, and first-generation college students, is due to Schlossberg's introduction of the concept of mattering alongside marginalization; since then, mattering has almost solely been viewed alongside marginality rather than as a stand-alone concept. Despite this gap, scales and tools to assess levels and feelings of mattering have been developed, including General Mattering Scales (Marcus 1991; Rosenberg 1981), the Mattering Scales for Adult Students in Post-Secondary Education (Schlossberg 1989), the Mattering to Others Questionnaire (Marshall 2001), a refined version of Marcus's scale (Tovar 2010), and France's (2011) Unified Measure of University Mattering (UMUM-15). These are most often cited in quantitative research, which dominates the study of mattering, rather than qualitative research on mattering which is largely is missing from the conversation about the importance of this concept.

Qualitative research on mattering has largely been limited to dissertations, and two of the most prominent examples are Klug's (2008) study of perceptions of mattering among students at a mid-western public university and Latopolski's (2018) study of feelings of mattering in academic advising settings. Combined, these authors have highlighted the importance of acknowledgment, small communities within a larger campus, feeling valued, and feeling as though you positively impact your community within the concept of mattering.

Definition and characteristics of belonging. Compared to mattering, the idea of sense of belonging is a much more commonly researched subject. This term, introduced to the field by Hurtado and Carter (1997), has been defined by countless scholars and each time captures “an individual’s psychological experiences and their subjective evaluation of the level of integration in a particular context” (Strayhorn 2019: 11). It has been argued that a sense of belonging is a basic human need that is capable of influencing behaviors and perceptions, and that it is context-dependent and shifts over time (Strayhorn 2019; Nunn 2021). When applied specifically to college students, a sense of belonging refers to “ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers" (Strayhorn 2019: 4). One of the key similarities between mattering and belonging lies in their definition, both relate to the idea of being involved in a valued capacity (Hagerty et al. 1992; Dixon 2016). One of the key differences between mattering and belonging, however, is that mattering is rooted in how we relate to other individuals, while belonging refers to how we relate to groups (Dixon 2016).

Impacts of belonging. A lack of sense of belonging leads to suffering, in some cases feelings of social alienation and in others even suicidal thoughts (Baumeister & Leary 1995). On the contrary, achieving a sense of belonging can lead to positive emotions including calmness, joy, and elation and increase one's overall happiness in life (Baumeister & Leary 1995). For college students, a lack of sense of belonging has been shown to lead to diminished academic motivation, impaired development, lower levels of engagement, and poor academic performance (Deci & Ryan 2000; Goodenow 1993). Another key similarity between mattering and beloning is their impact on similar positive outcomes, including greater psychological well-being, reduced

anxiety and depression, improved self-esteem and life satisfaction (Hagerty et al 1996; France & Finney 2009; Rosenberg & McCullough 1981; Dixon & Kurpius, 2008).

Relationship between mattering and belonging. Many different variations of the relationship (or lack thereof) between mattering and belonging have been proposed in the literature on higher education. Scholars have argued that mattering and belonging are two distinct concepts, and continue to explore whether mattering mediates belonging or belonging mediates mattering. For example, Dueñas and Gloria (2020) demonstrated a sense of belonging as a strong predictor of mattering among Latinx students. Others have argued that mattering is one of many aspects of belonging (Strayhorn 2019). This thesis acknowledges that the field does not yet have a full grasp on the relationship between mattering and belonging, or if such a relationship exists. The research for this thesis was conducted with an approach that views mattering and belonging as separate concepts that overlap, and that mattering exerts an influence on belonging, which is in line with the model that Tovar (2013) designed in her study of the persistence of community college students, which was previously theorized by Corbière & Amundson (2007). The interviews conducted for this thesis, however, kept in mind this undetermined relationship and attempted to gain insight into how students understand the concepts and any possible connection between them.

Why mattering is especially important for first-generation college students. The experience of mattering is important for all students not only because it is a basic human need, but also because it can promote better mental health and well-being, as well as academic success. For first-generation students specifically, mattering can take on heightened importance for five reasons. First, mattering has been shown to foster greater well-being, which has implications for first-generation college students who have been reported to have greater levels of mental health

issues, such as depression and stress compared to continuing-generation peers (Stebleton et al. 2014). Second, periods of transition, or entering new, unfamiliar environments can foster feelings of marginality, which is understood to occur when one feels that one does not matter at all. Every transition provides the potential for feelings of marginality to arise (Schlossberg 1989). All college students find themselves in a new environment during their first year of study, but for many first-generation college students, the world of higher education itself is brand new not only to them, but also to their entire families, and so their expectations, understandings, and insight into college life is often vastly different compared to their continuing-generation peers. Third, disparities in levels of mattering and belonging between students of different backgrounds have been documented. For example, Stebleton et al. (2014) argue that first-generation college students have a weaker sense of belonging compared to their continuing-generation peers. And for first-generation students that are also students of color, these disparities may be even more drastic. Scarpa et al. (2021) found differences in feelings of mattering between participants of different races, and Dueñas and Gloria (2017, 2020) demonstrated specifically how feelings of mattering for Latinx college students were limited by unwelcoming environments. Fourth, first-generation college students are often a small minority of students at elite schools like Vassar, which can be an incredibly isolating experience. Lastly, schools like Vassar also have a distinct history and reputation of being a space meant to be occupied by wealthy, White students with college-educated parents. There may be an awareness among first-generation college students, especially among those who are also from low-income backgrounds and/or students of color, that this institution was not established with them in mind, and it may be difficult for students to feel like they matter to or at an institution like this.

Community Cultural Wealth and Mattering

Cultural wealth. An understanding of cultural wealth requires us to start with the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who was the first to introduce the term cultural capital in 1970. According to Bourdieu, there are three types of cultural capital that are taught or transmitted through the process of socialization: objectified capital, or cultural goods, embodied capital, "in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body," and institutionalized capital, which includes formal recognitions of cultural capital such as academic credentials (Bourdieu 1986: 17). In addition to cultural capital, Bourdieu also outlined concepts of economic capital, or the command of economic resources, and social capital, "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu 1986: 21). These concepts of cultural and social capital were applied by Coleman and Hoffer (1987) to schools, families, and communities in order to emphasize the importance of social embeddedness for the success of students.

Yosso (2005) provided a "critical race theory (CRT) challenge to traditional interpretations of cultural capital [such as Bourdieu's]" in her explanation of community cultural wealth , which is an "array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression (p. 69). Yosso (2005) describes several forms of cultural capital that contribute to cultural wealth: social capital, or "networks of people and community resources," navigational capital, or "skills of maneuvering through social institutions", aspirational capital, " the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers," familial capital, or " cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition," linguistic capital, or "intellectual and social skills attained

through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style," and resistance capital, or " knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality," all of which "draw on the knowledges students of color bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom" (77-80, 82).

Yosso's model of community cultural wealth was obviously designed with the experiences of students of color in mind. This thesis posits that this theory may also be particularly relevant for first-generation college student experiences in higher education for three reasons. First, for many first-generation college students, this status is one of many intersecting marginalized identities, and their experiences as a first-gen students cannot be separated from their experiences as a student of color. Second, it is understood among scholars of higher education that one of the main reasons first-generation college students struggle is their lack of institutional knowledge. This lack of knowledge arises from not having parents who completed college and that they often reside outside the dominant culture of higher education institutions that are so often White and middle-class in nature.

Third, the study of first-generation college students so often takes a deficit-based approach, emphasizing their gaps in their knowledge compared to continuing-generation peers, and the many ways in which these students struggle. In this thesis, I pursue an asset-based approach, which lies at the heart of Yosso's model of community cultural wealth, and aim to highlight the skills and knowledge that first-generation college students already possess upon entry to college, as well as the ways in which they actively promote their own success.

Research on Cultural Wealth in College Students

Research on cultural wealth in college students is relatively limited, but there is evidence of a relationship between several forms of cultural wealth and positive academic outcomes.

Gonzalez (2019) studied the role of community cultural wealth in graduate school persistence among minority first-generation college students. This study found that students utilized social, navigational, familial, aspiration, linguistic, and resistance capital to facilitate their own success. Sussman (2020) studied cultural wealth among undergraduate first-generation college students and found positive correlations between resilience capital and academic major satisfaction as well as well-being.

Looking at specific forms of capital, research exists on the benefits students experience from navigational capital, aspirational capital, and social capital. Butler et al. (2020) demonstrated the value of navigational capital in fostering academic success among Latinx community college students. The research on social capital provides more evidence for this potential relationship between mattering and community cultural wealth. Soria and Stebleton (2013) demonstrated the positive impact of social capital on working-class students' sense of belonging and Huerta and Fishman (2014) highlighted the ways that social capital positively influenced a sense of matting among Latino male students.

Stemming from scholars like Yosso who highlight the assets that students of color and first-generation college students bring with them to college, researchers have begun to discuss the harms associated with deficit-based approaches and the value of asset-based approaches. A deficit-based model defines students by their weaknesses rather than their strengths (Collins 1998) and prevents students from feeling valued and respected by the faculty and staff of their college (Hienbach, Fiedler, Mitola, & Pattni 2019). An asset-based model, however, focuses on student's talents and offers a plethora of benefits (Hienbach, Fiedler, Mitola, & Pattni 2019)

The main research question of this thesis remains "What makes first-generation college students feel like they matter?" Within student narratives, this thesis will pinpoint pivotal

moments in which first-generation students' belief that they mattered was affirmed. In addition to highlighting the people and spaces that encouraged these students to feel like they matter, this thesis will explore the potential relationship between cultural wealth and mattering. I argue that students being affirmed of their own cultural wealth can encourage feelings of mattering. Conversely, a heightened sense of a lack of (dominant) cultural capital may lead to feelings of marginality among first-generation students. If feelings of marginality arise due to the perception that students are not valued by the people around them, or the institution they are a part of, being told or shown that they do in fact have value, potentially in the form of cultural wealth as defined by Yosso (2005), may foster feelings of mattering.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Significant considerations when into my decision to conduct qualitative research, specifically in-depth, structured interviews. In the research on mattering, as well as the scholarship on cultural wealth, qualitative research is lacking compared to quantitative research. The relationship I proposed between mattering, cultural wealth, and well-being can likely be studied using both quantitative and qualitative, but I believed I could gain more insight into how these concepts interacted by asking students directly. I was also more comfortable performing qualitative research, as my experience with the Transitions Research Team had allowed me to have conducted 13 in-depth, semi-structured interviews when I began working on my thesis. Lastly, this thesis intentionally takes an asset-based approach, emphasizing the importance and value of the skills and knowledge that first-generation college students already possess at the time of entry into college. Following this paradigm, the experiences and stories of first-generation college students are also incredibly valuable and deserve to be highlighted and celebrated. Also, I knew my findings might result in commentary on how feelings of mattering can be fostered and strengthened among first-generation college students, and I wanted potential suggestions to come directly from first-generation college students themselves in their own words.

Recruitment Criteria

My initial point of interest was understanding how feelings of mattering develop (or don’t) among college students. I wanted to narrow my focus to make the recruitment of participants more direct and to orient myself in a specific section of the literature on higher education. The decision to focus on first-generation college students was both because I wanted to be a member of the population I focused on and because I had already previously engaged

with literature and research on first-generation college students as a member of the Transitions Research Team and in the projects I took on for various Sociology and Education courses at Vassar.

Beyond first-generation students, I also chose to narrow my participants to seniors at Vassar for three main reasons. First, one of the questions I wanted to explore was how feelings of mattering changed over time, and seniors have the spent the most amount of time at Vassar. Second, current seniors at Vassar (for the most part) started college in the Fall of 2018, and had completed at least three semesters of college before the Covid-19 pandemic forced campus to shut down. I anticipated that the pandemic might have had an impact on feelings of mattering, so I wanted to ensure that I was interviewing students who had experienced pre-Covid life at Vassar for at least a full year, which is not the case for most first-years, sophomores, or juniors. Third, I knew I would likely be relying on convenience sampling and most of the students in my own network at Vassar are also seniors.

Recruitment Process

Students were recruited in two ways. The first was via a Facebook Post (See Appendix A) published in "Vassar: the Virtual Version," a private Facebook group with 2,042 members, all of whom needed to provide proof of attending Vassar before being admitted. The page was founded and has remained popular among Vassar students during the Covid-19 pandemic. The post invited students to contact me (via email or Facebook Messenger) or "leave a comment" if they were interested in learning more about my research or in being interviewed. The post informed students of the topic of my thesis and of the eligibility criteria, which required that participants be first-generation college students and current seniors at Vassar College. I defined a first-generation college student as "someone whose parent(s) or guardian(s) has/have not

completed college education in the U.S." Due to the confusion that often surrounds the label 'first-generation' I invited students to reach out if they were unsure about their status. For the two students who asked to participate after reading this Facebook post, a discussion occurred beforehand to ensure they fell into the first-generation category and were a senior, meaning they had an expected graduation date of May 2022 or December 2022. The other method of recruitment was convenience sampling. I contacted students in my peer network whom I had met through Vassar College's Transitions Program, which serves students who are first-generation, low-income, and/or undocumented. I contacted seven students whom I knew to be seniors and first-generation students at Vassar. All of the peers who I approached agreed to be interviewed for my thesis.

Participants

Nine first-generation college seniors at Vassar were interviewed as part of this thesis. At the beginning of each interview, I asked students to describe their ethnic-racial and gender identities. Many scholars have argued that there is a risk of misunderstanding people's identities when they are reduced to specific, often limited categories (Nunn 2021; Johnston-Guerrero 2016). This thesis follows the model used by Lisa Nunn (2021) in research on college students in which she allowed students' self-descriptions of their ethnic-racial identity to stand on their own and extendS this logic to gender identity as well.

Students were invited to share their racial and ethnic backgrounds as well as gender identity and self-identified as the following:

- "Korean American. That's my ethnicity. Race, Asian. Gender, I identify as female."
- "I use she/her pronouns . . . I grew up in Guam . . . Ethnically I'm Filipino. And I'm Asian American."
- "I use she/her pronouns . . . I'm a first-generation Mexican-American."

- “I use he/him/his pronouns . . . ethnicity, I’m Mexican. I’m a male.”
- “I use she/her pronouns, female-identifying student. I identify racially as Black, and ethnically as Colombian. You can say Afro-Latina as well.”
- “My pronouns are she/they . . . I’m the daughter of Mexican immigrants . . . I’m White . . . I identify as queer, both in gender and sexuality.”
- “she/her . . . I do identify as Black, African-American. Fully black: both of my parents are Black.”
- “My pronouns are she/her . . . I think I’ve always thought of my gender identity being inherently tied to my race identity . . . I guess just like Black woman is both.”
- “I am Vietnamese American and I am a cis male.”

Interviewees hailed from majors across the college, with three students in the Natural Sciences, three in the Social Sciences, two Interdisciplinary majors, and one student majoring in both the Arts and Interdisciplinary fields. Although students were not asked about their income status, a few voluntarily chose to disclose this information at some point during their interview. Three students identified themselves as low-income, one student identified themselves as middle class, and one student shared that they had entered Vassar as a low-income student and that had since changed to a more middle-class income. Some students also chose to share details relating to immigration status. Three students mentioned that they were children of immigrants and one student shared that they were an immigrant themselves. At the end of each interview, students were asked to choose the pseudonym that will be used to refer to their experiences throughout the thesis.

Interview Design

The interview schedule was divided into 5 main sections: Introductions (allowing the students to share their various backgrounds and identities), Mattering as a Concept (gaining more insight into how students understood the concepts of mattering and belonging), Personal Experiences with Mattering (inviting students to share their own feelings of mattering - or not), Specific Instances of Mattering (asking students to recall specific instances where they felt the belief that they mattered was affirmed), and Concluding Questions (allowing students to voice whether they thought their first-generation status or other identities impacted their experiences with mattering and giving space for students to voice recommendations on how to increase feelings of mattering within students).

During meetings with my advisor, Professor Rueda, I was able to narrow the focus on my interview schedule to the following questions: 1) How do first-generation college students understand the concept of mattering, 2) Do first-generation college students at Vassar have feelings of mattering? And how have those feelings changed throughout their time at Vassar?, and 3) What has made first-generation students at Vassar feel like they matter? Each of those main questions ended up becoming a section of the interview (Sections 2-4, respectively). The second section of this interview is partially inspired by Lisa Nunn's (2021) work on belonging among college students, in which she asks students directly "What does it mean to belong?" During the fourth section of the interview, students were provided with a definition of mattering, and asked to recall instances throughout their time at Vassar that affirmed their feelings of mattering. This procedure and definition were adapted from Kung's (2006) dissertation on perceptions of mattering at a selected Midwestern public institution, as were the three follow-up questions concerning each instance.

A draft of this interview schedule was shared with my advisor, Professor Rueda, who provided feedback that allowed me to further fine-tune my questions. I also conducted a practice interview with a fellow member of the Transitions Research Team who has experience in interviewing college students about their personal experiences, is also a first-generation college student, and is currently a junior at Vassar College and therefore would not have been eligible to participate in my regular interviews. The practice interview allowed me to gauge what type of responses were elicited by each of the questions, but also check in with them about whether the questions were clear. This 'practice interview' was conducted on Zoom but was not recorded. The interview and following de-brief conversation took about 90 minutes, so I anticipated that the interviews would last about 60 minutes. The final interview schedule (See Appendix B) was edited based on feedback from this practice interview.

Interview Protocol

After students expressed interest in being interviewed, they received an email from me with all the necessary information (See Appendix B). In this email, students were thanked for their participation, asked to return a signed version of the attached consent form (See Appendix C), provided with the Zoom Call Information, and reminded that they could contact me with any questions that might come up for them before we met. After students received the email, they also received a Google Calendar invite with the Zoom Call information because this would make the information easily accessible at the time of the interview. All students returned the consent form digitally before the time of their interview.

I interviewed all the students between January and March 2022. Before starting to record, I made sure to check in with the students about how they were doing and how the semester was going. I went over the consent form with them, reminding them that everything they say said

would be confidential and anonymous. I also informed students that all of the questions I asked were optional and that they could skip any question they did not want to answer. I explained to the students that they could stop the interview or revoke their participation at any point during or after the interview. I reminded students that I would be recording the audio and video information from our Zoom call, and although the video recording would be deleted after the call, they were welcome to turn off their camera if they did not want their faces to be recorded. None of the students opted to turn their cameras off. Lastly, I asked students if they were okay with me taking notes on my computer during the interview; no one expressed discomfort with me taking notes.

Interviews were conducted on Zoom for two main reasons. The first reason was that these interviews were conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic. It could have been possible to meet with Vassar students in person, but to ensure that there was as little risk as possible associated with participating, I chose to do interviews virtually rather than in person. In addition to eliminating the risk of transmission of Covid-19 during the interviews, meeting with students on Zoom made recording more convenient. I did not have to acquire or maintain a recording device, and I only had to wait about five minutes after I finished recording to receive audio and video recordings of the interviews from Zoom. As promised, I deleted the video recordings as soon as they were generated by Zoom software. I then downloaded the audio recordings, renamed the audio files to include the date of the interview and the last name of the participant, and uploaded the audio files to Rev.com for transcription. Following each interview, I wrote a memo was written highlighting the key themes I felt emerged in the interview. Upon completion of this thesis, any documents that contained the identity of students (e.g. audio recordings, interview transcripts, memos, and data exported from MAXQDA) were deleted. Once I received the

transcript from Rev.com and, performed an accuracy check, after which I supplemented the memos with what I felt were important quotes relating to each of the core interview themes. After these additions, the final versions of memos were 5-10 pages in length.

Data Analysis

All interview transcripts were analyzed using MAXQDA, a data analysis software application. During the first round of analysis, analytical codes were designed to organize my data according to sections of my interview schedule and initial areas of interest. These included, but were not limited to, 'Definitions of Mattering,' 'Definitions of Belonging,' 'Positive Mattering Experiences,' 'Negative Mattering Experiences,' 'Changes in Mattering Over Time,' 'Community Cultural Wealth/social capital,' 'Community Cultural Wealth/navigational capital,' 'Suggestions for Vassar,' 'Being First-Gen,' and 'Demographic Information.' Upon analyzing student responses to specific questions across interviews, a secondary set of codes was established to group student responses according to themes that emerged. These codes included but were not limited to 'Interpersonal Mattering,' 'Institutional Mattering,' 'Unconditional Mattering,' 'Transactional Nature of Mattering,' 'Tokenization,' 'Defining Mattering/attention,' and 'Defining Mattering/dependence,' 'Defining Mattering/uniqueness,' and 'Suggestions/professional development,' These themes ultimately became written sections of my thesis. Although an abundant number of quotes from students applied to each of the themes, only a limited number ultimately made it into the final version of my thesis.

Limitations

Due to this study's small sample size, none of the findings that emerged are generalizable to the larger first-generation population at Vassar or beyond. The size of this sample (n = 9) was limited due to time constraints. Given that a Senior Thesis at Vassar College is completed within

a seven month period, it was not feasible to conduct many more interviews than what occurred. A second factor that limits the generalizability of my findings is due to the fact that convenience sampling was used. This was not a random sampling of first-generation college students at Vassar, instead mostly reliant on my personal networks. In terms of demographic limitations, not only were most of the students I interviewed cisgender women, but also I interviewed very few male students. Despite the fact that gender has been found to have an influence on feelings of mattering (e.g. women are often more likely to report higher levels of mattering compared to men), the fact that there are very few cisgender men in my network prevented me from being able to explore this very deeply in my analysis.

Positionality

With any research project, it is important to discuss the researcher's own positionality. I shared an important identity with many of the students I interviewed since I am also a first-generation college student. This status, as well as the personal relationships I shared with many of my interviewees, may have made them more comfortable sharing their feelings, beliefs, and experiences with me. At the same time, my background as a White, lower-middle-class, student puts me in a more privileged position compared to many of the students I interviewed. Although I felt that many of the students were providing unfiltered responses, it is possible that this may have affected what they were comfortable sharing with me. In addition to influencing what students may have shared with me, my position as a first-generation college student and my personal experiences with mattering and marginality at Vassar necessarily informed the way I went about studying this topic. Luker (2008) argues that being objective in the social sciences is impossible because "our assumptions about the social world themselves are socially influenced, but so are our assumptions about the best way to go about investigating the social world" (p. 31).

There were attempts to mitigate any bias that may have gone into my interview protocol so that I was not asking students leading questions, but rather very open-ended questions that allowed students to share what felt most relevant to them and control the narrative. Examining the interview protocols that have been utilized by past researchers and having my interview schedule reviewed by peers and faculty were the main ways I attempted to make my interviews as objective as possible.

CHAPTER 4: DEFINING MATTERING

The central aim of this thesis is to get at what makes first-generation students at Vassar feel like they matter. The first step of this process is to determine how these students understand the concept of 'mattering.' This chapter provides an overview of how the students I interviewed defined mattering and how they described the differences and relationship between mattering and belonging.

HOW DO FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS AT VASSAR DEFINE MATTERING?

Before diving into how these students defined mattering, it is important to note that "mattering is not a uniform concept" (Latopolski 2018: 105). The answers that students provided were specific to them as individuals, but across these subjective answers, common ideas were found. This chapter explores these definitions in relation to those that are prominent in the existing scholarship on the topic. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) identified four key aspects of mattering: attention, importance, ego-extension, and dependence. Schlosberg (1989) then expanded this definition to include appreciation. More recent qualitative studies of mattering students have highlighted factors of mattering that are important to students beyond these long-standing definitions, including feeling acknowledged and valued, the role of smaller communities, and having an impact on your community (Latopolski 2018; Klug 2008). For the most part, student definitions of mattering aligned with existing literature; students expressed the need for attention, ego-extension, dependence, tight-knit communities, as well as feeling important, valued, and cared for. There were, however, a few aspects of student definitions that did not align with the literature. Appreciation was not as paramount to the students I interviewed as it had been for authors in the past, and the idea of feeling and being perceived as unique was important for students despite not being an issue yet raised in the literature.

Perceived Attention: Acknowledgment and Respect

Rosenburg and McCullough (1981) referred to attention as "the most elementary form of mattering . . . the feeling that one commands the interest or notice of another person" (p. 164). Many students indicated that being on the receiving end of attention was important to feel like they mattered. Ruth explained that "To matter essentially is to be paid attention to . . . If someone pays proper attention and detail to who I am and preserves my dignity . . . that is when I know that I matter in a space."

Students alluded to two types of attention that were important to mattering, including acknowledgment and respect. Lilac explained that to her mattering was equivalent to "feeling acknowledged . . . and not feel as though you're being ignored or you feel invisible." She went on to give examples of when/how she feels acknowledged, "for me, that can just be as simple as someone recognizing me and being like 'Oh, hi, How are you?' and then I'm like 'Wow, that person knows my name. They know who I am,' . . . It's just as simple as people recognizing me." This understanding of acknowledgment being important to mattering is not only held by students at Vassar. Latopolski (2018) found that students felt that they mattered to advisors when they were acknowledged by their advisors outside of academic settings, specifically when their advisors greeted them by name. Klug (2008) also found that when students felt that others knew their faces and greeted them "by name and with a smile on campus," this led to feelings of mattering (p. 81). The second aspect of attention that students highlighted was respect, particularly for a student's background and identity. Ruth explained that mattering at Vassar occurred when "Your dignity as a student or identity, or what identities are most salient to you, they're preserved." Maura explained that respect for "the general perspective of a person like me in a space" was an essential prerequisite to mattering. If she felt that the space she was in possessed a culture in which her perspective as a first-generation, low-income woman of color

would be respected and valued, then she would feel acknowledged, and by extension, that she mattered.

Feeling Important and Heard

Rosenburg and McCullough (1981) explained that a critical aspect of mattering is feeling important; to matter is "believe that the other person cares about what we want, think, and do, or is concerned with our fate" (p. 64). The students I interviewed often equated feelings of mattering with feelings of importance, and the way importance was demonstrated was often through feeling "heard."

> "To matter to Vassar is to be heard by . . . [the] administration and the institution." - Mon
>
> "If I feel uncomfortable with anything or just feel like something is wrong, I feel like I should at least be heard" - Martha

Martha continued on to explain that the students who mattered at Vassar were those who held an "important position," like the President of VSA, in which a student's feedback and complaints would be heard directly by those high up within the institution. The emphasis students placed on feeling heard mirrors Rosati et al.'s (2019) findings that student activists feeling ignored and dismissed by their administration resulted in feelings of marginality, the opposite of mattering.

Ego-Extension: Pride and Disappointment

Ego-Extension can be understood as "the feeling that other people will be proud of our accomplishments or saddened by our failures" (Rosenburg & McCullough 1981: 164). Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) identified ego-extension as an important aspect of mattering, as did the students I interviewed. Natalia explained that oftentimes, she was affirmed that she mattered to her advisor, who [always] "wants to congratulate us or celebrate us—, that's so genuine." Natalia's advisor made it clear through her words and actions, such as eagerly

checking in with her students about their ongoing applications for jobs and awards, or asking students to send her their resumes so she can nominate them for awards. Another important example came from Martha, who explained that he felt like he mattered during what were difficult moments, because "I feel like I'm also letting somebody else down . . . for example, my mom would probably be . . . disappointed [or] sad at some of the choices I've made." This example from Martha speaks to Klug's (2008) study of students a public university in the Midwest, in which they reported instances of "tough love" from their advisors made it clear to them that they mattered (p. 63).

Feeling Needed

Rosenburg and McCullough (1981) also identified dependence, or the feeling of being needed, as an important aspect of mattering. Throughout my interviews, it became clear that feeling needed by groups of people facilitated mattering in students. Ruth explained how volunteering as a Student Leader for the Transitions Program instilled in her a sense of dependence: "I had these first-year students that were depending on me and my other team of student leaders that were also depending on me . . . and also the director of transitions who was also depending on me" to achieve a common goal: making the first-year students feel like they belonged. It was ,made clear to Ruth by her co-workers and her supervisor that her involvement was critical to the success of the program. Martha highlighted his involvement on a sports team at Vassar, and he has remained on the team despite the large amounts of time required to practice and the physical toll the sport takes on his body. Martha explained that when he spoke to his coach about potentially leaving, his coach responded: "Oh we really need you on the team. You're experienced, you're a good player. So it's just like, please don't leave. We really need

you." After this exchange, Martha stayed on this team for the fourth year in a row, and his feelings of mattering were bolstered.

Feeling Cared for: Supportive Relationships

Natalia explained that "I think mattering comes with care. If I feel like I matter, that means someone cares for me." She and many other students viewed feeling cared for as a precursor for mattering, a finding consistent with Klug (2008), who found that being on the receiving end of nurturing relationships endorsed students' belief that they matter. The three examples of supportive relationships that came up in interviews were with other peers, faculty, and administrators.

Martha spoke about how her relationships with his peers provided crucial emotional support: "There have been times where I expressed stress or the need to cry and there have been people there for me . . . So I feel like I matter because they are concerned with my fate or at least just my well-being." Juniper spoke about how her feelings of mattering resulted from "forming really deep bonds with my friends and the people in my life." Lilac spoke about how her relationships with both peers and faculty who went out of their way to provide emotional support which made her feel like she mattered:

> It was people, including my peers and also my mentors, taking the time to actually sit down and be like, 'Okay, let's talk about this,' as opposed to just a simple, like, 'I'm sorry you feel that way. I hope it gets better.' So whether that was, you know, fitting in a time between classes where they had time to talk or like scheduling actual office hours, or my friends being available at a specific time, I think just physical availability and also emotional availability of those people was really important to me.

Speaking more directly to the role that faculty play in emotionally supporting students, Natalia highlighted a professor from her first year at Vassar, who during office hours asked her about her life beyond the classroom, allowing Natalia to share disclose the financial stress she was under about not being able to find a summer job: "And then she reached out again with, "Hey did you find a job? Is everything [okay]?" . . . [It made me realize] "Woah you still care

about me. It's been months." Juniper also made clear that professors getting to know her on a personal level made her feel like she mattered. It signaled to her that "Oh, you genuinely care about me as a person." Maura explained that it's "really great when a professor can talk about how a student is outside of their expected goal or assignments. It's like, "How are you doing, student?" Outside of education or anything." This is consistent with Latopolski's (2018) findings which emphasized the importance of faculty taking extra time and effort to get to know students on a more intimate level because it was critical in feeling that they mattered to their professors.

Feeling Valued: Having an Impact

In Latopoloski's (2018) study of mattering within the context of academic advising, students shared that they needed to feel valued in order to feel like they mattered. The Vassar students I interviewed felt similarly. For example, Lilac commented that mattering could look like recognition that she is "someone who takes up space and brings something valuable" to wherever she is. When Lilac felt that her contributions would not be valued, for example in classes that are predominantly White, it was harder to feel like she matters. To truly feel like they mattered, the students I interviewed wanted to have a tangible impact on the spaces or people aroundthem. Similarly, Latopolski (2018) reported that when students were asked to define what mattering is, they often spoke about having a positive impact on an individual or community. Natalia explained that "to matter means that you hold weight and value . . . you take up space . . . And it's valuable that you're here with us . . . We would not be the same collective if X person wasn't here."

The Importance of Identity-Based Connections

Many students shared how feelings of mattering came about when they spent time in groups of people or with individuals with whom they shared important experiences or identities. Latopolski's (2018) interviews with college students revealed the importance of small communities in fostering feelings of mattering, but these students focused on extracurricular activities like Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). Students like Lilac and Martha shared that the Vassar Transitions Program was one such small community that brought about feelings of mattering, but this was largely due to the shared experiences among those in the program rather than a shared interest.

> "[Transitions made] me feel like I matter more because there are people around me that identify the same and . . . relate to certain struggles or obstacles that I have navigating college, and they're able to really connect with that . . . I really have found it very easy to build connections through like certain programs, like the Transition program. That's where most of my friends and really close friends come from" - Lilac

> "[Transitions feels like] a home away from home" - Martha

The importance of connecting to those from similar backgrounds to promote feelings of mattering also came up in interactions students had with individuals, including peers, admin, and faculty.

> "[One of the first times I felt like I mattered here was during a] really, really long conversation with a friend of mine whose family also emigrated here from a young . . . and being the eldest singling . . . and all the things that came with that, the good and the bad . . . And it was the only time in my life where I was like, 'Oh, I'm not alone in these experiences. I'm not alone in these feelings. I'm not alone in the aftermath of these experiences.' And not only do I have someone who fully understands them, I have someone who understands them and also cares about me." - Juniper

> "I feel like I do matter to people who, of course, have the same background because we're all trying to support each other, help each other succeed here at Vassar . . . I can apply it to people like Dean [Name] who is so heavily involved with transitions . . . somebody higher up on the chain [but] that doesn't disconnect him from us . . . I feel like he does care and like we matter to him because he's also POC and just he cares about us" - Martha

> "I did find it in Professor [Name] . . . English not being my first language, and being a first-generation student, and making it up as I go . . . It was just like, whoa, we're like little Mexican girls from California, who have all these... We've spoken about our family and our backgrounds. And it's just like, it feels, and I don't know if this is the right word, but so colloquial, and we slip in Spanish words here and there, because there's no English equivalent. And that was very validating" - Mon

During interactions where students felt safe to talk about themselves and connect on a deeper level with others, their experiences were validated. The ability of others to make students feel simultaneously understood and cared for was critical in fostering a sense of mattering.

Uniqueness and Individuality

In addition to the importance of identity-based connections, a theme that came up in my interviews that was not previously discussed in the literature was the idea of being perceived as a unique individual. Ruth explained that feeling like she matters at Vassar meant that she felt she could "offer something that maybe the other students don't." Ruth's feelings of mattering to Vassar as a whole were minimal because "there's no kind of effort to really value each student's individuality. It was just everyone lumped together . . . I just felt like another student . . . one out of 2,400." Ruth's inability to feel that she brought something unique to Vassar limited her feelings of mattering. Taylor provided an interesting example of the importance of uniqueness, explaining that when he possessed an identity that was different from that of his peers, he actually felt like he mattered more. In his hometown, being a part of the LGBTQ+ community was rare, so he could be "that 'gay person," and offer a unique perspective, but because "here at Vassar a lot of people are gay, that is kind of diminished."

How Do First-Generation Students at Vassar Define Mattering? (Summarized)

The definitions of mattering provided by students reiterated that ego-extension, small communities, receiving attention (specifically acknowledgement and respect), and feeling important, needed, valued, and cared for are significant parts of feeling like one matters. Despite all the ways that student definitions aligned with those of previous authors, student definitions rarely mentioned appreciation, which Schlossberg (1989) argued was a critical aspect of mattering. Student definitions also highlighted two new concepts that may foster mattering

among college students that have yet to appear in the literature: forming identity-based connections and being perceived as and feeling like a unique individual.

HOW DO FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS AT VASSAR UNDERSTAND MATTERING IN RELATION TO BELONGING?

In addition to understanding what aspects are critical to mattering for first-generation college students at Vassar, it is also important to try and understand how they conceptualize the concept and experience of belonging. The research on belonging greatly outweighs the research on mattering, and research that evaluates both of these concepts is even rarer. Because of this, definitions of these concepts and what the relationship is between them are still debated. As was done earlier in this chapter with student definitions of mattering, student perceptions of belonging are explored in relation to the existing literature on the topic.

The similarities between mattering and belonging have often been argued to be rooted in their similar positive outcomes (e.g. greater psychological well-being, reduced anxiety and depression, improved self-esteem and life satisfaction) and defining aspects (i.e. a key aspect of belonging is "valued involvement," while important parts of mattering are feeling valued, needed, and accepted) (Hagerty et al 1996; France & Finney 2009; Rosenberg & McCullough 1981; Dixon & Kurpius, 2008; Hagerty et al. 1992; Dixon 2016). The difference between mattering and belonging, however, is understood to be that mattering deals with our interpretations of other individuals' behaviors toward us, while belonging is more group-oriented (Dixon 2016). In explaining the differences between mattering and belonging, student answers largely mirrored existing literature in that some perceived significant overlap between the two concepts that made it difficult to differentiate between the concepts. Other students explained that the key difference between mattering and belonging was the scale at which they operated;

mattering was more dependent on individual relationships and interpretations whereas belonging occurred in relation to larger groups, or the school as a whole, which again mirrored much of the literature on mattering and belonging.

The relationship between mattering and belonging has been a source of controversy among scholars (Dixon 2016). Some scholars do not view mattering and belonging as separate concepts; Strayhorn (2019) argues that mattering is an aspect of belonging. And even for authors that see mattering and belonging as stand-alone concepts, the relationship between them is not clear. France and Finney (2009) found a correlation between mattering and belonging, but Corbière & Amundson (2007) and Tovar (2013) argue that mattering fosters belonging, while Dueñas and Gloria's (2020) study identified belonging as a predictor of mattering among Latinx college students. Student perceptions of this relationship both mirrored and challenged the field's current understanding of these concepts. Some students state that mattering may be an aspect of belonging or belonging an aspect of mattering and others that mattering and belonging exert an influence on one another have been argued by previous scholars. Not reflected in the literature, however, were two ideas: the first being that mattering and belonging are completely unrelated and that mattering, and the second being that mattering and belonging have a cyclical relationship in which they continuously influence one another.

Definitions of Belonging

Like mattering, belonging, as defined by the individual, can be subjective. Students defined belonging in a plethora of ways, but in many ways definitions of belonging were similar to those they provided for mattering. One major theme that came up when asked to define belonging was the importance of being in a community with individuals with whom you share a

similarity, either based on shared interests or similar backgrounds, the second of which also came up when I asked students about mattering.

For example, Lilac shared that to her, belonging meant having a certain "space or group of people who are able to really identify the same as you" and who you can connect with "on a deeper level in a way that makes you feel like, like you're worthy of being there." Similarly, Mon identified that their sense of belonging arose when they found "a community of peers and people" that she felt "seen by [and] . . . identified with," this included students who shared their identity as a first-generation college student and a child of immigrants, but also students who share the same academic interests. Natalia emphasized that her belonging at least partially came from being a part of team, a group of students with a common goal in mind, specifically House Team[3]. This idea of belonging relating to membership in a group confers with work of previous scholars who see belonging as group-oriented and those who see integration into a community as a critical aspect of belonging (Dixon 2016). As I highlighted earlier, forming connections with people from similar backgrounds was crucial to many students' feelings of mattering. I don't believe these similar answers imply that connection and community are more relevant for belonging than mattering, but that the concepts are incredibly similar and they are difficult to differentiate, which is the focus of the next section.

Differences Between Mattering and Belonging

After students provided their definition of belonging, I asked them what they thought the difference between mattering and belonging was. Students generally fell into one of two categories of thinking: 1) there is such a significant overlap between mattering and belonging

[3] Each dorm at Vassar College has a House Team, which includes various student leaders, House Fellows, who are faculty members that live in the dorms alongside students and host programming, and House Advisors who serve as a liaison between the Office of Residential Life and two of Vassar's dorms

that it prevented them from being able to articulate the difference, or 2) mattering and belonging are similar concepts, but their difference lies in the scale at which they operate. Both of these groups of students mirror much of what has been written on mattering and belonging.

Students often struggled to make a distinction between mattering and belonging.

"I don't know how different it [belonging] is from mattering." (Juniper)

"I don't know . . . that's difficult, Majella. Difficult." (Natalia)

"It is hard to talk about one without talking about the other." (Lilac)

This difficulty in differentiating between belonging and mattering because of the large amount of overlap was not only demonstrated by what students said but also by what they didn't. This point during my interviews was the place where the largest number of students took a pause; these pauses were often so long that several of my interview transcripts just listed the word (Silence) as the transcriber often received files with over a minute of no dialogue because students needed more time to process this question. Students are not alone in struggling with this tension. Past authors have posited that mattering is an aspect of belonging, such as Strayhorn (2019), while others have to view them as entirely separate concepts, including Dueñas and Gloria (2020).

Among the students that were able to articulate a difference between belonging and mattering, many emphasized that mattering operated at a smaller scale than belonging. In the words of Maura, "belonging is more relational to the large-scale, but mattering, I think that depends on . . . people that value me . . . and people that I value on campus." Natalia commented that mattering "is a lot more on the individual level . . . When I go back to my room and I feel good about that interaction [it makes me feel like I matter to that person]." And Martha explained belonging at Vassar, requires "feeling like we're an actual part of the community." Integration into the larger student body was paramount for Martha, as he observed that he, as a

student of Color, hadn't "really made any non-POC friends," which prevented him from feeling he belonged to the Vassar community. These students' interpretation of the difference between mattering and belonging resembles much of the literature on this topic. It is widely understood that perceptions of mattering are based on an individual's interpretation of other individuals' behaviors toward them, while belonging is more group-oriented (Dixon 2016). More specifically, belonging occurs when one feels connected to larger groups of individuals while mattering most often occurs between two people (Dixon 2016).

The Relationship Between Mattering and Belonging

The field of social psychology emphasizes the potential relationship between mattering and belonging but there is not a general consensus on what exactly the relationship between mattering and belonging is. Many of the relationships that have been proposed were reflected in student answers. Students fell into three groups: those that believed mattering and belonging were not mutually exclusive (one could exist without the other), those that believed the presence of either mattering or belonging implied the presence of the other, and those that believed mattering and belonging have a cyclical relationship in which they reinforce one another.

The weakest relationship students outlined between mattering and belonging was one in which they were not co-dependent, which is a relationship that is not very popular in the literature. Because mattering, for some students, operated on an individual level and belonging on a group level, it was possible for someone to feel like they matter but not like they belong and vice versa. Martha explained that he, as a person of Color felt like he mattered at Vassar because it was "clear that Vassar has made an effort to bring in POC students," but he felt a divide between himself and the "non-POC" majority of students, preventing feelings of belonging to Vassar as a whole. Additionally, Natalia explained that "I could belong to LSU [Latinx Student

Union]. I could be a part of LSU . . . [but] I don't have a sense of mattering to LSU." Although Natalia is one of the Latinx students on Vassar's campus and therefore does technically belong to that group (LSU), she did not have relationships with individuals in the group, therefore she did not feel like she mattered in that group.

Other students viewed mattering and belonging as inherently connected. Mon, Juniper, and Lilac argued that feeling like one belongs implied that one matters. To Mon, having a sense of belonging was related to being able to take up space, and the fact that someone has intentionally made space for you to feel like you belong "means that you matter." Juniper reported that "If I feel like I belong I feel like I matter" and Lilac explained that " I feel like if you do feel like you matter in a space, then belonging comes with it." These students saw that belonging came with mattering, possibly implying they believe mattering to be a pre-requisite for belonging, which has been argued by Strayhorn (2012), or that belonging may be a pre-requisite for mattering, an idea that has not yet surfaced among those who study these concepts.

Lastly, several students explained that they believed mattering and belonging influenced one another. Taylor provided a clear description of this: "one feeds into the other. Knowing that you matter leads to a sense of belonging, but then also that having a sense of belonging also leads you to feeling like you matter. So it's kind of like they play off of each other. It's not really a causative relationship." Taylor's model was then emphasized by Lilac and Ruth who shared that "If you feel like you belong somewhere, feeling like you matter is a much easier thing to grasp than if you didn't belong somewhere," and "If I felt like I mattered at Vassar, then I think I would have a greater sense of belonging to this institution," respectively. Students here pointed the impact of mattering on belonging and belonging on mattering. This idea that mattering facilitates belonging is reflected in Tovar's (2013) study of persistence among community

college students, while the idea that belonging facilitates mattering was demonstrated by Dueñas and Gloria's (2020) study of Latinx college students. A model in which mattering and belonging continually influence each other in a cyclical relationship, however, has not been previously put forward.

How Do First-Generation Students at Vassar Understand Mattering in Relation to Belonging? (Summarized)

The students I interviewed were asked to define belonging and explain the differences and relationships between belonging and mattering. The idea that being a member of a community is a critical aspect of belonging was reiterated by students. Students finding difficulty in identifying the differences between mattering and belonging speak to a long-standing debate among scholars, and the explanation from several students that mattering operates on a smaller scale than belonging represents one of the conclusions scholars have come to regarding this debate. In these first two sections, students largely aligned themselves with the authors of previous literature, but the final section on the relationship between mattering and belonging was where the nuance occurred. Students who expressed that mattering and belonging may be related because one may be a part of the other, as well as students who explained that they may be related because one has the ability to influence the other, conformed with current understandings of these questions. Some students, however, introduced new ideas. The first being that mattering and belonging are entirely isolated constructs and operate independently, and the second that mattering and belonging both have a continuous influence on each other.

CONCLUSION

Chapter 4 answered the first of my three research questions: How do first-generation college students at Vassar understand mattering? An exact definition of mattering as well as how

it relates to and interacts with the concept of belonging is a point of contention among social psychologists. This chapter, therefore, was meant to provide space for the student perspective. It provided insights not only for those trying to define these concepts and articulate the relationships between them but also for those that work with college students and wish to promote feelings of mattering and belonging given that they have been associated with so many positive outcomes. Chapter 5 goes beyond these definitions of mattering to differentiate between the types of mattering and identify what has fostered the different types of mattering for first-generation college students at Vassar.

CHAPTER 5: EXPLORING THE CAUSES OF MATTERING

Chapter 4 provided an overview of what aspects of mattering were the most important to first-generation students at Vassar and examined the relationship between mattering and belonging from the student perspective. While Chapter 4 answered my first research question (How do first-generation college students at Vassar understand mattering?), Chapter 5 will answer my two other research questions (Do first-generation college students at Vassar feel like they matter? and What makes first-generation college students at Vassar feel like they matter?[4]) In order to do this, this chapter dives deeper into the student perspective of mattering, exploring several types of mattering that came up during interviews: institutional mattering, interpersonal mattering, and unconditional mattering. This chapter also analyzes the actions and agents who impacted students' sense of institutional, interpersonal, and unconditional mattering, and connects these examples to Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth. This chapter argues for an immediate adjustment to institutional cultures and interpersonal interactions that actively values the experiences, skills, and perspectives of first-generation college students, as well as an overall shift in our understandings of mattering, in which whether one matters is not so dependent on what one has to offer.

DO FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS AT VASSAR FEEL LIKE THEY MATTER?

The first major finding regarding the question "Do first-generation students at Vassar feel like they matter?" was that very rarely did students hold a binary position. Only one of nine students shared that 'yes' they felt like they mattered. The eight other students I interviewed had much more nuanced answers. Their feelings of mattering were context-dependent. Some students

[4] My original research questions also included "How have these feelings of mattering fluctuated throughout their time at Vassar. Answering all of my research questions within the page-limit for the this thesis was not feasible so I chose not to have a section dedicated to this question in order to limit my page count.

felt as though they mattered to their peers in their major department, but not to the professors. Others felt that they mattered in their STEM classes, but not so much in their humanities and social science classes, and vice versa. Additionally, students felt that they mattered with a select group of friends rather than the whole student body. These findings coincide with current understandings of mattering in which scholars understand that mattering changes between contexts and aspire to create specific measurements for various contexts (Kaschak 2011). Feelings of mattering, however, not only depended on the space students were in, they also depended on the type of mattering being considered.

Differentiating Institutional and Interpersonal Mattering

The types of mattering that were most prevalent for students were institutional mattering, which relates to mattering 'to' Vassar, and interpersonal mattering, which speaks to what it means to matter 'at' Vassar. The distinction these students made between types of mattering is in line with much of the literature that exists on mattering. Rosenberg's (1985) conceptualization of mattering, from which much of the research on this concept stems, argued that there were two types of mattering: interpersonal, which referred to mattering to specific individuals beyond ourselves, and societal mattering, which refers to "the idea that we are important to society as a whole" (Schmidt 2018: 19). Within the context of higher education, the term "university mattering" was coined to describe a form of societal mattering "where the university is the large social entity to which students experience a sense of mattering" (Cheat & Li 2020: 176). University mattering is understood to come about when students feel that they can positively contribute to their university, that their university pays attention to them, and that their university responds to their needs. To instill university mattering in a student, a school needs to provide

support services but also communicate to a student that they are “recognized, cared for, [and] needed” (France 2011: 2).

The key difference between interpersonal and institutional mattering is not in their definitions, but rather who or what is serving as the external source for a student’s feelings of mattering. Returning to the findings from Chapter 4, students reported that attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence, identity-based connections, and feeling valued as well as unique were all important to their feelings of mattering. In their differentiation between interpersonal and institutional mattering, students shared instances of people at Vassar and Vassar as an institution either helped them to meet these needs or failed to do so. A helpful framework for examining how feelings of mattering arise comes from Prilleltensky (2020), who explained that there were two sides to mattering: receiving and giving. The giving side of mattering refers to our ability to provide for others, including feeling important to, or heard by, others, and feeling as though others depend on us and that they value us, which for the students I interviewed would include having an impact on a group or space and feeling like they bring a unique value to a group or space. The receiving side of mattering refers to the ways that others demonstrate to us that we matter, including attention, care, and ego-extension. The next sections will highlight whether or not students felt like they mattered institutionally and interpersonally, as well as investigate why they did or did not possess these feelings of mattering.

Do First-Generation Students at Vassar Possess Positive Feelings of Institutional Mattering? And Why Not?

France’s (2011) Unified Measure of University Mattering-15 (UMUM-15), which was tested using survey data and continues to be used to measure ‘university’ mattering, highlights the importance of feeling like your college pays attention to you, that they care about you, that

they depend on you, that your contributions benefit the college community, and that your college community would be upset if you were mistreated. For the most part, students did not feel like they mattered to Vassar (the institution), or felt that they did matter to Vassar but not in a way they would describe as ‘positive.’ Students that did not possess feelings of institutional mattering often cited disparities between them and their peers as the cause. Many of the students I interviewed compared themselves to their continuing-generation peers.

> I just knew that being a first-generation student meant that I had less social capital. And because of that, it could affect the way I navigate higher education. And because of my poor navigation of college in the first year, it made me feel like I didn't matter that much. And still to this day, even though I've gotten better at it, I still feel like I don't matter significantly to Vassar. - Ruth

> I think when I first got here, it was very obvious who "mattered" to the institution and who didn't. Just sitting in some of my classes and having people talk about like, I don't know, going to all these private schools where the parents were lawyers or politicians or have PhDs or, I don't know. And just feeling like, "Oh, are these the experiences and the prerequisites that matter? And since I didn't have them, what am I to this institution?" - Juniper

The institutional attitude of Vassar conveyed to students like Rith and Juniper that knowledge of how to navigate higher education, or navigational capital, and having people in their lives who could help them navigate college and post-graduation careers, a form of social capital, were important. Resources like these facilitated success at Vassar, and a student who succeeded at this institution is a student who matters.

First-generation status often intersects with other marginalized identities, including race and income level. Several students connected their sense of institutional mattering to their status as students of color. They were acutely aware of the historical legacy that Vassar continues to carry as a primarily white institution, a legacy that is not challenged by Vassar’s current actions.

> I also don't necessarily feel like I matter here, because I know that Vassar wasn't created as a space for people like me. And Vassar doesn't necessarily…Well, Vassar doesn't sort of prioritize people like me. - Juniper

> And with the legacy of Vassar, it's a very white institution, so sometimes I do feel like the students that are not POC, sometimes I feel like they... And it's not intentional, but it's systematic, where they kind of have more of a voice because they can use it. - Maura

> There are a lot of times where I feel like I'm purposely overlooked because I'm a woman of color, and I have 100% just had meltdowns over it because I'm like, what the fuck? I raised my hand . . . Do they only see their hands because they're white and I'm not white? What is this? And so, that can get really frustrating a lot because it always has me questioning, are they doing this because I'm brown? Because I've never had this problem in [my hometown], where every person's brown . . . that's why I'm so sure it's a race thing. I fucking hate it . . . I know that my voice was valued completely before, and now I know that it's not the same way. - Gilberta

For these students, it is clear that Vassar both historically, and presently, caters to White students. This is not an institution designed with students of color and their experiences in mind. The voices of White students are the ones that matter the most to professors and to the administration.

Several students felt that the financial support (or lack therof) that they could provide for Vassar influenced their institutional mattering. Many student opinions were reflected in Juniper's commentary on Vassar:

> College is a fucking business. Let's be honest . . . not only what can, as an institution, what can Vassar give to this student, but also what can this student give back to Vassar

Seeing Vassar as a business, and themselves as customers of the school—or possibly even beneficiaries—low-income students explained that feelings of not mattering to Vassar as an institution occurred when comparing themselves to higher-income peers and when thinking about, in the words of Juniper, what they can 'give back' to Vassar. Maura commented that she felt that those who "pay full tuition matter more sometimes," while Martha felt that he would only matter to Vassar as an alumni, and only if he "ended up with a lot of money." Students saw Vassar placing the most importance on those whose families could pay full-tuition or who would end up as alumni with high-paying jobs.

A lack of institutional mattering among the first-generation students I interviewed was rooted in perceived disparities. Students felt that they could not provide as much for Vassar as their peers, and that they did not receive as much attention and care as their peers. The students I interviewed believed their wealthier, continuing-generation peers could better meet what was expected of students because they had insight into what is often called the 'hidden curriculum' and advantages that would turn them into the kind of alumni Vassar made it clear they wanted—alums with high paying careers who can afford to donate money to the college. Students also compared the treatment they received with that of their peers, specifically highlighting the lack of attention, care, and support students of color received compared to the White students at Vassar. The idea that students of color may have low rates of mattering compared to their White peers is consistent with past findings, including Dueñas and Gloria (2017, 2020) who demonstrated that unwelcoming college environments hindered mattering for Latinx undergraduates and with Scarpa, Zopluoglu, and Prilleltensky (2021) who found differences is mattering along lines of race and ethnicity. The ways society or specific institutions operate to limit feelings of mattering among people of color, beyond the explanation of discrimination, have not been outlined in the literature. These student testimonies may serve as a jumping-off point for further exploration of low levels of institutional mattering among students of color. Specific measures of feelings of mattering among first-generation college students and those of their continuing-generation peers does not exist, but these findings align with studies that have demonstrated that first-generation students have weaker sense of belonging than continuing-generation students and that students of color have weaker sense of belonging compared to White students at similar institutions (Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman 2014; Mueseus & Maramba 2011)

Several students reported that although feelings of institutional mattering did arise, this was not necessarily a positive experience as it often was rooted in feelings of tokenization. Maura explained that there were certain times when she felt like she was just "a diversity student, like when they purposefully get a scholarship student to help them out or to make their school look better." Natalia expanded on this, explaining that part of the reason she is valued by Vassar was that she is a Black student. She is "marketable" because she is "pretty face they can put up on stuff" and quote as having had a good experience in the future when trying to promote their school. Students felt like Vassar valued their identities as poor students and as Black and Brown women, but only because it allowed Vassar to claim that they are a diverse and charitable institution. This, paired with the earlier section on how poor, Black and Brown students felt they mattered less to Vassar than wealthy, White students speaks to a form of exploitation happening at Vassar, in which they celebrate their diversity and inclusion without actually caring for the students that allow them to claim these attributes. The words of one student I interviewed, Martha, capture this dynamic.

> POC students do matter here. And it's obviously clear that Vassar has made an effort to bring in POC students . . . maybe we just matter because we're POC and we're here at Vassar, that's all that matters to them . . . but sometimes i feel like we don't reach that goal . . [of] feeling like we're an actual part of the community

These students' feelings of institutional mattering were only partially met. They felt valued, and that Vassar depended on them, fulfilling the 'giving' side of mattering. The needs of the receiving side of mattering, however, were not met. They did not feel that Vassar cared for them or paid attention to them beyond what Vassar could get out of them. The student experiences did coincide with factors outlined by France and Finney (2011) in that because they didn't

experience factors that were critical to France and Finney's (2011) model, they did not feel like they mattered. The idea of Vassar paying attention to students and caring for them did not come up in my interviews. They often felt overlooked in favor of other students, they did not feel like a priority to Vassar. Students spoke of feeling mistreated by the college, rather than the college caring that they were mistreated. Many also shared how Vassar needed them to bolster their 'diversity and inclusion' statistics, rather than needing the contributions they could make as students and leaders.

What does it mean that upon being admitted to Vassar, we have students who feel tokenized, who believe that they were only admitted as part of the college's desire to make themselves look better, rather than for the value they bring to the school as students with unique skills, knowledge, and perspectives? How is it possible that both the institution of Vassar and the Vassar community have failed to challenge the beliefs these students hold in the four years they have spent here?[5]

Do First Generation Students at Vassar Possess Feelings of Interpersonal Mattering?

For the most part, students reported feelings of mattering in interpersonal relationships. In their interpersonal interactions, students found all of the aspects of mattering that felt significant to them: attention, importance, dependence, ego-extension, identity-based connections, and

[5] Despite the many negative feelings many students held in relation to institutional mattering, one student did have an overall positive experience with it. Taylor was the only student who shared that he felt like he mattered to Vassar as a whole, in a way that was truly positive. He shared many experiences in which his perspective was respected, valued, and utilized to make a change. It is clear that repeated positive, interpersonal interactions with people that were important to the college (Club Presidents, Director of Grand Challenges, etc.) in which he felt like he was making an impact on Vassar as a whole protected him from the feelings of marginality that other students held.

feeling valued, unique, and cared for. Students felt like they could provide for others in a way that fulfilled the giving side of mattering, but also felt that those around them prioritized them in a way that met their needs of the receiving side of mattering. Many of the examples given in Chapter 4 to expand on each of these aspects of mattering spoke to instances of interpersonal mattering. To avoid repetition, this section on interpersonal mattering is kept short. Before moving on to the next section though, it is important to explain that students are not alone in possessing interpersonal feelings of mattering but not institutional mattering. This dynamic most closely mirrors Nunn's (2021) model of belonging that outlines several forms of belonging, including academic belonging, social belonging, and campus-community belonging, and that "experiencing belonging in one of these realms does not directly translate to belonging in any other realm" (p. 12). Nunn (2021) highlighted that many first-generation students and students of color felt "at home" in small pockets on campus while feeling out of place within the larger institution, and that belonging needs being met solely by subcommunities rather than the larger campus community is not sufficient (p. 12).

COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH: PREVENTING MARGINALITY AND PROMOTING MATTERING AMONG FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

Thus far, this thesis has established several different aspects and types of mattering relevant to first-generation college students. Answering the first research question, 'How do first-generation college students at Vassar understand mattering?' provided some insight into the third research question, 'What makes first-generation college students at Vassar feel like they matter?' To expand on these initial findings, however, this section will utilize Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth to examine the ways that first-generation college students can activate their own cultural wealth to foster feelings of mattering, the ways that deficit mindsets

and approaches can prevent feelings of mattering, and the ways that first-generation college students and those around them can utilize an asset-based approach to promote feelings of mattering.

Yosso (2005) provided a "critical race theory (CRT) challenge to traditional interpretations of cultural capital" in her explanation of community cultural wealth, which is an "array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression (p. 69). Yosso (2005) describes several forms of cultural capital that contribute to cultural wealth: social capital, navigational capital, aspirational capital, familial capital, linguistic capital, and resistance capital, all of which "draw on the knowledges students of Color bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom" (77-80, 82). The forms of cultural wealth that came up in my interviews and will be discussed in this section included social capital, navigational capital, aspirational capital, and resistance capital. Social capital refers to "networks of people and community resources" (Yosso 2005, p. 79). Navigational capital refers to "skills of maneuvering through social institutions" (Yosso 2005, p. 80). Aspirational capital "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (Yosso 2005, p. 76) and resistance capital refers to " knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (Yosso 2005, p 81).

Students Activating their Own Cultural Wealth to Foster their Feelings of Mattering

For all the definitions offered for mattering and the different types of mattering, it is widely accepted that mattering is a motive. The desire to matter is sufficient to drive human behavior, and this was reflected in the experiences of many of the students I interviewed.

Students explained the ways that feelings of mattering came about after they activated their own social, navigational, resistance, and aspirational capital.

Regarding social capital, the students I interviewed actively expanded their social capital and utilized existing social capital in order to acquire navigational capital to promote feelings of both interpersonal and institutional mattering. Students formed many social connections throughout their first few years at Vassar, many times based on shared experiences or cultures. The relationships that resulted from this often helped students feel like they mattered because they were receiving attention and care but also felt depended on. Research on the positive impact that social capital can have on first-generation college students feelings of mattering is limited, but studies of populations that often overlap with first-generation status have been done. My findings are consistent with those of Soria and Stebleton (2013) on the positive impact of social capital on working-class students' sense of belonging and of Huerta and Fishman (2014) on how relationships with staff and peers positively influenced a sense of mattering among Latino males.

In addition to social relationships allowing students to directly access feelings of mattering, social relationships also were able to do this indirectly. Relationships with other students and faculty allowed students to enhance their navigational capital. Lilac, for example, built relationships with professors who were also low-income, first-generation students in college that helped her navigate issues associated with affording costs of college as well as apply to graduate school. Ruth explained that it was her relationships with other students, specifically those whose parents had attended college, that allowed her to learn about the various social skills that helped students succeed in higher education. Despite these findings, a relationship between navigational capital and mattering has not been outlined by previous scholars.

During student interviews, many of them also demonstrated their resistance capital in the ways they acted to protect or promote their feelings of mattering. Several students found very niche spaces where they felt like they mattered, as well as spaces where they felt they did not matter at all. This drove how they navigated different spaces on campus in a way that prevented them from feeling further marginalized. Maura, for example, spoke about how she quit a sports team she once loved because over time it became an environment that was emotionally draining in a way that made her feel like she no longer mattered to the people on her team. She also explained how she avoided humanities class, because compared to her Natural Sciences major department, there were few women or students of color, and she felt forced to share her perspective by professors even though the predominantly white and male environment made her feel as though her perspective wouldn't be valued by the other people in the space. Lilac navigated Vassar in a similar way; if she found herself in spaces where she didn't feel like she mattered, she retreated into herself and kept quiet until she was out of that space and in one where she felt she could be herself again. If students found themselves in hostile spaces, ones where they didn't feel like they mattered, they were active in taking steps to protect themselves. The possession of resilience capital has been found to have positive effects on first-generation college students, such as academic persistence and well-being, but this thesis is the first to posit a relationship between resilience capital and feelings of mattering specifically (Sussman 2020).

Natalia captured mattering's ability to motivate how one moved in certain spaces very well:

> The image that comes to mind is a turtle. When a turtle pokes out their head and they like what they see so their head sticks out or the opposite of when you poke a turtle and their head comes out and they immediately go back in. I think that's what happens. When I felt validated and heard in this space, I was far more open to continue discussing what was going on . . . and develop those friendships and develop those relationships with my professors and keep coming back . . . [and] keep wanting to interact with them. And likewise in those spaces where I poked my head out and then I was rejected or hurt or . . . not heard, I retreated, I couldn't stay there. I couldn't pretend to want to stay there. And so I just retreated. It's literally

> becoming a shell of yourself. You're there, your body's there . . . but you don't matter. And so why would I make an effort to be fully present? Why would I make an effort to be fully here if I didn't want to be here?

Many of the students I interviewed held aspirational capital that fostered feelings of mattering. They were able to place their goals of receiving a bachelor's degree in a larger context. Many students spoke about the importance of serving as a role model for younger family members. Martha, for example, explained that he knew he was serving as a role model and "setting the bar" for his younger sisters, a fact that influences how he navigates his academics. In addition, students spoke about how graduating college was not only a dream they held, but one that their parents held as well. Juniper spoke about how this was an opportunity to thank her parents for all the sacrifices they made and a way for her to play out the future "that they really wanted, but didn't have. My parents were super school-focused and stuff, but my mom got pregnant young and they got married young. So after that, there wasn't really a focus on schooling or anything." Students also spoke about their desire to promote the financial security of themselves and their families. Lilac explained that she viewed being at Vassar as an opportunity to help her family as well as herself, but also guarantee the economic security of her future children. This aspirational capital possessed by students not only motivated them to continue towards graduation but also provided a larger context for their time at Vassar. Specifically, their hopes and dreams made their presence at Vassar more meaningful, that their actions had more value, and that they mattered more. This is significant because it is an avenue through which students are gaining a sense of mattering regarding college but not from or within the institution itself, but rather from their families. Similar to the findings on resilience capital, this thesis is the first to suggest a relationship between aspirational capital and mattering.

Many of the students I interviewed were active in utilizing their social, navigational, resilience, and aspirational capital to not only succeed but ensure that they felt like they

mattered. The relationship between community cultural wealth and mattering is one that does not currently exist in the literature, but students made clear how various forms of capital helped them feel like they matter to Vassar and to the people around them, including those at the institution and those beyond it. This demonstrates the possibility of this framework being used in future studies on the ways that we can better instill feelings of mattering among first-generation students.

Deficit vs. Asset-Based Approach Used by Institutions and People Around First-Generation College Students

Earlier in this chapter, it became clear that for many students, a lack of institutional mattering came from feeling as though they were not enough. They felt they couldn't offer as much as their wealthier, continuing-generation peers, who may pay full tuition at Vassar, who may have highly educated parents who raised them in a way that made them comfortable with the kind of academic discussions that often take place in Vassar classrooms, or who may have gone to prestigious high schools where they learned how to build relationships with teachers. This kind of approach, defining students by their weaknesses rather than their strengths, is known as a deficit model (Collins 1988). When applied to minority, low-income, and first-generation college students specifically, deficit thinking characterizes these students as lacking the skills necessary to succeed within college environments. This is exactly the kind of harmful mindset Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth aims to counteract. These first-generation college students should not be thought of as having less to offer than other students, but rather as students with valuable skills, knowledge, and perspectives to offer. The idea that deficit thinking harms students is not a new one. It has been well-documented that deficit thinking is pervasive in higher education. Heinbach, Fiedler, Mitola and Pattni (2019) are just a

few scholars that argue that deficit thinking prevents faculty and staff from appreciating students' cultural strengths. The harms that Vassar's deficit approach has had on first-generation students is not surprising, but rather just emphasizes the need for change if students are to ever feel like they matter.

There were times, however, when an asset-based approach was utilized by people at Vassar, and it had a direct, positive impact on a student's feelings of mattering. When first-generation students' skills and knowledge were not only welcomed but put to use, students felt like they mattered. Despite not feeling like they mattered to Vassar as a whole due to institutional norms and expectations, students found smaller groups where they were valued. Their contributions to the success of a group or in creating something of value using skills they already possessed upon entry to Vassar lead to feelings of mattering. The clearest example of this came from Mon, whose most significant feelings of mattering came out of their Senior Thesis. Mon explained that their thesis project was inspired by their culture and their lived experiences. It was a way for them to take up space in a department that they had not previously felt like they mattered to. Mon received funding and access to shops and materials and received guidance from advisors who were excited about their work in a way that made it feel like the work they were doing mattered. Mon's project was not only based on their own cultural capital but also emphasizing the value in a certain type of work. It instilled in them a sense of confidence regarding their abilities as a "maker and as an artist" that they saw as originating from their socioeconomic and cultural background because their parents have always been "doers . . . they trust their bodies and their hands to produce." In this instance, Mon's cultural background and the skills they gained from their parents were excitedly welcomed and seen as valuable, and this process directly instilled a sense of mattering.

It is not only cultural and familial capital from first-generation college students that should be acknowledged, supported, and celebrated. The unique perspective students posses is also an asset they can offer to Vassar. Taylor, shared many experiences in which he was able to share his perspective as a low-income first-generation student, and ultimately enact positive change at Vassar. One of his first experiences with mattering at Vassar was when he advocated for more inclusivity in one of the school's sports clubs. Students that may not be able to afford their own equipment are now encouraged to reach out and ask for help from the club rather than not participate or scramble to scrape together enough money as had been done by low-income students in the past. There were other moments where students shared that their perspective, knowledge, and skills were valued, but including them all would make this section of my thesis entirely too long. The main thing I hope readers will take away from this section is that there is incredible value in an assets-based approach. Within an asset-based approach, faculty an staff focus on the talents of student in order to help them unlock their full-potential (NYU 2022). It is clear from student testimonies that recognizing and celebrating all of the value first-generation students bring to this campus allows them to succeed. It also ensures they experience feelings of interpersonal mattering. The potential relationships between valuing students' cultural and familial capital and feelings of mattering, as well as between valuing student's unique perspectives and feelings of mattering, have not been previously discussed.

My interviews were designed in a way that was meant to center student narratives. Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth, or the forms of capital she outlines, was not explicit in my interview questions, but rather a theme I hoped would come up in my interviews that would provide insight into how to better support feelings of mattering within first-generation college students. Examples of every form of cultural capital that Yosso (2005) described (social,

navigational, familial, aspirational, linguistic, resistance) came up throughout my interviews. The relationship between these forms of capital and feelings of mattering was not always made explicit by the students themselves, but it was clear that during interpersonal interactions in which the students saw their skills and perspectives reflected, valued, and/or used in a way that benefitted Vassar, either people in the Vassar community or the institution itself, feelings of mattering came with them.

It is the spirit of community cultural wealth, that students have plenty to offer the spaces they enter even when their experiences lie outside that of the dominant culture of the institution, that came through during my interviews. And it is this spirit needs to be utilized to change institutional cultures and the ways we engage with students during interpersonal interactions. Suggestions on exactly how to go about this are highlighted in the next chapter.

A THIRD FORM OF MATTERING: UNCONDITIONAL

It was clear when students provided definitions of institutional and interpersonal mattering, that they viewed institutional mattering as very transactional. In analyzing my data, however, I found myself asking if institutional mattering was the only form of mattering that was truly transactional? Even in cases of interpersonal mattering, it was often students' ability to provide for others, that left them feeling like they mattered. It was when these students participated in class, helped solve their friends' problems, or helped their team win that their feelings of mattering arose. How heavily many students' sense of mattering relied on their ability to provide for others was illuminated by this comment from Taylor:

> I guess for me, I am definitely someone that values my self-worth in what I can do for other people. I definitely like helping people . . . When I can't help someone in some sort of sense, or someone comes to me with a problem and I don't know how to exactly address it and be there for of them, I feel that I'm kind of failing as a person or failing as a friend . . . And I think for me, it kind of makes me anxious because I'm losing self worth in that sort of sense. And if I can't help people, why do I exist? And that sort of thing and why am I here? And since I base myself worth on how I can help with people, I haven't had the chance to develop my other parts of my self worth

Unconditional Mattering

Much less studied than either institutional or interpersonal mattering is the idea of unconditional mattering, so much so that discussions or definitions of unconditional mattering are not found within the literature. The closest terms used among social psychologists include unconditional self-regard, which is defined as "a felt sense that one is worthy and acceptable even when making mistakes, experiencing failure, or behaving in less than desirable ways," and unconditional self-acceptance, or the idea that "individuals should fully accept themselves as valuable and enjoyable human beings whether or not they are self-efficacious and whether or not others approve of or love them" (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky 2021: 121; Ellis 1996: 150). I offer a definition of unconditional mattering based on definitions of these terms as well as testimonies from students on powerful mattering experiences: unconditional mattering refers to a sort of mattering that isn't predicated on your ability to provide. Feelings of unconditional mattering come from the 'receiving' side of mattering. You know you matter because people (or institutions) pay attention to you and they care for you.

The dearth of literature on this subject was reflected in student interviews, as there were only a few times that students expressed this sort of unconditional mattering, one in which they felt significant to friends, loved ones, or even professors because they were being loved and cared for. Although these moments were the few and far between, they were some of the most powerful.

> I matter to the people in my life in a completely different way [and] in a far more tender way. I know that my friends and the people that I love want me to be happy and want the best for me and don't necessarily care what that looks like . . . I know that the people that I really matter to care about my fate and my importance outside of what it's able to provide for them, but I don't get that same security and that same intimate sense of feeling from the institution. - Juniper

> It was a genuine interest into how I was doing . . . And so I feel like in those conversations [with former employers and professors], I do matter. I inherently matter because their interest isn't about what value I

> bring to their lives or their organization . . . It is based on who I am as a person and not only a student. - Natalia

For most of the students I interviewed, mattering to Vassar or other individuals was always reliant, at least partially, on their ability to provide value. This is not at all a criticism of the students I interviewed, as I also often struggle to matter when I am not 'producing' something of value. I encourage us to reflect on this. Why must we be providing something in order for us to feel like we matter? Why are we not allowed to matter inherently because we exist?

There are three main reasons I aim to encourager a greater emphasis on unconditional mattering. First, mattering is critical to one's well-being, as reflected in the literature that highlights mattering's positive impact on mental health (lowered levels of anxiety, depression, and stress) (Elliot et al. 2011; Marshall 2001; McComb et al. 2020; Scholsberg 1989). The students I interviewed corroborated this finding, making clear both the negative impact of not feeling like you matter and all the benefits that come with feeling like you matter.

The second reason this thesis pushes for an emphasis on unconditional mattering is that our ability to provide for others inherently fluctuates. In the literature, feeling like one matters is often thought of as a more stable attribute than feeling like one belongs (Baumeister & Leary 1995). However, students who primarily based their feelings of mattering in their ability to provide for others saw great fluctuation in their sense of mattering. Because this thesis was completed during the Covid-19 pandemic, many students commented on how a shift to isolated, remote learning effected their mattering, precisely because they could no longer provide for others in the same way. Ruth, for example, spoke about how she felt like she mattered significantly less from Spring 2020 onward compared to before. As a Student Leader for the Transitions program, she found it much more difficult to contribute to community building:

> "everything was virtual and you couldn't meet up with your students, you couldn't really do anything with them, and I felt like my skills weren't able to be exercised. And because of that . . . I felt like I mattered less during that year, because I felt like the Transitions community couldn't depend on me as well" - Ruth

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students sense of mattering was not only experienced by the students I interviewed. I also found it incredibly difficult to feel like I mattered between March 2020 and January of 2021, partially because it didn't feel like anyone in my life needed me. Looking at what has been published regarding the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on mattering, Ning et al. (2021) found that there was a sharp decline in mattering among first-year college students from fall 2019 to fall 2020. Scholars are noting that there has been a decrease in mattering, but many studies focus on the challenges faced by first-generation students that made it harder for them to have their basic needs met. Missing from this conversation I believe are findings like these that emphasize students need to feel valued and depended on because our current model of mattering is highly transactional.

The final reason unconditional mattering should be prioritized is that basing mattering in our ability to produce inevitably creates disparities in feelings of mattering. We live in a society that values both wealth and Whiteness over everything else, and Vassar is no exception to this rule. Students who bring with them more wealth to Vassar as well as students who can easily navigate this school whose cultural norms are based on those of the White middle-class, will undoubtedly be perceived as mattering more than those who bring less wealth or who cannot instantly successfully navigate these spaces.

CONCLUSION

Chapter 5 answered two of my research questions: Do first-generation college students at Vassar feel like they matter? And What makes first-generation students at Vassar feel like they matter? This chapter added to the limited qualitative studies on mattering among college students. It provided support for previous research that differentiated between types of mattering

and offered evidence that types of mattering do not necessarily occur simultaneously. This chapter also provided possible explanations for previous stuies that found disparities in feelings of mattering and belonging between first-generation and continuing-generation students, as well as between White students and students of color. Additionally, this chapter provided support for utilizing Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model to understand first-generation college students' experience with mattering as well as using an assets-based approach to instill feelings of mattering in first-generation students. This chapter ended with a commentary on the transactional nature of mattering that came through not only in my student interviews, but also in what has previously been written about mattering. Although unconditional mattering was discussed very rarely, student testimonials regarding feelings of mattering that did not require them to provide anything were the most powerful. Chapter 6 provides suggestions from both students and the author on how to go about both adopting this assets-based approach to more effectively encourage feelings of interpersonal and institutional mattering and how to go about better instilling feelings of unconditional mattering among first-generation students Vassar before ending with recommendations for future research based on questions that arose from my research.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Chapter 5 argued for two key changes in how we conceptualize and attempt to instill mattering in college students. The first was to adopt an asset-based approach regarding institutional and interpersonal mattering, that would allow all students, especially those from minoritized backgrounds, to feel like they matter to their schools and to the people within them. The second was to move away from the transactional model through which we view mattering and to work towards encouraging unconditional mattering in students. In an unconditional model of mattering, students' ability to feel significant is not dependent on their ability to provide. This chapter provides suggestions on how to foster greater institutional, interpersonal, and unconditional mattering in students. These suggestions are based in the experiences of the students I interviewed and come directly from the students themselves as well as from the author's analysis of the shared experiences across interviews. This chapter also provides recommendations for future researchers to explore based on the questions that were left unanswered by my own research and ends with a few closing remarks from the author.

SUGGESTIONS FOR VASSAR COLLEGE

Suggestions on How to Better Foster Feelings of Institutional and Interpersonal Mattering

The suggestions provided by students on how Vassar could improve feelings of mattering for first-generation college students in the future were mostly rooted in the negative experiences they had at Vassar. Many students discussed Vassar's approach to diversity and inclusion and how it needs to be drastically changed. . The reality is that Vassar is still a Primarily White Insitution and, as of 2019, has a student body that is only 3.73% Black, which leaves Black students with a class of peers that for the most part fails to reflect them and their experiences (Data USA 2019). In the words of Juniper, "I feel like if Vassar just had a couple more fucking

black people on this campus, it would've helped." But Vassar must do more than just foster a more diverse student population, it also has to actively care for these students once they arrive. Lilac expressed a desire for greater institutional support for programs that effectively address the needs of marginalized students, including those who are students of color, low-income, and/or first-generation.

> I feel like they're not doing enough for those specific programs to really help them . . .give the students the resources that they need. I feel like these offices are kind of working hard by themselves and the people within them are really trying so hard, but I think the institution is a little bit wishy-washy in providing for those specific programs . . . like Transitions and/or like ALANA. I feel like those, those programs are very much like a one-person job. So there's like one director that has to coordinate everything . . . I really feel like you having to do all that work by yourself without getting the help that you've asked for from the institution, it can be kind of difficult sometimes.

The perceived lack of institutional support that programs like Transitions and the ALANA Center receive from Vassar is particularly contradictory to the goal of instilling feelings of mattering in students when considering that programs for first-generation college students have been proven to successfully increase feelings of mattering among first-generation college students (Swanbrow-Becker et. al 2017). Lilac also commented on the need for more diverse faculty and staff. She found it harder to connect with White professors and expressed a desire for more professors and administrators that she can see herself in "like people of color, so like Black and Brown people, and also different like socioeconomic backgrounds." Previous scholars have not articulated that an increase in faculty of color would improve mattering among students of color, but there are many calls for increasing the presence of, for example, Black faculty members to give Black students the opportunity to more easily find mentors and develop their identity (Brown 2016). This thesis goes one step farther to argue that an increase in diverse faculty would increase feelings of mattering among students.

Vassar is actively maintaining its status as a primarily white institution and failing to foster a diverse student body in which Black students can easily find support and community. In

addition to not providing enough support for spaces that do try and support the small numbers of Black students (as well as other students of color, low-income, and first-generation college students), Vassar is signaling to these students that they ultimately do not matter. And these two recommendations represent the first two steps in ensuring that students from groups that mau not currently feel like they matter to the institution, can in the future, and that students can more easily form connections in which interpersonal mattering can be found.

A third suggestion on how to improve feelings of institutional mattering among first-generation college students comes from my analysis of the interviews rather than the students themselves. Beyond a lack of commitment to true diversity and inclusion, there are other ways that Vassar communicates who matters and who doesn't. Students expressed not feeling like they mattered due to their first-generation status, specifically that they didn't know how to easily navigate this school or how to set themselves up for success after graduation. This, I hope, should prompt Vassar to reflect on the assumptions it makes of students when they get here. Several students I interviewed explained that upon arrival to Vassar they did not know how to communicate with professors or that there was support available for students when they needed help with their academics. The fact that students are not taught these things and have to actively learn about this 'hidden curriculum' on their own, sometimes years after they first get here, is the fault of the institution. The knowledge that continuing-generation students enter college with cannot be assumed to be shared among all students. I argue that unveiling the 'hidden curriculum' is not only critical to students' academic success, but as demonstrated by the students I interviewed, also to their mattering and well-being. It is important to note, however, that the sharing of this information should be done carefully, so as to not communicate to first-generation students that they may be at a 'disadvantage' compared to their continuing-generation

peers. A day of orientation dedicated to covering the basics of navigating Vassar, in which all students gain access to this information, is one potential way to address this. I am aware that Vassar currently hosts a program whose many purposes include addressing this issue. The 'Summer Immersion in the Liberal Arts' program is "designed with historically underrepresented groups in mind" (Vassar College 2022). It is similar to programs that have been effective at other schools, such as Georgetown university which offers a course to first-year, first-generation college students on navigating Georgetown during their first semester (Georgetown University 2018). Due to logistical and financial limitations, however, it is not possible for every student who would benefit from this program to be accepted or attend, which is why I argue, in addition, Vassar should incorporate this kind of information into first-year orientation which all incoming are required to attend.

The next suggestion I offer on how to improve institutional mattering is predicated on the assumption that the transactional model of mattering we currently operate within will likely remain. For as long as mattering is transactional, it is necessary to create a school in which that transactional mattering can be accessed by all students. Some of the strongest feelings of mattering for the students I interviewed came from feeling like their contributions to Vassar were valued. Martha spoke of a sports team that students could join without much prior athletic experience, compared to most teams that recruit students in high school before they even get to Vassar. Ruth spoke of serving as a 'student leader' for the Transitions program. And Taylor, who had the strongest feelings of meaningful, institutional mattering, explained how open a professor was to his feedback and suggestions on how to create more inclusivity in STEM. This may have given students a sort of sense of purpose, and creating enough programs and leadership opportunities so that students can find a way to valuably contribute to a certain group or

department at Vassar is critical. I am not the first researcher, nor will I be the last. to suggest this idea. Flett (2019) called for universities and colleges to create opportunities that students are able to take advantage of in which they will be able to feel that other people depend on them. Previous scholars have demonstrated the ways different types of activities can enhance a students' sense of mattering, such as Piliavin and Siegl (2007) who connected meaningful volunteer activities with an increase in mattering.

In addition to creating avenues through which students' efforts can be valued, it is also necessary to value their perspectives. There is a tendency in much of academia to focus on the work of scholars or conclusions that come out of raw data, but the personal experiences and cultural knowledge students bring with them to the classroom is just as important and valuable. Lilac spoke about how helpful her social science classes, specifically sociology and educational studies, were in helping her feel like she mattered because she was able to talk about and connect her personal experiences to the literature. One of Mon's strongest mattering experiences was in regards to their thesis in which they were financially and personally supported by their departments in creating a project that demonstrated and celebrated their own culture and transnational identities. Ensuring that faculty value the personal perspectives and the lived experiences that students bring with them into the classroom is another way we can improve feelings of institutional and interpersonal mattering among first-generation students. There has been no previous call for this change in faculty approaches because of the potential it has to improve students' feelings of mattering, testimonies of just exactly how powerful feeling valued by professors has been demonstrates that it is necessary.

Suggestions on How to Better Foster Feelings of Unconditional Mattering

Because operating solely within this transactional model of mattering would be limiting ourselves, this thesis also offers suggestions on how to better instill feelings of unconditional mattering in first-generation college students. Most important in attempting to promote unconditional mattering, is to approach all student interactions with an ethic of care. The moments where students felt actively cared for, in a way that wasn't predicated on what they could provide, resulted in the most consistent feelings of mattering; they were less likely to fluctuate than feelings of mattering that arose from their ability tio provide for someone else.

There were many suggestions from students concerning the ways that they could feel more cared for by people around them, mostly surrounding professional development. Ruth suggested a reimagining of Vassar's current advising system. The new system that would prevent feelings of marginality students experienced from professors that did just "the bare minimum" and instead provide students with an advisor who acted in a mentor capacity. The result would be "a more fulfilling relationship" that would improve a student's self-confidence and sense of mattering among first-years. Another recommendation concerning how faculty can better care for students came from Maura, who suggested professors undergo professional development on how to more effectively engage with first-generation college students. From Maura's perspective, many professors had seemed to be unaware of the experiences of first-generation students and did not know how to approach or relate to the student. Currently, the burden of establishing connections with faculty largely falls on students. This places an extra burden on first-generation college students who may not have experience or know how to approach professors. The students I interviewed were not the first to highlight potential roles that faculty in instilling or prohibiting feelings of mattering. Flett (2019) called for faculty to serve as "first-line responders" by increasing their one-on-one contact with students and taking a special interest in

them. It has been demonstrated that encouragement and interest from faculty can enhance a students' sense of belonging, so Flett (2019) argued for professors to similarly become active in fostering related feelings of mattering in their students.

It was not only professors that were identified as needing additional training. Natalia, for example, applied to be a Student Fellow[6] at Vassar partially due to negative experiences she had had as the only Black woman in her student fellow group as well as a desire to create a more welcoming environment than she had experienced. Upon receiving the training for student fellows, she realized that Vassar wasn't preparing these students to navigate racial dynamics and how to address racist comments and behaviors that could arise: The Student Fellow "program is really, really failing in addressing how a lot of Black students don't feel like they belong their freshman year here." Beginning to improve the training that Student Fellows receive and actively engage in conversations about race, racism, and accountability is incredibly necessary for the well-being of future students at Vassar, especially that of Black students at Vassar. Research on the benefits that would come from incorporating these kinds of lessons and conversations into peer-based support systems is lacking. But, it is clear from Easterwood's (2016) work on African American students at primarily white institutions that a failure to do this is detrimental to the physical and psychological well-being on Black students, who may suffer from low self-esteem, concentration issues, anxiety, and depression, and feelings of marginality when experiencing a high-profile racial incident.

[6] A student fellow refers to a position often held by sophomores, juniors, and seniors at Vassar that in some way mirrors a Resident Advisor (RA) that you would find at other schools. These students are trained to serve as mentors and referral agents for first-year students. Each student fellow is assigned a small group of freshman to support, which is called a "student fellow group." Read more about it here: https://offices.vassar.edu/residential-life/contact/student-fellows/

I am not the first to call for an ethic of care to be adopted by those who work with students. For example, Rueda et al. (2017) found that first-generation, low-income students identified the importance of those around them embodying an ethic of care, or making "a clear and concerted effort to help historically underrepresented students cultivate a sense of belonging and thrive within the institution" (p. 34). I believe that intentionally caring for students in a way that meets their unique needs depending on their backgrounds and circumstances can not only improve their sense of belonging but also their sense of mattering.

Vassar College was designed for wealthy, White, continuing-generation college students, and that it is exactly who it continues to serve. The support systems in place at Vassar are designed with those more privileged students in mind, and they operate in a way that often harms more than helps students who are first-generation, low-income, and/or students of color. Students, however, do not just accept that this is how things are, they have reflected on their experiences and offered viable suggestions on how to improve the Vassar experience for the students who will follow in their footsteps. If Vassar is to continue to become a more diverse school, which it should so that future first-generation, low-income, students of color feel less isolated on this campus, it also needs to understand and take into account the experiences of these students. Their needs must be just as important in the development of support programs (like the Student Fellow program) and in the eyes of their advisors and professors with whom they often want a relationship but are not confident in approaching/attempting to develop that relationship.

RECCOMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A major limitation of this thesis is that its findings lack applicability because it has such a small sample size. But if there is one take-away I hope this thesis should have for future

researchers, it is the importance of qualitative research. Through interviews, I was not only able to gauge if students felt like they mattered, like many quantitative studies have focused on, but also why that was or was not the case. I was able to identify the people and departments that had fostered feelings of mattering among first-generation students at Vassar, as well as those who failed to do so. Future researchers should continue to conduct qualitative research on this topic. The specific recommendations for future research I outline here come out of the potential new findings that came from my research as well as questions that arose from my interviews that I was unable to answer myself.

The first question I encourage future researchers to investigate is the tension that came up in my research between the need to feel unique and the need to form identity-based connections as an important part of mattering. For many students, important to both mattering and their sense of belonging was forming connections with those from similar backgrounds (e.g. professors, cultural-affinity organizations, specific communities on campus, etc.). At the same time, feeling unique was often also important for students sense of mattering. Taylor spoke about how his sexuality, specifically at a place like Vassar, actually made him feel like he mattered less because it didn't provide an opportunity to be unique. As a gay man, he felt like the queer perspective he could offer wasn't as valuable at Vassar, where being a member of the LGBTQ+ community is relatively common, as it was in his hometown. Future research is needed to establish how to achieve a balance between these two needs. How do we acknowledge students' individuality and ensure they feel unique among the thousands of students at Vassar while also creating an environment that allows them to find acceptance and community regarding their intersecting identities?

Another important insight I gained from my research was regarding the impact of gender on mattering. Results from quantitative research have long suggested that women tend to have stronger feelings of mattering than compared to men (Schieman & Taylor 2001). Many researchers have focused on the experiences of women as an explanation for this phenomenon (e.g. one hypothesis is that women often are more likely to be caretakers and so having those relationships or feeling like someone depends on them leads to mattering) (Bonhag & Frose 2021). A gender-based qualitative study of mattering that focuses on the experiences of men has yet to take place, but Martha, who as a reminder was one of the male students I interviewed, explained one way in which masculinity may operate to hinder feelings of mattering among men:

> I feel like the only other part of my identity that impacted my sense of mattering is the fact that I identify as a man, that I'm male. Just because I feel growing up . . . I mattered was because I offered something, be it physical labor at home, helping my mom with chores and whatnot, or just seeing my father matter not necessarily a father or an emotional attachment or figure, but more like a provider. So he mattered in that way, but not so much like, "We care about you," like we were interested in you. It's sort of like growing up around that has made me feel that way about myself. So sometimes I feel like I don't matter [and that] because I'm a man, I have to provide something, in one way or another. So unless I'm providing something, I don't matter.

Lastly, Chapter 5 highlighted two key takeaways I hope future researchers take into account. First, it brought to light a potential relationship between feelings of mattering and various forms of capital defined by Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth. Although definitive statements cannot be made based on the interviews I conducted with nine Vassar students, I hope future researchers see the potential value of utilizing such a model and continue to evaluate relationships between mattering and social, navigational, familial, aspirational, resilience, and cultural capital. It allows researchers to take an asset-based approach. It also allows us to conduct research with an understanding that first-generation students have the ability to 'provide' in a way that can unlock the more transactional forms of mattering (interpersonal and institutional), but it is up to the institutions and people around them to

recognize the value that first-generation college students hold. Second, Chapter 5 also discussed the idea of unconditional mattering. Future research should attempt to investigate the ways that unconditional love and care instill a sense of mattering in students as well as the type of policies and initiatives that can be enacted to encourage these feelings of unconditional mattering.

CLOSING WORDS

I was motivated to investigate mattering as part of my Senior Thesis because feeling like I matter has been critical to my success at Vassar. There were many times I questioned my place at this school. I even went so far as to sometimes question my place in the universe. But it was the people that cared for me and depended on me that kept me going. Ideally, no one should ever question if they matter because that is a question that can lead to never-ending rumination. I argue that we all inherently matter. You do not need to earn your place in the universe. You are here and that is enough. I believe the same approach should be taken regarding mattering within schools.

Higher education is heralded as a place of enlightenment where students can dedicate themselves solely to the pursuit of knowledge. Colleges and universities hope their students undergo positive, life-changing transformations throughout their undergraduate years. But even the most elementary form of learning cannot take place without students' basic physical and psychological needs being met. All students deserve an equal chance to succeed, therefore all students deserve to feel like they matter. It is my hope this thesis is one of many parts of a culture shift at Vassar that strives to instill feelings of mattering among all students, especially those who may currently struggle with this. This would include first-generation college students, students of color, low-income students, and students dealing with mental health issues.

I can speak directly to the success of Vassar College's Transitions Program in making some first-generation college students here feel like they belong, but as the students I interviewed made clear, it is not enough. If readers are only able to walk away from my thesis with one lesson, let it be this. First-generation college students deserve to feel like they matter. Although scholars and practitioners have long dismissed their stories, it is time to listen. Their voices and their experiences deserve to be heard. I hope the students I interviewed, and any first-generation college students reading this, resonate with this final quote from Mon:

> And not to get very cheesy, but I think . . . in doing this [thesis], you give people space to belong. And it's nice, even if it's just within ourselves and with each other that we value this stuff. And through making it academic and making it productive, we validate our identities, and make space to belong to other people. Because we also get to dictate that, not just the institution.

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APPENDIX A. RECRUITMENT FACEBOOK POST.

!!!RECRUITING THESIS PARTICIPANTS!!!
If you're a first-generation* college student AND a senior, I would love to interview you! I'm hoping to speak to 10 people for my thesis between now and early February (I'm anticipating that interviews may last around an hour).
My topic is mattering, specifically I want to learn more about what has made first-generation college students feel like they matter at Vassar.
If you're interested, or want more information, message me on Facebook or send me an email (mmsheehan@vassar.edu) [or leave a comment and I'll contact you]
*For the purposes of recruitment, I'm defining a first-generation college student as someone whose parent(s) or guardian(s) has/have not received a bachelor's degree in the U.S. (If you're unsure if you fall into this category we can talk more!)

APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW SCHEDULE.

PART I: INTRODUCTIONS

My name is Majella Sheehan. Today is MM/DD/YY and this is an interview for my Senior Thesis in Sociology.

- And To start us off, go ahead and introduce yourself
    - Name
    - Major/minor
    - Hometown
    - Pronouns (if comfortable)
    - Racial/Ethnic Identity (if comfortable)
- The focus of my thesis is first-generation college students, so if you're comfortable, can you talk a little bit about your family background and what makes you a first-generation college student?
- What does this identity mean to you? Does it mean anything to you?

The rest of this interview is divided into three sections. In this first section, there is no right or wrong answer, I am just interested in learning more about your understanding of the concept of mattering.

PART II: CONCEPTUALIZATION

- In a general sense, what do you think it means to matter?
- What do you think it means to matter at an institution like Vassar?
- Is there a difference between what it means to matter **at** Vassar vs. what it means to matter **to** Vassar?

- In the literature on higher education, there are a lot of discussions around the concept of mattering as well as the concept of belonging. What do you think it means to have a **sense of belonging** at Vassar?

Thank you for taking the time to reflect on those concepts. This next section is focused more on your personal experiences with mattering throughout your time at Vassar. Before we discuss any further, I want to provide you with a definition of mattering that I will now send in the chat:

Mattering is a motive; the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension (the feelings that instill a sense of pride or disappointment) that influence on our actions. Mattering could also be described as the function of how one perceives their importance to another; it is the belief people have, whether right or wrong, that they are significant to someone else and that they are cared for and appreciated.

Feel free to take the time you need to read that and let me know when you're ready for me to continue with the questions

PART III: PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

- Thinking of your experience at Vassar, do you feel like you matter?
    - YES:
        - Why?
        - Has this always been the case?
            - Yes:
                - Has this fluctuated throughout your time at Vassar?
                - When did you start to feel like you mattered?
            - No:

                - Has this fluctuated throughout your time at Vassar?
                - During what periods of your time at Vassar did you not feel like you mattered?
            - What do you think caused these fluctuations?
            - Do you notice any differences in yourself during times where your feelings of mattering were strong and times during which feelings of mattering might not have been as strong?
    - NO:
        - Why not?
        - Has this always been the case?
            - One word answer
            - No:
                - How has this fluctuated throughout your time at Vassar?
                - During what periods of your time at Vassar did you feel like you mattered?
        - What do you think caused these fluctuations?
        - Do you notice any differences in yourself during times where your feelings of mattering were strong and times during which feelings of mattering might not have been as strong?

The next few questions are designed to ask you about specific moments throughout your time at Vassar. I will read them out but also put them in the chat in case you want to come back to them.

- Thinking of specific instances at Vassar, what actual acts, behaviors, or practices did you experience that endorse the belief that you matter?

    - In what context did practices that endorse mattering occur?
    - Who helped you feel like you matter?
    - How did you feel at the time?
- Looking back at these moments where you felt like you mattered, how do you think it impacted you?

Thank you for sharing your experiences with me. Up next is the last section of questions.

PART IV: CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

- Do you think your first-gen status has impacted your experiences with mattering? Have any other parts of your identity impacted your experiences with mattering?
- Reflecting on the last 3 and a half years at Vassar, are there things that could have been done that could've made you feel like you mattered more?
    - Are there things you think can be done to make first-generation students here feel like they matter more?
    - What about Vassar students in general?
- Is there anything else you want to discuss that I have not asked about?
- When I write my thesis, I may end up referring to individual interviews. If I refer to you or quote you, what would you like your pseudonym to be?
- Before we end the interview, do you have any questions or comments for me?

APPENDIX C. EMAIL TEMPLATE.

Dear X,

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for my senior thesis. Before we meet on **Date at Time**, I ask that you please **read the attached consent form and send it back signed in an email (or reply to this email with the consent form attached).**

It is important to me that you feel comfortable and safe sharing your experience with me. I will be asking a range of questions about your experiences at Vassar, and you will determine what you are comfortable with sharing.

Due to precautions around COVID-19, all interviews will be conducted via Zoom and will be recorded, only the audio file will be kept and the video will be deleted immediately.

Below is the Zoom information of our interview scheduled for **Date at Time :**

Majella Sheehan is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

[Zoom Information]

I will also be sending you an invitation via Google Calendar. If you have any questions between now and **Date** please let me know.

Best,
Majella Sheehan

APPENDIX D. CONSENT FORM.

Interview Consent Form

Primary Investigator: Majella Sheehan
Faculty Advisor: Eréndira Rueda, Ph.D.

Title of Project: Perceptions of Mattering Among First-Generation College Students at Vassar

I acknowledge that on _____, I was informed by _____ of Vassar College, of a research project having to do with the following:

- The sharing of personal experiences regarding the experiences of mattering for first-generation college students at Vassar.
  - One to two hour-long interviews using open-ended questions.

Potential Risks: There should only be minimal emotional or psychological discomfort elicited by the interview, which asks that participants share their personal experiences and histories.

Potential Benefits: Participating in this project may help to identify gaps in the academic literature regarding our understanding of the concept of mattering and/or the types of support that work for first-generation college students

I am aware that responses will be kept anonymous and confidential, used only for the purposes of the study and potential follow-up research. If there are any questions or concerns, participants may contact Majella Sheehan with questions or concerns, by email: mmsheehan@vassar.edu or by phone: (347) 275-0244.

I am aware, to the extent specified above, of the nature of my participation in this project and the possible risks involved or arising from it. I understand that I may withdraw my participation in this project at any time without prejudice or penalty of any kind. I hereby agree to participate in the project. I also indicate below if I consent to being audio recorded, for transcription purposes. (You must be at least 18 years of age to give your consent.)

_____
(Printed name of Participant)

_____
(Signature of Participant)

Date:_____

Institutional Review Board
Audio/Video Recording Release Form

Primary Investigator: Majella Sheehan
Faculty Advisor: Eréndira Rueda, Ph.D.

Title of Project: Perceptions of Mattering Among First-Generation College Students at Vassar

With your permission, I will audio record our interview. Please indicate what uses of the Zoom audio recordings you are willing to permit, by putting your initials next to the uses you agree to, and sign the form at the end. This choice is completely up to you. We will only use the audio recordings and interview transcripts in ways that you agree to. *In any use of the recording and transcripts, you <u>will not</u> be identified by name.*

1. _____ The interview transcripts can be studied by the primary investigator for use in the thesis project.
2. _____ The interview transcripts can be used for scientific publications.
3. _____ The interview transcripts can be shown at scientific conferences or meetings.

I have read the above descriptions and give my consent for the use of the audio/video recordings of me as indicated by my initials above.

Signature _____ Date _____