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Exploring the Social Processes Influencing the Well-Being and Social Integration of Systemically Marginalized Students in Higher Education: A Mixed-Methods Approach

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by

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Abstract

Comprising two manuscripts, this dissertation employs a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively examine the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes influencing the socioemotional well-being and social integration of systemically marginalized students. The first manuscript (Hachem & Toro, 2022; see Chapter 2) quantitatively explored the relationship between ethnic identity commitment and indices of well-being, the mediating role of social relationships, and the moderating roles of gender and immigrant generation status among Latinx college students (N = 707). Results suggested that ethnic identity commitment was positively associated with socioemotional well-being. Although both types of relationships were significant mediators on their own, maternal (vs. peer) relationship quality was the stronger mediational influence. Furthermore, gender and immigrant generation status were not significant moderators of these indirect effects. The second manuscript (Hachem et al., *in preparation*; see Chapter 3) qualitatively explored how students (N = 10) navigate university experiences in relation to various intersecting marginalized identities (e.g., ethnic-racial identity, sexual identity, first-generation college student status, socioeconomic status, geographical identity, gender identity, and religious identity). Analyzing discussions that occurred within the context of a social integration support program, this study employed a strength-based risk and resilience framework to shed light on the unique challenges and strengths that stem from systemically marginalized identities in the university setting. Together, the studies provide a comprehensive exploration of the experiences and needs of systemically marginalized students and contribute to our understanding of how to effectively address

educational disparities. Implications for the development of effective resources on university campuses are discussed.

Dedication

To my mama, Zahra, my sito, Najla, and all the strong women in my life who instilled in me the value of an education and taught me the true meaning of strength, resilience, and perseverance.

And to all the brave students amplifying the voices of the Palestinian students being denied their right to an education, and fighting for justice and a free Palestine.

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encouragement, and love as I worked towards my goals. I feel so blessed to have brothers who will always have my back and be there when I need them. *Suna*: Thank you for always making me laugh and for being such a bright light in my life, my baby #1.

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

Education is often regarded as the great equalizer, offering individuals from systemically marginalized backgrounds the opportunity to achieve upward mobility through educational attainment. However, this idealistic notion of education as the great equalizer is not reflective of reality. Despite growing efforts to narrow the achievement gap between students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more privileged counterparts, the current educational system continues to perpetuate existing inequalities rather than eliminate them (see Redford & Hoyer, 2017).

While there has been a growing recognition that systemically marginalized students face additional and unique challenges in higher education, less is known about how students navigate these challenges or how their intersecting marginalized identities interact with their academic environments to impact university experiences. To effectively address educational disparities, it is necessary to place a greater emphasis on the active role students play in constructing their university experiences, taking into consideration the multiple and intersecting identities that are marginalized within the educational system. Comprised of two manuscripts, the current dissertation employs a mixed-methods approach to identify and understand the interrelated intrapersonal and interpersonal processes that either promote or inhibit the socioemotional well-being and social integration processes of students from systemically marginalized backgrounds.

Students as Active Participants in University Settings

Previous research has predominantly focused on environmental or external factors, such as systemic inequities and situational cues, as the primary determinants of psychosocial and academic outcomes with considerable research demonstrating their powerful influence on academic experiences and outcomes among students from marginalized backgrounds (Brannon & Lin, 2021; Major & O'Brien, 2005; Pratto et al., 2006; Steele, 1997). For instance, past research has indicated a significantly positive influence of external factors, such as cultural socialization and discussing one's ethnic identity with peers, on ethnic-racial identity (ERI) commitment (Hughes et al., 2006; Syed & Juan, 2012) and academic performance (Banerjee et al., 2018). But this approach and related research essentially implies that students play a passive role in the shaping of their identities, experiences, and outcomes.

To address this, the current research employs an identity work perspective and identity negotiation framework, which suggest that individuals actively engage and negotiate their identities through social interactions within their environments (Deaux & Major, 1987; Swann Jr. & Bosson, 2010). Extending this perspective, the identity-based motivation model emphasizes the preponderant role of identity in shaping outcomes, including educational outcomes (Oyserman, 2013; Oyserman & Destin, 2010), with one caveat: identity, or more accurately, thinking about an identity one holds guides motivation and behavior; though, these outcomes are dependent on the accessibility and salience of the identity as well as the environment and the situational cues within it (Cross et al., 2017; Holland et al., 2001; McAdams, 2001; Oyserman et al., 2012; Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Swann Jr. & Bosson, 2010; Swann, 1987). In other words,

individuals are not passive actors within their social world. Rather, they are active participants involved in a dynamic and continuous identity negotiation process as they interact with stimuli (e.g., other individuals) to make sense of who they are and how they fit as well as how to behave within each environment and in every social interaction (Holland et al., 2001; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Taylor, 1998). The ERI enactment model, for instance, illustrates the proactive role ethnic/racial minorities take in shaping their identities within their environments (Cross et al., 2017). Specifically, ethnic/racial minorities navigate psychological and behavioral processes as they enact and experience their ERI in everyday intergroup and intragroup social interactions (Cross et al., 2017). These theoretical perspectives underscore the need to move beyond examining how one's environment influences outcomes and instead explore how an individual's identities and lived experiences shape their perceptions and interactions within their environments.

To emphasize the active role that individuals play within their environments, the current research examines students' marginalized identities within the university context as determinants of social integration processes and psychosocial outcomes. Specifically, the first study in the current research explored mechanisms that underlie the association between ERI commitment—an affirmation, sense of belonging, and heightened engagement with one's ethnic group—and socioemotional well-being during college. Differences by gender identity and immigrant generation status were also explored. The second study focused on the unique risk and resilience factors that stem from various systemically marginalized identities in the university context.

Multidimensionality and Intersectionality of Social Identities

Identity research tends to focus on a single identity at a time, implicitly suggesting that an individual's social identities are mutually exclusive as opposed to intersectional in their influence on psychosocial and academic outcomes (Burke, 2003). However, social identities, particularly politicized social identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), and sexual identity), are dynamically constructed and have a multidimensional and intersectional influence on experiences and outcomes (Brekhus, 2008; Burke, 2003; Crenshaw, 1991, 1997; Simon & Klandermans, 2001).

In the academic context, past research has demonstrated the continuous and interactive construction of ERI, gender, and academic identities with students negotiating what these identities—both separately and in conjunction—mean to them, choosing to internalize or resist certain narratives based on past lived experiences (DeBlase, 2003; Martin, 2007; McGee & Martin, 2011). McGee & Martin (2011), for example, highlighted the agency of students with systemically marginalized gender and ethnic-racial identities. Qualitative findings revealed that despite a keen awareness of negative stereotypes, high-achieving Black college students actively resisted them and, instead, fostered both their marginalized and academic identities. This process of resilience, via active resistance, contributed to their academic success. Such findings underscore the notion that individuals are active participants within their environments and emphasize the need to consider how students' systemically marginalized identities intersect and interact with their academic environments to shape their perceptions, interactions, and experiences at university.

Therefore, in addition to emphasizing the active role individuals play within their environments, the current research also sought to highlight the multidimensionality and intersectionality inherent in social identities. To address this complexity, the first study examined the differential impact of gender identity and immigrant generation status on the mediating influence of maternal and peer relationship quality on ERI commitment and socioemotional well-being. Similar to the first study, the second study in the current dissertation emphasized students' active role in constructing their university experiences based on systemically marginalized identities. The qualitative exploration of the unique challenges and sources of resilience that stem from various systemically marginalized identities highlights the multidimensional and intersectional nature of identities in shaping one's experiences and outcomes.

Social Integration and Academic Achievement

Social integration, or one's subjective sense of fit and interconnectedness, plays a pivotal role in determining retention rates within higher education (Hartley, 2011; Iacovino & James, 2016; Stephens et al., 2012; Taylor, 2010). Though previous studies have acknowledged the additional and unique challenges students from systemically marginalized backgrounds face in achieving social integration (Dennis et al., 2005; Kenny & Rice, 1995; Padgett et al., 2012), there is a notable gap in understanding how a student's identities may influence perceived relationship quality in the university context, and the subsequent impact on psychosocial outcomes. Additionally, there is a need to explore specific hurdles that stem from intersecting marginalized identities and how systemically marginalized students navigate such stressors.

Studies have highlighted the influence of both parental and peer relationship quality on academic outcomes. Positive parental and peer attachment have been associated with better college adjustment outcomes, improved academic performance, and enhanced psychosocial well-being throughout college (Gorrese & Ruggieri, 2013; Mattanah et al., 2011). However, systemically marginalized students, namely those from low-SES and ethnic/racial minority backgrounds, often perceive less familial and peer social support (Chang et al., 2020; Jenkins et al., 2013; Kenny & Rice, 1995), possibly due to cultural differences between their collectivistic upbringing and the individualistic culture prevalent on U.S. college campuses (Stephens et al., 2012). The resulting cultural mismatch contributes to a perceived lack of belonging and difficulties in forming friendships at university, compounding systemically marginalized students' existing apprehension to seek support (Dennis et al., 2005; Jung et al., 2007; Phillips et al., 2020; Pratt et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2013; Stephens et al., 2012).

Additionally, systemically marginalized students may face discrimination and prejudice in academic settings, exacerbating social integration difficulties. Discrimination from peers negatively impacts socioemotional well-being, while discrimination from educators leads to poorer academic outcomes (Benner & Graham, 2013). Furthermore, high stereotype threat contexts in academic environments can result in intergroup anxiety and a decreased willingness to interact with members of other groups (Shelton & Richeson, 2006).

Considering the substantial influence of relationship attachment quality on academic achievement, it is necessary to focus on social integration processes for a

comprehensive understanding of the experiences and needs of systemically marginalized students. The first study in the current research aimed to establish an understanding of the influence of social relationships on socioemotional well-being throughout college, with a specific focus on the determinant role of one's ethnic identity commitment. The second study drew on foundational social psychological theories, including social identity theory, self-categorization theory, and attachment theory to provide a social integration support program. The objective of the program was to address social integration difficulties for students from systemically marginalized backgrounds. Discussions throughout the program uncovered the nuanced processes through which students navigate their university environment in relation to multiple and intersecting marginalized identities. These insights not only shed light on the unique challenges systemically marginalized students face but highlight how historically marginalized identities can also be sources of resilience.

Current Research

Systemically marginalized students are faced with complex and multifaceted experiences as they navigate college. Recognizing the need for a paradigm shift, this research highlights students as active participants within their environments and emphasizes the multiple and intersecting marginalized identities that impact perceptions, experiences, and outcomes within the university context.

Comprised of two manuscripts, the current dissertation employs a mixed-methods approach to understand the intra- and interpersonal processes influencing socioemotional well-being and social integration processes for students from systemically marginalized

backgrounds. Manuscript 1 (Chapter 2) quantitatively explores the influence of maternal and peer attachment quality on socioemotional well-being (i.e. depressive symptoms, anxiety, and self-esteem), emphasizing the determinant role of ethnic identity commitment among Latinx college students. The moderating roles of gender and immigrant generation status were also explored. Drawing from discussions that occurred within the context of a social integration support program, Manuscript 2 (Chapter 3) employs a strength-based risk and resilience framework to qualitatively explore how students navigate their university environment in relation to various intersecting marginalized identities. Together, these studies seek to advance our understanding of the experiences and needs of systemically marginalized students by exploring their active role in shaping outcomes, the multidimensionality and intersectionality of their identities, and the dynamics of social integration within the academic setting.

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Chapter 2:

Ethnic Identity Commitment and Socioemotional Well-Being Among Latinx-Origin College Students: The Influence of Maternal and Peer Relationships

Hachem, Z. A., & Toro, R. I. (2022). Ethnic identity commitment and socioemotional well-being among Latinx-origin college students: The influence of maternal and peer relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *39*(4), 931–952. https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211052057

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Zeinab A. Hachem served as lead for data analysis, writing – original draft, and writing – review & editing, and contributed to data collection.

Rosa I. Toro served as lead for funding acquisition, methodology, project administration, data collection, resources, and supervision, and contributed to writing – review & editing.

Zeinab A. Hachem and Rosa I. Toro contributed equally to the study conception and design.

Abstract

Considerable research has noted the association between ethnic identity commitment, which refers to a positive affirmation, sense of belonging and heightened level of engagement to one's ethnic group, and indices of well-being, but less is known in terms of factors that can explain this link. The current study explored the relationship between ethnic identity commitment and indices of well-being, the mediating role of social relationships, and the moderating roles of gender and immigrant generation status. A sample of 707 Latinx college students (79% female, 21% male, M_{age} = 19.08 years, SD_{age} = 1.17, *Range*: 17.00 – 25.00) reported on ethnic identity commitment, maternal and peer relationship quality, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and anxiety. Results suggested that ethnic identity commitment was positively associated with socioemotional well-being. Although both types of relationships were significant mediators on their own, maternal relationship quality had a greater influence. Furthermore, gender and immigrant generation status were not significant moderators of these indirect effects. Findings indicate that committing to one's ethnic identity enhances socioemotional well-being. They also demonstrate the complex interplay of social relationships and the enduring influence of maternal relationships during early adulthood. Results support the development of efforts geared towards facilitating ethnic identity commitment as well as leveraging the impact of social relationships in a manner that supports Latinx individuals.

Keywords: maternal relationships; peer relationships, Latinx, ethnic identity, depressive symptoms, anxiety, self-esteem.

Ethnic Identity Commitment and Socioemotional Well-Being Among Latinx-Origin College Students: The Influence of Maternal and Peer Relationships

For ethnic minority individuals, the transition to college involves reflecting on what their ethnicity means to them within this new context (Brittian et al., 2013; Kalsner & Pastole, 2003). Understanding this process in Latinx individuals, or individuals of Latin American origin or descent, is important as they represent the largest minority group in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Additionally, Latinx representation on U.S. college campuses has dramatically increased in recent decades and continues to increase. Specifically, the percentage of 18–24-year-old Latinx students enrolled in college increased from 22% to 36% between 2000 and 2018; and in the Fall term of 2018, Latinx students represented 20% of U.S. resident undergraduate students at public universities (Hussar et al., 2020), most of which were first-generation college students (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Although U.S. college campuses are becoming increasingly diverse, Euro-American cultural values still determine successful social integration and academic success (Iacovino & James, 2016). Not only are Latinx students managing typical stressors of adjustment to life as a college student, such as learning to manage their time, workload, and finances, they are also dealing with other stressors unique to their minority and/or first-generation college student status. Such stressors include navigating barriers due to documentation status or acculturative stress as students attempt to balance their own cultural values with that of the university's (Enriquez, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2013). Other stressors involve a perceived lack of social support and navigating perceptions of

microaggressions and discrimination, which can impact ethnic identity commitment, or the degree of identification with one's ethnic group, and socioemotional well-being (Cheng et al., 2016; Forrest-Bank & Cuellar, 2018; Jenkins et al., 2013). Both ethnic identity commitment and socioemotional well-being can impact academic achievement (Syed et al., 2011; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Thus, understanding the association between ethnic identity commitment and socioemotional well-being among individuals of this stigmatized group within this context is relevant and necessary.

Research has demonstrated the positive influence of ethnic identity commitment on well-being such as: higher self-esteem, fewer depressive symptoms, and lower levels of anxiety (e.g., Phinney et al., 1997; Phinney et al., 2001; Romero & Roberts, 2003; Umaña-Taylor, 2011), but these associations appear to vary by immigrant generation status and gender. Specifically, first-generation immigrants and females tend to report higher ethnic identity commitment compared to second- or later generation immigrants and males (Donovan et al., 2013; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2009; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009). Ethnic identity commitment also influences the quality of social relationships (Huang & Stormshak, 2011; Stepney et al, 2015), which similarly impact socioemotional outcomes (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Armsden et al., 1990; Oldfield et al., 2016). To better understand these associations, the current study seeks to examine relations between ethnic identity commitment, and socioemotional well-being (i.e. depressive symptoms, anxiety, and self-esteem), the mediating role of social relationships, and differences by gender and immigrant generation status among Latinx young adults.

Theoretical Frameworks Underlying the Ethnic Identity Development Process

Ethnic identity refers to the extent to which a person identifies with a particular ethnic group (Tajfel, 1981). Specifically, it refers to a shared consensus of who they are, the attributes they possess, and how that relates to individuals who belong to the same or different groups (Hogg, 2006; Phinney, 1990). Phinney (1989) asserts that ethnic identity development involves three stages that begin in early adolescence: (a) no exploration; (b) beginning to explore what their ethnicity means to them; and (c) exploring and reaching an understanding of what their ethnicity means to them (i.e., ethnic identity commitment). Those with higher levels of ethnic identity commitment tend to feel a sense of belonging and have a positive attitude toward their ethnic group (Phinney, 1992), which has been associated with a positive self-concept and sense of well-being (Phinney, 1990).

With regard to age in this developmental process, individuals tend to commit to their ethnic identity in late adolescence or young adulthood (Brittain et al., 2015; Schwartz, 2001). For example, when comparing high school and college-aged students, college-aged students were significantly more likely to have achieved an understanding of what their ethnicity meant to them (Phinney, 1992). Since the participants in the current study were in late adolescence/early adulthood, we focused on commitment to one's ethnic identity, which pertains to a positive affirmation, sense of belonging and heightened level of engagement to their ethnic group (Marcia, 1980; Phinney & Ong, 2007). This commitment is solidified as they are exposed to different settings and new experiences (Sokol, 2009; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009). For this reason, examining ethnic identity commitment during the early adulthood period of development

is important, especially when considering its well-documented impact on well-being (Romero & Roberts, 2003; Syed et al., 2013, Umaña-Taylor, 2011).

In addition, parents and others of significance play a critical role in identity development, as it is common for children to adopt admired characteristics and features of important individuals (Erikson, 1950, 1980). During adolescence, individuals may discard earlier adopted characteristics and roles as they determine who they are and their place in the world through exploration and eventually commitment. In ethnic minority households, specifically, cultural socialization, or the process whereby parents implicitly or explicitly teach their children about their racial or ethnic background, is common. The impact of cultural socialization on ethnic identity commitment is well studied (see Hughes et al., 2006 for review). For example, studies have shown that maternal cultural socialization positively predicted ethnic identity development (McHale et al., 2006), while family ethnic socialization, in general, positively predicted ethnic identity commitment (Brittian et al., 2013). Other studies have found that over time, peers positively influenced ethnic identity commitment in adolescents (Rivas-Drake et al., 2017). Among young adults, peers were found to have similar levels of ethnic identity commitment and the active discussion about ethnic identity was found to positively impact commitment (Syed & Juan, 2012). Overall, the role that social relationships play in shaping one's ethnic identity from childhood throughout adulthood is considerable.

Finally, the impact of ethnic identity commitment on well-being can also be influenced by person-level factors (i.e., gender and immigrant generation status). In the Hispanic/Latin American culture, gendered cultural socialization is typical (Raffaelli &

Ontai, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999) with an expectation for females to carry on cultural traditions (Umaña-Taylor & Guimond, 2010). Several studies have demonstrated the difference in cultural socialization between males and females, with Latinas consistently showing higher susceptibility to cultural socialization and higher ethnic identity commitment compared to Latinos (e.g., Hughes et al., 2009; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2009). As a result, Latinas are more likely to place higher value to this group membership (Umaña-Taylor & Guimond, 2010). This may result in females being more likely than males to bond with their mothers via their shared ethnic identity. Moreover, with each passing generation in the U.S., cultural ties weaken. This is because recent immigrants are more likely to make it a priority that their children learn about their ethnic background and acquire the language (Hughes et al., 2006; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009). For later generations, who have assimilated more into U.S. society, this becomes less of a priority, and thus, ethnic identity decreases (Capozza & Brown, 2000; Hurtado et al., 1994). First-generation Hispanic/Latinx immigrants, for example, tend to report significantly higher levels of ethnic identity compared to later generations (Donovan et al., 2013). U.S.-born children of Latin American immigrants (i.e., second-generation immigrants) are also significantly more likely to self-identify as American or adopt a bicultural identity, especially if their mother self-identified in a similar respect (Rumbaut, 1994). Overall, both gender and immigrant generation status influence the levels of ethnic identity commitment in individuals, so it is important to explore whether they also influence the direct and indirect associations of ethnic identity commitment and socioemotional well-being.

Link Between Ethnic Identity Commitment and Well-Being

Being a member of a group provides a sense of belonging that contributes to a positive self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In the case of ethnic identity, researchers have maintained that this identity is essential to the self-concept of ethnic group members (Phinney, 1990). The sense of shared values, attitudes, and behavior, as well as shared language and knowledge of cultural history, creates an environment of acceptance and belonging, as well as a more positive affect toward one's ethnic group (Deaux, 2000; Phinney, 1990). For example, a vast body of research reports a significant association between higher ethnic identity commitment and positive self-esteem (Bracey et al., 2004; Navarro et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2002) across various social contexts (Umaña-Taylor, 2004; Umaña-Taylor & Shin, 2007). Other research has found a significant association between higher ethnic identity commitment and fewer depressive and anxiety symptoms (Brittian et al., 2013; Brittian et al., 2015; Forrest-Bank & Cuellar, 2018). Overall, extant research documents the positive influence of ethnic identity commitment on socioemotional health outcomes and highlights its importance for ethnic minority individuals.

In spite of the positive impact of ethnic identity commitment, related research elucidates important factors, such as gender and immigrant generation status, to consider that may demonstrate some variability in the relations involving ethnic identity commitment and well-being. For example, Cheng et al. (2016) reported moderation by gender, with higher ethnic identity commitment predicting lower levels of depressive symptoms among Latina college students who perceived greater discrimination. Higher

ethnic identity commitment was not found to be a protective factor among Latinos (Cheng et al., 2016). Other research has found moderation by immigrant generation status, with first-generation Hispanic-origin adolescents reporting significantly better socioemotional health than second-generation Hispanic-origin adolescents (Filion et al., 2018). As such, it is important to explore whether gender and immigrant generation status moderate the direct and indirect effects of this association.

Social Relationships as Explanatory Mechanisms

Group memberships are a part of an individual's social identity that inform other aspects of their identity on the premise of shared values and beliefs (Hogg, 2006), which then shape personal characteristics and sense of self (Deaux, 2000; Schwartz, 2001). For example, parents and others of significance (e.g., peers) play a critical role in the development of children's identities, with subsequent research supporting this theory (Huq et al., 2016; Sokol, 2009; Stepney et al., 2015). Shared identities also facilitate closeness among individuals (Erikson, 1980). Indeed, adolescents with higher levels of ethnic identity exploration and commitment report better relationships with their parents over time (Huang & Stormshak, 2011). Similarly, young adults with higher levels of ethnic identity exploration and commitment view their parents as more accepting as opposed to controlling (Chen & Sheldon, 2012). It may seem that once an individual commits to their ethnic identity, and there is a greater degree of shared ethnic identity (i.e., similar levels of ethnic identity commitment), it can be a conduit for positive relationships; albeit the impact of ethnic identity on relationship quality may vary by relationship type. For example, Kiang and Fuligni (2009) found higher levels of ethnic

identity exploration and commitment in Latinx young adults when interacting with parents compared to peers. This may suggest that since individuals more often bond over their ethnic identity with their parents, compared to peers, ethnic identity commitment may be a stronger predictor of maternal relationship quality compared to peer relationship quality.

There is also longstanding documentation of the positive psychological impact of quality parental and peer relationships (Armsden et al., 1990; Gorrese & Ruggieri, 2013). For example, Armsden & Greenberg (1987) found that better quality parental and peer relationships were associated with higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of depression and anxiety. Some studies, however, have found that parental relationships were stronger predictors than peer relationships of positive socioemotional well-being (Greenberg et al., 1983; Laible et al., 2004). Considering the emphasis of mothers as primary caregivers within the Latinx culture (Campos et al., 2014), and their influence on levels of paternal involvement (McBride et al., 2005), we anticipated that maternal relationship quality would play a significant role. Overall, the impact of social relationships is important to consider and explore in the ethnic identity commitment–well-being relationship. And, in spite of its importance, little research explores maternal and peer relationships as explanatory mechanisms in this association. As such, the current study focused on the mediating roles of maternal and peer relationship quality in the link between ethnic identity commitment and socioemotional well-being.

Current Study

The current study explored the relationship between ethnic identity commitment and socioemotional well-being (i.e. depressive symptoms, anxiety, and self-esteem) among Latinx college students (see Figure 2.1). It also sought to examine the mediating influence of maternal and peer relationships and differences based on gender and immigrant generation status. Based on the current literature, the following hypotheses were formed:

H1: Ethnic identity commitment would be negatively associated with depressive and anxiety symptoms, and positively associated with self-esteem.

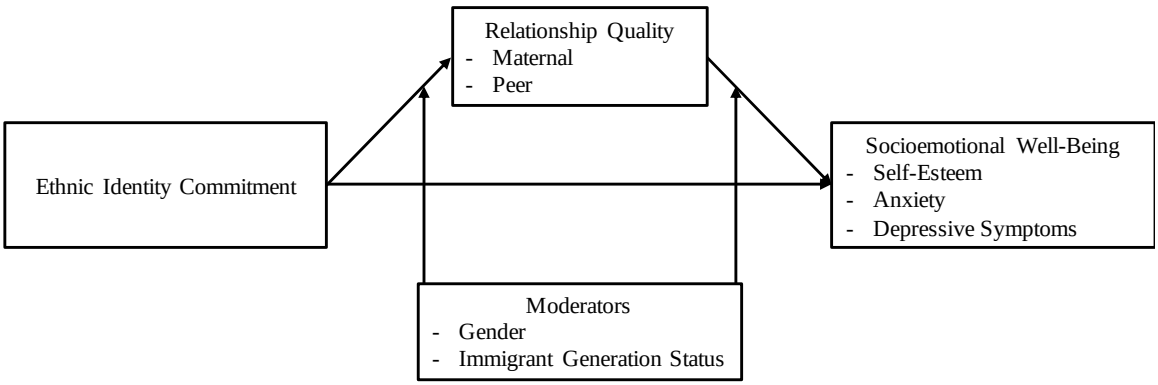
H2: Maternal and peer relationship quality would mediate the relationship between ethnic identity commitment and socioemotional well-being.

H3: Maternal relationship quality would be a stronger mediator than peer relationship quality.

H4: Gender and immigrant generation status would moderate these associations such that findings would be stronger among females and among second- or earlier generation immigrants.

Figure 2.1

Conceptual model of moderated mediation analysis for the current study.



Method

Participants

Participants included 707 (79% female, 21% male, M_{age} = 19.08 years, SD_{age} = 1.17, *Range*: 17.00 – 25.00) Latinx undergraduate students attending a public university in Central California during the fall and spring semesters between 2015-2018. Most participants were born in the U.S. (88%) with at least one foreign-born parent (73% of fathers and 67% of mothers). The majority of participants who were born outside the U.S. have spent about 15 years in the U.S. (*SD* = 3.87), arriving at approximately the age of 5 (*SD* = 3.96). Participants traced their ancestry to Mexico (94%), El Salvador (2%), Ecuador (.4%), Nicaragua (.6%), and other unspecified countries (3%).

Regarding maternal educational background, 6% of participants reported that their mothers had no schooling, 61% had up to a high school education, 14% had some college education, and 19% held a higher degree. Eight percent of participants reported that their fathers had no schooling, 68% had up to a high school education, 14% had some college education, and 10% held a higher degree. In terms of socioeconomic status, 28% of participants classified their parents as belonging to the lower/working class, 32% to lower/middle class, 32% to middle class, and 8% to middle/upper class. Furthermore, 63% of participants were Pell Grant recipients, indicating exceptional financial need.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from a large (*n* = 20,155) ethnically diverse (52.51% Latinx/Hispanic, 20.59% White, 14.66% Asian, 9.09% other or unknown, and 3.15% African American) public university in Central California and were enrolled in an

introductory psychology course. Prior to the data collection, the study was approved by the second author's Institutional Review Board. The current project was among several online studies available to eligible students (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) and was part of a participation requirement for the course. Before participating, participants were provided with the study information and then provided consent. Completion of the questionnaire took about 45 minutes.

Measures

Ethnic identity. The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney, 1992) was used to measure ethnic identity. The commitment subscale was used (7 items; e.g., "I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me.") because participants are at an age where they are committing to their ethnic identities. Participants indicated their responses on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Cheng and colleagues (2016) reported a coefficient alpha of .91 for the commitment subscale. In the present sample, Cronbach's alpha for the commitment subscale was .92.

Maternal and peer relationships. The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment – Revised (IPPA-R; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Gullone & Robinson, 2005) was used to measure the level of attachment individuals have towards mothers and peers. The scale is composed of three subscales: trust (10 items; e.g., "My mother respects my feelings," "My friends listen to what I have to say"), communication (9 items; e.g., "I tell my mother about my problems and troubles," "When we discuss things, my friends care about my point of view"), and alienation (6 items; e.g., "I get upset easily around my

mother," "I feel angry with my friends"). Participants indicated their responses on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (almost never or never true) to 5 (almost always or always true). Previous studies have found these scales to be reliable with a coefficient alpha of .91 for the maternal attachment scale and a coefficient alpha of .94 for the peer attachment scale (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2009; Telzer et al., 2016). In the current study, the maternal and peer attachment alphas also demonstrated adequate reliability (αs = .95 and .93, respectively).

Depressive symptoms. The Beck Depression Inventory-2 was used to assess the number of depressive symptoms that each participant experienced in the 30 days prior to completing the scale (BDI-2; Beck et al., 1996). The measure has 21 groups of statements, that each contain a 4-point scale ranging from 0–3, where 0 reflects normal feelings experienced by mentally healthy individuals (e.g., "I am not particularly discouraged about the future.") and 3 reflects extremely depressive feelings (e.g., "I feel the future is hopeless and that things cannot improve."). Toro and colleagues (2019) reported a coefficient alpha of .94. In the present sample, this scale demonstrated acceptable reliability (α = .93).

Anxiety. The Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI; Beck et al., 1988) was used to assess participants' anxiety levels. The BAI lists 21 symptoms of anxiety (e.g., "Numbness or tingling," Fear of worst happening," or "Difficulty in breathing"), and participants were instructed to indicate their responses on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (severely – it bothered me a lot). A total score is calculated by finding the sum. A scale is provided to interpret these scores, ranging from 0 – 21 (i.e. low anxiety) to 36 and

above (i.e., potentially concerning levels of anxiety). Brittain and colleagues (2013) reported a coefficient alpha of .94. In the present sample, this scale demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .93$).

Self-esteem. To measure participants' self-esteem levels, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) was used. This scale includes 10 items that measure self-worth by measuring both positive and negative feelings about the self (e.g., On the whole, I am satisfied with myself;" "At times I think I am no good at all"). Participants indicated their responses on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Syed and Juang (2014) reported a coefficient alpha of .89. In the present sample, this scale demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .86$).

Demographic characteristics. For *gender*, an item on the questionnaire was provided asking participants to indicate their gender from the following options: male, female, other. To assess *immigrant generation status*, participants were asked to provide information about their birth status, as well as their parents' birth statuses. Participants born outside the U.S., or in the U.S. to at least one foreign-born parent were coded as 2nd or earlier generation, while participants born in the U.S. to U.S.-born parents were coded as 3rd or later generation. Finally, participant age was also included as a covariate.

Results

Analysis Plan

Bivariate analyses were conducted first to explore the data and the intercorrelations between the variables. Following this, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine differences in ethnic identity commitment by gender and

immigrant generation status. To examine the direct associations between ethnic identity and socioemotional well-being (i.e., depressive symptoms, anxiety, and self-esteem), simple regression analyses were conducted. In order to explore the indirect effects of maternal and peer relationship quality, mediation regression analyses, via Model 4 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017), was used. Simple mediation analyses were conducted first to explore the indirect effect of each type of relationship separately. After, simultaneous mediation analyses were conducted to determine which was the stronger mediator. To explore differences by gender and immigrant generation status, moderated mediation regression analyses, via model 58 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017), were conducted. In all regression analyses, age was entered as a covariate. Gender and immigrant generation status were also entered as covariates when not included in the model as moderators. Finally, the decision to utilize the PROCESS macro over conducting path analyses was guided by research demonstrating that in mediation and moderated mediation models, the model parameters, conditional indirect effects, and the index of moderated mediation are generally identical between the two analytic strategies (Hayes et al., 2017).

Descriptive Analyses

Bivariate analyses (see Table 2.1) indicated that ethnic identity commitment was positively correlated with both maternal and peer relationship quality. Ethnic identity commitment was also positively correlated with self-esteem and negatively correlated with depressive symptoms, but it was not significantly correlated with anxiety. Maternal

Table 2.1

Intercorrelations Among Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	—	-.12**	.02	-.05	-.00	-.07	.02	.06	-.03
2. Gender (1 = Female)		—	-.01	.10**	-.00	.15**	-.02	.13**	.08*
3. Immigrant Generation Status			—	.16**	-.00	-.00	.04	.03	-.04
4. Ethnic Identity Commitment				—	.25**	.25**	.22**	-.00	-.11**
5. Maternal Relationship					—	.32**	.41**	-.23**	-.42**
6. Peer Relationships						—	.30**	-.20**	-.19**
7. Self-Esteem							—	-.30**	-.58**
8. Anxiety								—	.44**
9. Depression									—
Mean	19.08	—	—	3.12	3.76	3.85	2.96	1.26	.54
SD	1.17	—	—	.58	.77	.62	.51	.72	.50

Note. $*p \leq .05$; $**p \leq .01$. Coding for immigrant generation status: 0 = 3rd or later generation; 1 = 2nd or earlier generation.

and peer relationship quality were significantly correlated with all three indices of well-being.

Preliminary Analyses

Two separate independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to explore the difference in ethnic identity commitment by gender and immigrant generation status. Females reported significantly higher ethnic identity commitment (M = 3.15, SD = .58) than males (M = 3.01, SD = .57, $t_{(705)}$ = -2.64, $p < .05$, 95% CI [-.25, -.04], d = .24). Regarding immigrant generation status, participants were divided into two groups: 2nd or earlier generation (have at least one foreign-born parent) and 3rd or later generation (both parents are U.S.-born). Participants who were 2nd or earlier generation immigrants reported significantly higher ethnic identity commitment (M = 3.17, SD = .58) than 3rd or later generation immigrant participants (M = 2.94, SD = .57), $t_{(705)}$ = -4.25, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.33, -.12], d = .40.

Direct Associations Between Ethnic Identity and Socioemotional Well-Being

First, to address the hypothesis that ethnic identity commitment would be associated with socioemotional well-being, regression analyses were conducted (H1). Results indicated that ethnic identity commitment was significantly associated with some of the indices of socioemotional well-being. Specifically, ethnic identity commitment was negatively associated with depressive symptoms (B = -.09, SE = .03, β = -.11, $p < .01$, $F_{(1, 705)}$ = 8.32, R^2 = .01), positively associated with self-esteem (B = .19, SE = .03, β = .22, $p < .001$, $F_{(1, 705)}$ = 36.55, R^2 = .05), and not significantly associated with anxiety (B = -.004, SE = .05, β = -.003, $p > .10$, $F_{(1, 705)}$ = .01, R^2 = .00). In light of the non-significant

direct association between ethnic identity commitment and anxiety symptoms, mediation analyses were not conducted for this outcome.

Mediation by Maternal and Peer Relationships

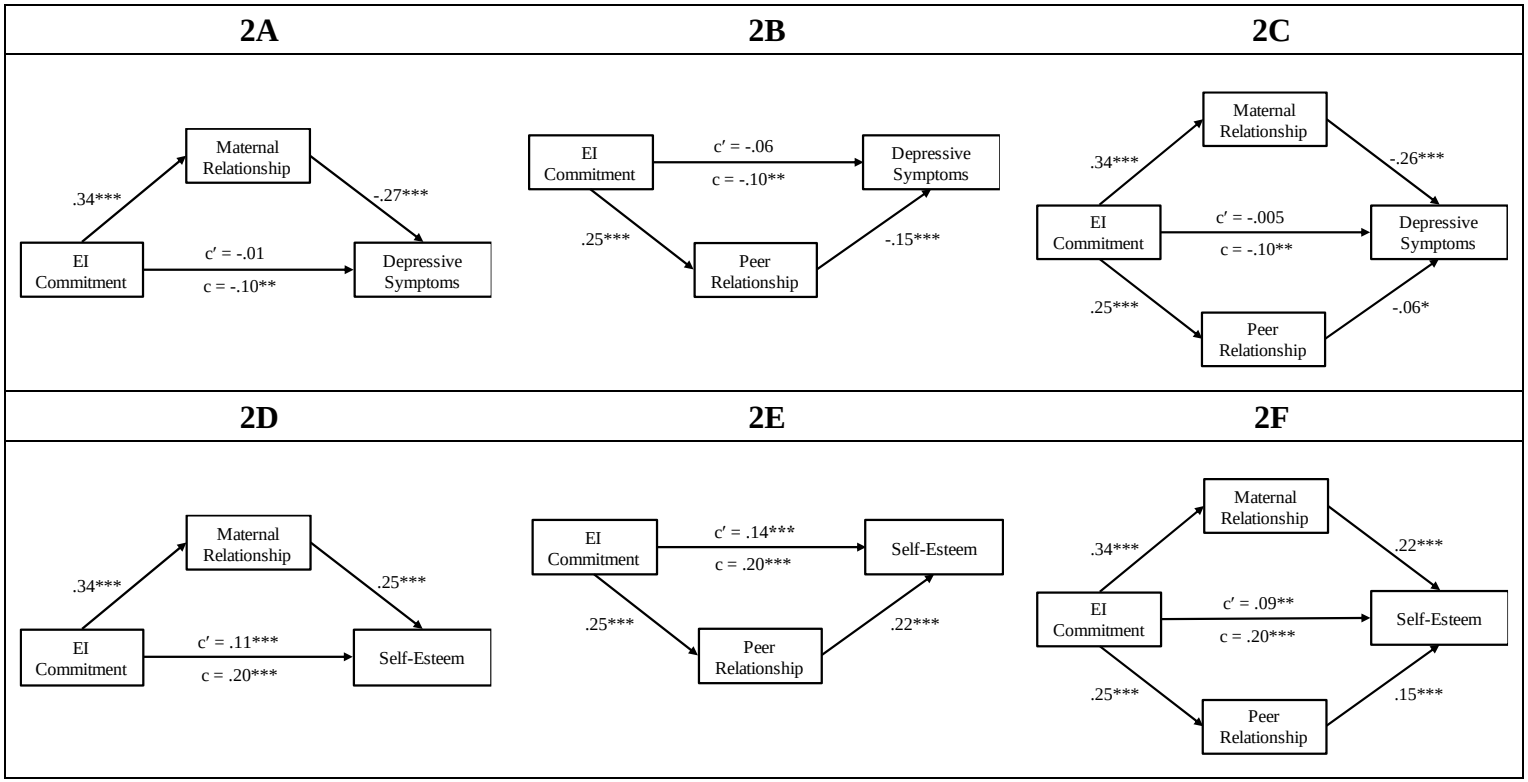
Regression analysis, via Model 4 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017), was used to address the hypothesis that maternal and peer relationship quality would mediate relations between ethnic identity commitment and socioemotional well-being (H2). In order to examine whether maternal and peer relationships were significant mediators, the direct relationships between ethnic identity commitment and relationship quality were examined. Results indicated that ethnic identity commitment was a significant predictor of both maternal (95% CI [.24, .43]) and peer (95% CI [.18, .33]) relationship quality (see Figure 2.2).

Depressive Symptoms

First, the mediating influence of maternal relationship quality on the association between ethnic identity commitment and depressive symptoms was examined (see Figure 2.2A). Results indicated that maternal relationship quality was a significant predictor of depressive symptoms, 95% CI [-.32, -.23]. When controlling for maternal relationship quality, ethnic identity commitment was no longer a significant predictor of depressive symptoms, 95% CI [-.07, .05], consistent with full mediation. Results also indicated a significant indirect effect, B = -.09, SE = .02, 95% CI [-.13, -.06]. Next, the mediating influence of peer relationship quality on this association was examined (see Figure 2.2B). Results indicated that peer relationship quality was a significant predictor of depressive symptoms, 95% CI [-.21, -.09]. When controlling for peer relationship quality, ethnic

Figure 2.2

The direct and indirect effects of ethnic identity (EI) commitment on socioemotional well-being. Values are unstandardized coefficients. Covariates include age, gender, and immigrant generation status.



Note. $*p \leq .05$; $**p \leq .01$, $***p \leq .001$.

identity was no longer a significant predictor of depressive symptoms, 95% CI [-.12, .01], consistent with full mediation. Results also indicated a significant indirect effect, *B* = -.04, *SE* = .01, 95% CI [-.06, -.02].

To explore which type of relationship is a stronger mediator, a simultaneous mediated regression analysis was conducted (H3; see Figure 2.2C). When including both mediators in the model, the indirect effects of both maternal (*B* = -.09, *SE* = .02, 95% CI [-.12, -.06]) and peer relationship quality were significant (*B* = -.02, *SE* = .01, 95% CI [-.03, -.001]). Although these results suggest that both types of relationships mediate the association between ethnic identity commitment and depressive symptoms when considered together, maternal relationship quality was a stronger mediator. In other words, maternal relationship quality was stronger in explaining the link between ethnic identity commitment and depressive symptoms than peer relationship quality.

Self-Esteem

The mediating influence of maternal relationship quality on the association between ethnic identity commitment and self-esteem was examined first (see Figure 2.2D). Results indicated that maternal relationship quality was a significant predictor of self-esteem, 95% CI [.20, .29]. When controlling for maternal relationship quality, ethnic identity commitment was still a significant predictor of depressive symptoms, 95% CI [.05, .17], consistent with partial mediation. Results also indicated a significant indirect effect, *B* = .08, *SE* = .02, 95% CI [.05, .12]. Next, the mediating influence of peer relationship quality on this association was examined (see Figure 2.2E). Results indicated that peer relationship quality was a significant predictor of self-esteem, 95% CI [.16, .28].

When controlling for peer relationship quality, ethnic identity commitment was still a significant predictor of self-esteem, 95% CI [.08, .20], consistent with partial mediation. Results also indicated a significant indirect effect, *B* = .06, *SE* = .01, 95% CI [.04, .08].

To explore which type of relationship was a stronger mediator, a simultaneous mediated regression analysis was conducted (H3; see Figure 2.2F). When including both mediators in the model, the indirect effects of maternal (*B* = .07, *SE* = .01, 95% CI [.05, .10]) and peer (*B* = .04, *SE* = .01, 95% CI [.02, .06]) relationship quality were both significant. Similar to depressive symptoms, these results suggest that both types of relationships mediate the association between ethnic identity commitment and self-esteem when considered together; however, maternal relationship quality was a stronger mediator.

Moderated Mediation Models

Moderated mediation regression analyses, via model 58 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017), were conducted to explore differences by gender and immigrant generation status (H4; see Figure 2.1 for conceptual model) among the indirect effects of maternal and peer relationship quality. In order to provide an overall moderation of both pathways of the mediation, the difference between the conditional indirect effects of the path from ethnic identity commitment to social relationships and the path from relationship quality to socioemotional well-being was taken.

Differences by Gender

Participants' gender did not significantly moderate the indirect effects of maternal (*B* = -.04, *SE* = .04, 95% CI [-.10, .04]) or peer (*B* = .02, *SE* = .03, 95% CI [-.03, .08])

relationship quality in the association between ethnic identity commitment and depressive symptoms.

Similarly, gender of participants did not significantly moderate the indirect effects of maternal (*B* = .02, *SE* = .03, 95% CI [-.05, .08]) or peer (*B* = -.03, *SE* = .03, 95% CI [-.10, .02]) relationship quality in the association between ethnic identity commitment and self-esteem.

Differences by Immigrant Generation Status

Immigrant generation status did not significantly moderate the indirect effects of maternal (*B* = -.01, *SE* = .05, 95% CI [-.09, .08]) or peer (*B* = -.005, *SE* = .02, 95% CI [-.04, .03]) relationship quality in the association between ethnic identity commitment and depressive symptoms. Similarly, immigrant generation status did not significantly moderate the indirect effects of maternal (*B* = .003, *SE* = .04, 95% CI [-.09, .07]) or peer (*B* = .02, *SE* = .02, 95% CI [-.02, .06]) relationship quality in the association between ethnic identity commitment and self-esteem.

Discussion

The current study aimed to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the association between ethnic identity commitment and socioemotional well-being through the indirect effects of maternal and peer relationships. The moderating roles of gender and immigrant generation status on the indirect effects of social relationships was also examined.

It was anticipated that ethnic identity commitment would be positively associated with self-esteem and negatively associated with anxiety and depressive symptoms (H1). This hypothesis was partially supported. Results indicated that ethnic identity

commitment was associated with healthier socioemotional well-being in the form of higher self-esteem and fewer depressive symptoms, but it was not associated with anxiety symptoms. The nature of association between ethnic identity commitment and socioemotional well-being are consistent with existing research (Phinney, 1990; Syed et al., 2013). Because the majority of the current literature focuses on self-esteem and/or depression, it is not completely clear why ethnic identity commitment was not associated with anxiety symptoms, as was expected. However, there is research that suggests that the ethnic composition of a university moderates the relationship between ethnic identity commitment and anxiety, such that the more ethnically diverse a university student body is, the less anxiety participants report (Brittian et al., 2013). It is possible that since participants in the current study attend a Hispanic-serving institution (45.8% - 51.2% of the student body population identified as Hispanic or Latinx between Fall 2015 and Fall 2018), they may have been able to more readily seek out support from peers of similar backgrounds. This university is also considered a commuter school, with the majority of students living off campus. So, the participants in this study could have still been living with their parents making it easier to seek parental support when needed. Overall, an ethnically diverse student body and the ability to more readily seek out parental and peer support may have contributed to the lack of association between ethnic identity commitment and anxiety symptoms.

Next, it was hypothesized that both maternal and peer relationships would mediate the association between ethnic identity and socioemotional well-being (H2). This hypothesis was also partially supported. Maternal relationship quality fully mediated

ethnic identity commitment and depressive symptoms, while partially mediating ethnic identity commitment and self-esteem. In both cases, the indirect paths of maternal relationship quality from ethnic identity commitment to depressive symptoms or self-esteem were significant. Similarly, peer relationship quality fully mediated ethnic identity commitment and depressive symptoms, but partially mediated ethnic identity commitment and self-esteem. As was the case with maternal relationship quality, the indirect paths of peer relationship quality from ethnic identity commitment to depressive symptoms or self-esteem were both significant. These findings support the concept of a shared ethnic identity strengthening the quality of social relationships.

Furthermore, it was expected that maternal relationship quality would have a greater mediating influence than peer relationship quality (H3). As expected, maternal relationship quality was the stronger mediator for depressive symptoms and self-esteem. These findings are in line with previous research that has compared the influence of these two relationships on well-being (Greenberg et al., 1983; Laible et al., 2004). It is clear that maternal relationships remain important well into adulthood, despite the notion that adolescents entering into adulthood may turn to peers more often than parents for support (Sokol, 2009). While quality peer relationships are important as individuals develop their identities, and should not be discounted as they did also significantly explain the ethnic identity commitment–well-being relationship, results suggest that maternal relationships still play a critical role in the well-being of young adults. The sense of a shared ethnic identity may promote better quality maternal relationships, which may contribute to a sense of belonging and perception of continuous support.

The final expectation of the current study was that gender and immigrant generation status would moderate the indirect effects being explored (H4), but results did not support this hypothesis. Much of the research that has found moderating effects of either gender or immigrant generation status have studied children and adolescents and have focused on ethnic identity levels (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2009). Although initial analyses via *t*-tests suggested differences by gender and immigrant generation status on ethnic identity commitment, the expectation that these factors would moderate the indirect associations between ethnic identity commitment and socioemotional well-being was not supported. This could be because Latinx young adults, regardless of gender or immigrant generation status, are all adjusting to their new college settings and look to their mothers and peers at similar rates as they work to understand who they are in this new context.

Overall, the findings of the current study suggest that the quality of social relationships can help to explain the association between ethnic identity commitment and socioemotional well-being. Specifically, maternal relationship quality accounted for the association between ethnic identity commitment and socioemotional well-being more often than peer relationship quality, underscoring the importance of maternal relationships as adolescents proceed into adulthood. Although young adults tend to favor the company of their peers and look to their peers at an increasing rate at this point in their lives, maintaining quality maternal relationships is critical in ensuring healthy ethnic identity development, and eventually commitment, and socioemotional well-being.

These findings also suggest that the ethnic identity commitment–well-being association is a complex one that may be explained by factors other than social relationships. Specifically, the transition to college brings with it a unique set of challenges, such as new financial and social responsibilities that contribute to changes in identity as individuals attempt to define themselves in their new contexts (Kenny & Rice, 1995; Mattanah et al., 2011). Increased involvement in one's culture and heritage through ethnic group membership may also provide individuals with the support they need in responding to and dealing with the disparaging views of their ethnic minority group by the dominant group, thus leading to a more coherent identity and healthier socioemotional well-being. As such, future studies should consider examining how various factors, including discriminatory experiences on college campuses, impact this association among Latinx young adults.

Limitations and Future Studies

The current study is not without limitations. Because of the nonexperimental nature of the study, causality cannot be inferred. Furthermore, the convenience sample of college students, use of mono-ethnic Latinx-origin individuals, and overrepresentation of females in the sample limits the generalizability. Despite this limitation, studying Latinx college students is important as they are the largest minority group in the U.S. and represent a large percentage of university students. They are also a highly stigmatized ethnic group in the U.S. As such, understanding the associations between ethnic identity commitment, social relationships, and socioemotional well-being in this group is important. Additionally, despite an overrepresentation of females in this study, it is not

out of place in comparison to other research whereby Latinx females are generally underrepresented in psychological research. Finally, participants were not given the opportunity to report whether they had a relationship with a parent or guardian of a different gender/sex. Although mothers are more likely to be the primary caregivers and the ones tasked with imparting cultural values in the Latinx culture (Campos et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor & Guimond, 2010), exploring the impact of paternal or non-parental caregiver relationship quality is important.

As U.S. college enrollment has also increased among Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and biracial students in the past two decades (Hussar et al., 2020), future studies should expand to include participants of various ethnic/racial backgrounds to explore differences between these groups. Including participants of various socioeconomic backgrounds and participants who are not attending college is also important as responsibilities (e.g., school, work, and family caregiving) may significantly differ based on socioeconomic status and/or college enrollment status. Ethnic identity commitment could also differ among these groups, and a broader range of participants would increase the generalizability of the study.

The use of a binary measure to collect gender information and lack of information regarding sexual orientation or disabilities limits relevant contextual information of the sample. Future studies are encouraged to provide participants with a more inclusive measure of gender identity and an opportunity to report their sexual orientation as well as any disabilities deemed central to their identity or self-concept. While the current study

did not find moderation by gender, it is recommended that future studies consider exploring the impact of intersectional identities.

Finally, future studies could delve deeper into the relationships being measured by looking at the ethnic makeup of participants' group of friends and living situations. For example, investigating whether participants were raised in a two-parent or single-parent household and whether they still live with their parents could be interesting because the level of cultural socialization could differ. Additionally, asking about the ethnicities of participants' closest friends may elucidate whether having peers of similar or dissimilar ethnicities impacts ethnic identity and peer relationship quality.

Practical Implications

The current study's findings highlight the importance of ethnic identity commitment to socioemotional well-being, as well as the importance of maternal and peer relationships in this association. Since acculturative stress predicts compromised socioemotional health (Crockett et al., 2007), efforts that are geared towards fostering an inclusive environment where young adults feel comfortable exploring and committing to their ethnic identity is important as this may positively influence socioemotional well-being. Furthermore, given that maternal relationship quality was a stronger mediator than peer relationship quality, developing programs that inform parents about the nuances of being a college student can help them in becoming a stronger support system. This is especially important for parents who never attended college and are unaware of what is expected of students. A program for incoming students and their parents can consist of: (1) faculty and staff discussing the college experience, expectations of students, and

responsibilities students may take on; and (2) acknowledging the unique ethnic identities of students and encourage students to initiate conversations related to ethnic identity in the context of their college experience. Such a program may give parents the information they need to be more supportive of their children when they seek out support. It may also bring perceptions of a shared identity to the forefront of the conversation with parents and peers, which may positively impact perceptions of social support. This may then enhance the quality of an individual's maternal and peer relationships, and in turn, their socioemotional well-being.

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Chapter 3:

Navigating the Path to Equality: An Identity-Based Exploration of the Experiences and Needs of Systemically Marginalized Students in Higher Education

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Zeinab A. Hachem served as lead for the study conception and design, funding acquisition, methodology, project administration, resources, data collection, formal data analysis and interpretation, writing – original draft, and writing – review & editing.

Maria Castro-Mendoza and Tsionah Novick contributed to data collection and data analysis.

Tessa L. Dover served as lead supervisor and contributed to the study conception and design, funding acquisition, methodology, data analysis, and writing – review & editing.

Abstract

Education is often regarded as the great equalizer; however, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES*; BPS:12/17*, 2017; *NELS:88*, 2000) highlights a persistent and, in some cases, widening achievement gap between students who hold systemically marginalized identities and their more privileged counterparts. The current study focuses on social integration processes given their pivotal role in determining retention rates within higher education. To better understand the type of change needed to address educational disparities in higher education, the current study draws from discussions that occurred within the context of a social integration support program to qualitatively explore how first-year undergraduate students' marginalized identities (e.g., ethnic-racial identity, sexual identity, first-generation college student status, socioeconomic status, geographical identity, gender identity, and religious identity) intersect and interact within their academic environments to influence university experiences. Employing a strength-based risk and resilience framework, findings shed light on the unique challenges and strengths that stem from systemically marginalized identities in the academic setting. Implications for the development of effective resources on university campuses are discussed.

Navigating the Path to Equality: An Identity-Based Exploration of the Experiences and Needs of Systemically Marginalized Students in Higher Education

Despite increasingly diverse university student bodies with respect to race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), gender, and college generational status, gaps in achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged students have persisted and even widened in some cases (Carter & Welner, 2013; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). While some universities have only paid lip service to addressing issues of structural inequity on their campuses, others have funded initiatives aimed at providing students who hold marginalized identities the tangible resources to facilitate their academic success (Whitley et al., 2018). Although these types of initiatives are an important first step, they have been largely ineffective in creating the type of systemic change necessary to narrow the ever-widening achievement gap between Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and White students (Iacovino & James, 2016) and also between first- and continuing-generation college students (CGCS; Chang et al., 2020; Stephens et al., 2012).

Developing effective strategies in the pursuit of social justice as it relates to disparities in educational attainment requires a shift from analyzing the problem to identifying the factors perpetuating it (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). The current study sought to develop a comprehensive understanding of the needs and experiences of students from systemically marginalized backgrounds. Drawing from discussions that occurred within the context of a social integration support program, the current study employed a strength-based risk and resilience framework to qualitatively explore how students navigate their university environment in relation to various intersecting

marginalized identities. Specifically, utilizing Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methodology, the analysis process was guided by a constructivist grounded theory approach (Hill et al., 1997, 2005), allowing for an inductive exploration of the experiences of students, as they live and perceive them, to guide theory development. This approach centers student narratives to document the unique challenges and resilience factors stemming from systemically marginalized identities (e.g., ethnic-racial identity, sexual identity, first-generation college student status, socioeconomic status, geographical identity, gender identity, and religious identity) at universities.

Literature Review

Persistent Degree Attainment Gaps Based on Systemically Marginalized Identities

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; *BPS:12/17,* 2017; *NELS:88*, 2000) reveals a persistent and, in some cases, widening achievement gap between students who hold systemically marginalized identities and their counterparts, alongside an alarming overall decrease in degree attainment, regardless of background. For instance, regardless of race/ethnicity or SES, in 2017, only 19.0% (vs. 25.0% in 2000) of first-generation college students (FGCS) attained a bachelor's degree compared to 58.7% (vs. 66.7% in 2000) of continuing-generation college students (CGCS). Despite consistent gaps in achievement between FGCS and their CGCS counterparts over a 17-year period, the proportion of students attaining bachelor's degrees has declined for all students, regardless of parental education.

The NCES data also highlights that educational disparities are not confined to a single marginalized identity. Rather, disparities extend across various combinations of

advantaged and disadvantaged identities. Over a 17-year period, consistent disparities have been observed among FGCS from marginalized racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and their privileged FGCS counterparts. Meanwhile, achievement gaps among CGCS from marginalized racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and their privileged CGCS counterparts have widened. Specifically, regardless of SES, in 2017, 51.0% (vs. 64.1% in 2000) of BIPOC CGCS attained a bachelor's degree compared to 61.9% (vs. 67.6% in 2000) of White CGCS. A similar trend emerged in relation to SES: regardless of race/ethnicity, in 2017, 39.0% (vs. 67.6% in 2000) of low-income CGCS attained a bachelor's degree compared to 76.8% (vs. 77.9% in 2000) of upper-class CGCS. These findings underscore the complex interplay of various identities in shaping educational outcomes.

The Importance of Intersectionality in Understanding Educational Disparities

While the NCES data (*BPS:12/17*, 2017; *NELS:88*, 2000) reveals a concerning decline in degree attainment for all students, the particularly pronounced decline among historically marginalized groups highlights the intersecting impacts of race/ethnicity, SES, and college generational status on educational outcomes. Research has consistently shown that FGCS tend to be BIPOC and come from low-income or working-class backgrounds (Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). This trend persisted as of 2017, with 32.2% of college students reporting to be first-generation, of which 44.4% were BIPOC (vs. 24.7% White) and 46.5% from low-income backgrounds (vs. 8.3% upper-class; *BPS:12/17*, 2017).

Employing an intersectional lens, then, is essential as it accounts for the intersection of multiple social identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, SES, college generational status) that shape students' university experiences and outcomes (Barnett & Lamy, 2013; Welner & Carter, 2013; Whitley et al., 2018). An intersectional approach also allows for a comprehensive understanding of systemic inequities in higher education, particularly as disadvantaged students grapple with multiple systemically marginalized identities, potentially compounding their disadvantage within the academic context (Crenshaw, 1991; Evans-Winters, 2021; Gillborn, 2015; Harris & Leonardo, 2018; Nelson et al., 2015).

Systemic Inequities in Higher Education Perpetuate Opportunity Gaps

Though the NCES data provides a broad picture of academic achievement disparities, it does not capture the myriad inequities causing and perpetuating such disparities. Upon entering college, marginalized students tend to be at an academic, social, and/or economic disadvantage (Padgett et al., 2012; Pratt et al., 2019; Stephens et al., 2012) due to a lack of opportunity and not necessarily because of a lack of ability or potential (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Murnane & Duncan, 2011; Welner & Carter, 2013).

Besides financial concerns and strain among low-SES students (Pratt et al., 2019), the two main factors that impact college retention and degree attainment for systemically marginalized students are academic and social integration (Iacovino & James, 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). Social and academic success in education continue to be defined by independent cultural values and behavioral norms that mirror middle and upper-class Euro-American cultural values and norms (Iacovino & James, 2016;

Stephens et al., 2012). As such, systemically marginalized students may find themselves navigating an educational system that is unable to support their unique cultural backgrounds and lived experiences, reinforcing opportunity gaps in learning (Carter, 2013). In other words, cultural and social capital inequities among students who hold systemically marginalized identities puts them at a clear disadvantage and perpetuates educational disparities. The following sections provide a review of previous work on cultural and social capital among marginalized students.

Cultural Capital. Cultural capital is an understanding of the values and norms that facilitate successful social interactions (Stephens et al., 2012). For systemically marginalized students, in particular, the university environment can increase conscious awareness of their marginalized identities. These students are faced with the added challenge of negotiating marginalized identities and reconciling their lived experiences with the demands and expectations of the academic environment. This identity negotiation process (i.e., meaning-making process) involves balancing the need to conform to the university's cultural values and norms with the need to enact self-verifying behavior of core self-conceptions during social interactions (Cross et al., 2017; Deaux & Major, 1987; Holland et al., 2001; Rogers & Way, 2018; Taylor, 1998).

The cultural mismatch between the independent cultural values and behavioral norms on American university campuses and the interdependent cultural values and norms typically exhibited among FGCS, BIPOC students, and low-SES students has been found to exacerbate academic and psychosocial challenges (Chang et al., 2020; Stephens et al., 2012) which persist through graduation (Phillips et al., 2020). Cultural mismatch

on American college campuses can pose a particular challenge for students with highly interdependent self-construals, which emphasize their connectedness to others, and for BIPOC students who highly identify with their ethnic-racial identity as they may feel that to succeed in U.S. higher education, they must deemphasize a central aspect of their identity. For example, Zhang & Noels (2013) found students reporting high ethnic-racial identity salience in a university setting also reported worse well-being even if they reported a high level of authenticity. Although the university environment can intensify and accelerate acculturation processes (Phillips et al., 2020), cultural mismatch upon entering college predicts worse academic performance (Stephens et al., 2012) and early academic failures can ultimately reduce the likelihood to persist (Gao-Miles, 2016; Iacovino & James, 2016; Museus & Quaye, 2009).

Social Capital. Related to cultural capital, social capital refers to access to social relationships and networks that provide resources (e.g., information, advice) to facilitate an individual's goal attainment (Coleman, 1988; Holland, 2010). Cultural and social capital inequities can manifest in myriad ways to create disadvantages. For example, even with high parental encouragement regarding college attendance, a lack of informational and other tangible support puts students from various systemically marginalized backgrounds (e.g., BIPOC, FGCS, low-SES) at a disadvantage upon entering college (Holland, 2010; Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). While enrolled in college, a lack of cultural and social capital also predicts greater difficulty in making new friends and fitting into the university environment, both of which exacerbate an uncertainty of belonging, directly impacting retention rates (McAdams, 2001; Padgett et al., 2012; Phillips et al.,

2020; Pratt et al., 2019). A perceived lack of belonging in one's academic environment has also been linked to increased imposter feelings, both of which have been found to predict academic disidentification (Blondeau & Awad, 2018; Cokley et al., 2023; Stone et al., 2018).

Systemically marginalized students are also less likely to utilize their social support systems whether to save face or because of concerns of being a burden (Chang et al., 2020). This can manifest in being less prepared or inclined to seek help from faculty in college, likely because of a lack of encouragement to seek help from faculty in high school (Padgett et al., 2012).

Establishing a Resilience-Based Social Integration Support Program

Despite the implementation of countless interventions, educational disparities have persisted (Farkas, 2011; Whitley et al., 2018). The lackluster long-term effects of curriculum-centered and teacher-centered interventions suggest the need for more student-centered interventions that target social integration processes. Indeed, as Lewin (1951) asserted, large systemic changes depend more on where a shift occurs in the system and less so on the scale of that shift (as cited by Foster-Fishman & Watson, 2017). However, developing effective strategies in the pursuit of social justice to transform the status quo of disparities in educational attainment demands a comprehensive understanding of the needs and experiences of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. To do this, systems-change and resilience-based intervention approaches were applied to a social integration support program with the aim of promoting transformative change in

students. The program simultaneously provided an avenue to explore systemically marginalized students' needs and experiences.

A systems-change approach suggests that the structures within a system (e.g., norms, resources, connections) work together to produce behavioral outcomes that uphold the system and maintain the status quo. Transformative change, therefore, requires a strategic shift in at least one of these structures (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007; Foster-Fishman & Watson, 2017). The social integration support program primarily aimed to address cultural and social capital inequities to facilitate the social integration of first-year university students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Rather than view the marginalized backgrounds of students as sources of deficit, the program instead focused on developing individual assets and providing resources as the impetus for change (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Whitley et al., 2018). Program participants were encouraged to own their strength-based narrative while connecting with students and a diverse set of university faculty and staff who held similar systemically marginalized identities (e.g., BIPOC, FGCS, low-SES).

While most universities have made a concerted effort to provide access to valuable spaces where systemically marginalized students feel they can celebrate their identities, or at the very least validate their identities (Museus & Quaye, 2009), these spaces do not efficiently satisfy the intersectionality of identities (Whitley et al., 2018) nor were they designed to explicitly discuss cultural acclimation, social capital, and other experiences that may occur in relation to one's identity. Rather, these conversations may occur organically as students connect with one another. Given the greater difficulty

systemically marginalized students have in connecting with peers and faculty (Chang et al., 2020; Pratt et al., 2019), a resilience program could facilitate connections and increase both a sense of belonging and social capital.

Relatedly, providing a space that empowers students to explore their systemically marginalized identities without fear of further marginalization may decrease such feelings and signal that the university values diversity and their presence at the university (Geronimus et al., 2016). Additionally, connecting with students and university faculty and staff from similar backgrounds or lived experiences may positively impact their sense of belonging and, in turn, their academic achievement (Gao-Miles, 2016; Walton & Cohen, 2007; Whitley et al., 2018).

The program introduced students to a diverse set of university faculty and staff to further increase social capital. Faculty and staff discussed how their own systemically marginalized identities, such as being first-generation college students, from low-SES background, and/or BIPOC impacted their academic experiences and provided advice to students to facilitate their own academic success. They also discussed their current research or related work and encouraged students to connect with them for further information or advice. Students were also routinely encouraged to connect with faculty and staff they met outside of the program. The continuous reminders to connect with faculty and staff was intended to empower students to build their social capital outside of the context of the program.

While the current study does not focus on outcomes related to participation in the intervention program, discussions that occurred throughout the intervention program

revealed the unique challenges systemically marginalized students face. Discussions correspondingly highlighted how intersecting systemically marginalized identities are also sources of resilience.

Employing a Strength-Based Risk and Resilience Framework

Despite the many challenges students with systemically marginalized identities face, these identities can also be sources of resilience. As such, the current study employed a strength-based risk and resilience framework to investigate the risk and resilience factors that stem from systemically marginalized identities in a university setting.

The strength-based risk and resilience framework focuses on identifying and leveraging promotive factors that mitigate risks and promote resilience (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). This framework emphasizes a shift in perspective from solely focusing on potential risks to also recognizing and utilizing existing internal individual assets in conjunction with external resources. The social-ecological context is also emphasized within this framework, underscoring the societal systems and structures that perpetuate inequities and impact individual outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; McLean et al., 2023).

Risks are defined as potential negative events or outcomes that can threaten well-being and goal attainment while risk factors are individual-based deficits or context-based challenges that increase the likelihood of a negative outcome (Compas, 2004; Sandler, 2001). Resilience, on the other hand, refers to the ability of individuals or communities to adapt, recover, or even thrive in the face of adversity. Resilience is

conceptualized as both a dynamic process and an outcome (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). For example, the process of overcoming the challenges associated with the transition to college represents a process of resilience while degree attainment signifies a resilience outcome.

Employing a Qualitative Methodology

The use of qualitative methods is important in understanding the experiences and perspectives of systemically marginalized students. While quantitative methods can shed light on some of the barriers faced by this student population, they may fall short in capturing the richness and complexity of their experiences. Qualitative methods, on the other hand, can provide a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and contextual factors that influence their university experiences.

Furthermore, qualitative methods allow for an intersectional lens to be applied in understanding how multiple and intersecting marginalized identities shape university experiences. By using qualitative methods to explore the experiences of systemically marginalized students from diverse backgrounds, we can also better understand the intersecting and compounding effects of various systemic inequities that produce greater disparities in educational outcomes.

Finally, qualitative research centers the voices of systemically marginalized students. Centering the voices of those who have been historically marginalized allows us to move away from the deficit-based framing that has so often been used with this population (McLean et al., 2023), and instead highlights marginalized students' strength and resilience in pursuing a higher education in an inequitable system.

Current Study

The current study highlights the unique challenges and strengths that stem from systemically marginalized identities in the university setting. The study focused on identifying the specific risk factors systemically marginalized students face, and the protective factors that contribute to their resilience and success. By examining the intersectionality of marginalized social identities, such as race/ethnicity, college generational status, SES, gender, and sexual identity, the study provides a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how these intersecting identities influence university experiences. Additionally, the study uncovers promotive factors that can facilitate the academic achievement and well-being of systemically marginalized students.

Method

Participants

Program Participants

Program participants were 10 first-year college students (M_{age} = 18.30, *SD* = 0.68, Range = 18-20). Nine participants identified as first-generation college students and one identified as a continuing-generation college student. It should be noted that the continuing-generation college student participant's parents completed their higher education outside of the U.S. As such, all participants were unfamiliar with the U.S. college application process. Regarding race, two participants identified as Asian, two identified as Hispanic or Latino, one identified as Middle Eastern or North African, and two identified as White or Caucasian. Three participants identified as multiracial: one participant identified as Asian and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; one

participant identified as Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, and White or Caucasian; and one participant identified as Asian and White or Caucasian. Participants were also asked to share their ethnic-racial identity in their own words (see Table 3.1).

Of the BIPOC students, two participants were born outside of the U.S. with one arriving to the U.S. at 6 years old and the other at 13 years old. Six participants reported being born in the U.S. to at least one foreign-born parent. Five participants indicated that English was not their first language and was not the main language spoken at home. One participant indicated that while English was their first language, both English and their heritage language were spoken at home.

Table 3.1

Ethnic-Racial Self-Identification

P #	Self-Selected Racial Identities	Self-Described Ethnic-Racial Identity	College Generation Status
1	Asian	*Chinese*	F
2	Hispanic or Latino	*Latina and Mexican American*	F
3	White or Caucasian	*I identify as white but I also have Native American family on my dads side.*	F
4	Hispanic or Latino	*Latinx, Mexican, Guatemalan*	F
5	Asian	*Asian American*	F
6	Middle Eastern or North African	*Iraqi*	F
7	White or Caucasian	*Caucasian*	F
8	- Asian - White or Caucasian	*Indian and Irish American*	C
9	- Asian - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	*South Asian American and Pacific Islander*	F
10	- Black or African American - Hispanic or Latino - White or Caucasian	*Latina*	F

Note. F = first-generation college student. C = continuing-generation college student.

Three participants identified as men, six participants identified as women, and one participant identified as nonbinary. One participant identified as transgender. Four

participants identified as heterosexual/straight, two identified as bisexual, two identified as pansexual, one identified as asexual, and one participant preferred not to say.

In terms of SES, four participants identified with a low-SES background, three with middle class, and three with upper class/SES. Five participants indicated living in an urban community while in high school, three lived in a suburban community, and two lived in a rural community.

Program Team/Analysis Team

The first three authors served as intervention program support and as the primary analysis team. The first author, and primary investigator, identifies as a cis-gender, second-generation Lebanese American woman, a first-generation college student, and is an applied social psychology graduate student. The first author facilitated all five sessions and coordinated data analysis efforts. The second author identifies as a multiracial—second-generation Mexican and White—cis-gender woman who, at the time of the study, was a continuing-generation undergraduate student majoring in psychology. The third author identifies as a cis-gender White woman and as a nontraditional and first-generation college student who at the time of the study was an undergraduate student majoring in psychology. The second and third authors served as program support for all five sessions. The fourth author, who served as an auditor, identifies as a White cis-gendered woman with Native Hawaiian heritage, a continuing-generation student and applied social psychologist. She did not facilitate sessions but oversaw the creation of the program and data collection. She also was a guest speaker at one of the sessions.

Temporal Context of Program

The intervention program was implemented in the Fall 2021 term during which the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing, the political climate charged, and racial tensions high. Anti-Black and anti-Asian prejudice and discrimination were particularly high during this time due to misinformation related to the source of the COVID-19 virus and national Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of George Floyd's murder, respectively (Eboigbe et al., 2023).

Environmental Context of Program

The intervention program took place at a historically predominantly White institution (PWI), largely comprised of commuters in a predominantly White urban environment. In the Fall 2021 term, 52% of the university student body identified as White and 39% identified as BIPOC. The BIPOC student population included 17% Hispanic or Latino, 10% Asian, 4% Black or African American, 1% American Indian or Alaska Native, 1% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders, and 6% who identified with two or more races. Among the undergraduate student body, 58% were Pell Grant recipients (IPEDS Data Feedback Report, 2022).

Procedure

Recruitment of Participants

Prior to recruitment, the study was approved by the Portland State University (PSU) Institutional Review Board. Participants were recruited through announcements sent to students' university emails. Flyers were also posted in various buildings on the university's campus. The primary investigator also made announcements at the start of the term in multiple classes that are typically taken by first-year undergraduate students.

The main criteria used to determine eligibility were class status (i.e., freshmen), race/ethnicity, and college-generational status. Students were required to be first-year, first-time university students for two reasons. First, as Hawe et al. (2009) explained, it is important to consider where and when an intervention fits within a context, and previous research has recommended interventions focus on first-year, first-time incoming students as inequalities that determine high school completion carry over to college entry and persistence (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). Second, given the limited capacity to participate in the program, the first and fourth author agreed to focus on first-year students who, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, were not presented with the same opportunities as students further along in their undergraduate careers to engage in the community-building process that typically occurs in the first several weeks of attending university (e.g., connecting with their peers during in-person classes or at various campus events). As such, first-year undergraduate students who had not attended any other university were considered eligible to participate in the research program; however, attendance of a community college in high school (i.e., dual enrollment) was acceptable.

Furthermore, students who are most at risk of attrition are FGCS, regardless of race/ethnicity, and BIPOC students, regardless of college generational status (Chang et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2020; Stephens et al., 2012). As such, White student participants were required to be FGCS. BIPOC student participants could be either FGCS or CGCS.

Eligibility was determined through an online screening questionnaire, which asked for demographic information and verified: (1) ability to attend all five Zoom sessions; (2) willingness to answer pre-session guiding questions; (3) willingness to

complete an exit survey; and (4) possessing the necessary technology to participate in live Zoom sessions. Out of 164 participants, 18% (n = 30) were deemed eligible and were prompted to complete the initial online questionnaire after providing consent. Of the 30 eligible participants, 21 participants (13% of initial sample) completed the initial online questionnaire who were then invited to participate in the support group sessions. Of these 21 participants, 10 participants (6% of initial sample) provided consent to participate in the five intervention program sessions and completed the first session's pre-session guiding questions.

Social Integration Support Intervention Program

The current study was part of a larger study involving a social integration support program. Participants were also asked to complete an intake and exit questionnaire. Additional demographic items not asked in the screening questionnaire were asked at the beginning of the questionnaires, along with measures related to constructs, such as ethnic-racial identification, academic identification, and well-being.

In line with a social justice research perspective, where the goal is to understand systemic inequities and promote social change (Cokley & Awad, 2013; Fassinger & Morrow, 2013), the program was designed with the dual purpose of exploring the experiences and needs of systemically marginalized students while simultaneously empowering them and increasing their sense of agency within the academic context. It took the form of a remote support group for first- and continuing-generation BIPOC students and White first-generation college students, called "What They Don't Talk About at Orientation: A Supportive Community for Minority Students and White First-

Generation College Students." Five biweekly 1.5-hour sessions were held via Zoom. Except for the breakout rooms, the sessions were recorded using Zoom's record feature.

Each session had a theme with a subset of discussion questions (see Appendix A). The themes were informed by past research, the first author's own experiences navigating higher education as a student who held multiple systemically marginalized identities within the academic context, and in collaboration with the fourth author. Importantly, while the first author's experiences informed the design of the study and the themes of each session, care was taken to avoid the assumption that her lived experiences would resemble that of the participants who may have held similar or differing marginalized identities. She also recognized that her role as the researcher in this context communicated a position of power. In line with social justice best practices, a diverse research team was recruited and positionalities, along with their potential impacts, were discussed from the outset of the intervention, during its implementation, and throughout the data analysis process (discussed in more detail below; Fassinger & Morrow, 2013). While participants were not consulted in the design of the program, the first author established and reinforced the notion that she and the research team were learning and gaining just as much from them as she hoped they were from participating in the program. In this way, the first author hoped to communicate her commitment to increasing participants' voices and sense of empowerment, while also building rapport.

Prior to each session, participants were asked to submit their responses to these pre-session guided questions at least 48 hours before each session. Each session was broken down into three parts. The first 25 minutes included a guest speaker and time for

questions and answers. The first four speakers were PSU professors who spoke about their own lived experiences and shared relevant research related to that session's theme. The fifth speaker was a PSU staff member who spoke of their lived experiences and expertise related to the last session's theme.

The second part of the session included about 25 minutes in a breakout room where participants discussed the session's guided questions together. Breakout room groups were composed to be racially/ethnically diverse and balanced with respect to gender identity. The first author used information from the screening questionnaire to assign participants to breakout rooms.

Participants were placed in the same breakout rooms for all five sessions. The primary investigator and the two research assistants were each present in one of the three breakout rooms, joining the same breakout room for all five sessions. During this part of the session, the research team kept their videos and microphones off to give participants a chance to converse with each other more comfortably and only intervened if participants were in need of assistance or clarification.

The third, and last, part of the session lasted about 40 minutes where all participants were given the opportunity to share their responses to that week's questions. Participants were also encouraged to share anything they may have learned from other participants while in their breakout room and if/how it has helped them to see a different perspective. During this portion of the session, the first author also asked follow-up questions of the participants. Follow-up questions were formulated either from the first-author's review of

participant's responses to pre-session guided questions or based on what she heard in discussion throughout the session.

Compensation

Upon completion of the program, including the intake and exit questionnaires, participants received $50 either via an Amazon gift card or via Venmo.

Data Sources

Pre-Session Guiding Questions

Before each session, participants were sent a set of questions related to the session's theme (see Appendix A). The purpose was to get participants thinking about the topic and prepare them for having a fruitful discussion with their peers. For example, Session 1's theme was "Deciding to Go to College and Experience in College So Far" and the first guiding question asked, "Why did you decide to attend college?" See Appendix A for a complete list of guiding questions for each session.

Participant Observation

In the second part of each session, participants were placed into one of three breakout rooms. Participants were assigned to the same breakout room for all five sessions. The first, second, and third authors were each present in one of the three breakout rooms and joined the same breakout room for all five sessions. While in the breakout rooms, the research team took on the role of *observer as participant*, such that the participants were aware of our presence in the breakout room, but our cameras and microphones were muted (Hesse-Biber, 2017). As participants conversed, researchers took field notes, making note of salient themes (i.e., topics that all participants within the

breakout room seem to agree about or topics that engender particularly intense emotions—positive or negative—within or among participants) throughout the conversation, participants' body language and facial expressions, as well as the general vibe of the conversation. The first author instructed the research assistants to unmute their camera and microphone and interrupt the breakout room discussion only if participants were experiencing technical difficulties or if participants' coversation had veered away from that session's topical theme.

Whole-Group Discussions

One of the main purposes of the intervention program was to provide a supportive community for BIPOC and first-generation White college students. To achieve this while also generating relevant data, the question-and-answer portion of the first part of each session and the whole group discussion that occurred after the breakout room portion of each session were recorded via Zoom's recording feature and took the form of a theory-building focus group. A theory-building focus group reflects a blend of a scoping focus group and a narrative focus group where researchers follow a semi-structured conversation protocol to elicit greater participant interaction with the aim of generating both opinion- and experiential-based information from participants (Ryan et al., 2014).

Demographic Questionnaire

Participants provided demographic information both in the screening questionnaire and at the beginning of an intake questionnaire that had to be completed before the first session to be able to participate in the intervention program (see Appendix B). Participants provided the following demographic information: age; race; ethnic/racial

identity; academic status (e.g., freshman, sophomore, etc.); gender; sexual identity; socioeconomic status; first language; language spoken at home, the type of community (i.e., urban, rural, suburban) in which they resided during high school. Participants were also asked whether they, their mother, and their father were born in the U.S. If they indicated they were not born in the U.S., they were asked to provide the age in which they arrived to the U.S.

Data Analysis

Except for the breakout room portion of each session, all five sessions of the intervention program were recorded via Zoom's recording feature. The first author downloaded the transcripts provided on Zoom's platform. The second and third authors updated each session's transcript for accuracy and were also instructed to include nonverbal cues (e.g., emphasis of certain words) and behaviors (e.g., facial expressions).

For each session, the research team analyzed responses to the pre-session guiding questions, field notes from the participant observation of the three breakout room discussions, as well as transcripts of the question-and-answer portion of the first part of each session and the whole group discussion that occurred after the breakout room portion of each session.

Consensual Qualitative Research

As the current study sought to understand how the marginalized social identities students hold interact with their university environment to impact university experiences, data analysis was not approached with a specific theoretical framework in mind (i.e., deductive research). Rather, an inductive, grounded theory approach was employed.

Specifically, data analysis was guided by Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methodology because of its usefulness in documenting inner experiences through an inductive process (Hill et al., 1997, 2005). CQR builds on the constructivist view of the grounded theory approach, which posits that just as interaction partners co-construct social realities, data are co-constructed through participant-researcher interactions. CQR also relies on a rigorous multi-researcher analysis team to reach consensus in the analysis and interpretation of data in an effort to reduce bias from any one researcher (Hill et al., 1997; Ponterotto, 2005; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014).

Constructing and Cross Analyzing Core Ideas

The primary analysis team consisted of the first three authors. The first author provided training to the second and third author. In line with the grounded theory approach, data analysis involved a nonlinear, iterative open, axial, and selective coding process (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). The primary analysis team first separately coded the data using each session's theme and pre-session guiding questions as initial domains to guide the coding process (Hill et al., 1997). The analysis team then held several meetings to sift through each line of data, using Atlas.ti 23.2.1 for Mac, to consensually identify relevant core ideas (i.e., open coding) that were cross analyzed to generate categories (i.e., axial coding) which were then integrated into broad themes, or domains (i.e., selective coding).

Overall, there was a high level of convergence among the primary analysis team. In the rare instances of divergence, each member would explain their interpretation of the data and a discussion would ensue until consensus was reached. Furthermore, utilizing

the constant comparative approach within the grounded theory approach, the open, axial, and selective codes were constantly and consistently revisited and appropriately revised throughout the analysis process (Williams & Moser, 2019).

Audit Process

The fourth author took on the role of auditor, a key component of CQR where analyses are audited by someone who is not part of the primary analysis team to ensure that the primary analysis team's findings accurately represent the data (Hill et al., 1997, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005). The auditor periodically independently reviewed and provided feedback on core ideas, categories, and domains. Auditor feedback typically consisted of suggestions related to the construction of domains. The primary analysis team incorporated the auditor's feedback into the analysis process until consensus was reached between the primary analysis team and the auditor.

Findings

Strength-Based Risk and Resilience Framework

Given the breadth of topics discussed throughout the social integration support program, several domains, or themes, emerged in the findings. Upon completion of the inductive coding process, the first and fourth author met to review the emergent domains and to discuss how they fit together. An initial observation was participants' discussion of how their marginalized social identities impacted university experiences. In compiling the relevant subset of domains, the first and fourth author then recognized that participants discussed both challenges (i.e., risks) and resilience or protective factors that stemmed from their marginalized identities. Thus, a strength-based risk and resilience

framework was applied to explore how students' marginalized social identities interact with their university environment.

Qualitative analyses revealed adverse (i.e., challenges) and protective (i.e., resilience) factors in relation to the following university experiences: (1) consciousness/awareness of marginalized identities in a university setting; (2) striving behaviors; (3) academic sense of belonging and feelings of imposter phenomenon (IP); and (4) perceptions of a social support system. See Table 3.2 for a summary of the findings.

Domain 1: Consciousness of Marginalized Identities in a University Setting

Throughout the intervention program, participants mentioned both personal and social identities. Given the focus of the current paper, we will focus solely on the social identities participants mentioned. In order of most to least mentioned (across all data sources), participants mentioned: ethnic-racial identity, sexual identity, college generational status, socioeconomic status, geographical identity, gender identity, and religious identity. Each of these social identities were discussed with a keen awareness of the marginalization of the identity, which is explored more deeply in the following section.

Challenges Related to Marginalization Consciousness. Several themes emerged related to the challenges associated with participants' conscious awareness of the marginalization of their self-categorized social identities.

C1.1: Pre-University Discriminatory Experiences in Academic Settings. Participants reported being both targets and witnesses of discriminatory experiences in

Table 3.2

Summary of Findings

Domain	Challenge	No. of Occurrences		Resilience
Domain 1: *Consciousness of Marginalized Identities in a University Setting*	C1.1: Pre-University Discriminatory Experiences in Academic Settings	22	7	RF1.1: Seeking Out and/or Providing Peer Support
	C1.2: Ongoing Discriminatory Experiences in Non-Academic Settings	23	5	RF1.2: Confronting Stigmatizers
	C1.3: Anticipating and Experiencing Discrimination at University	12	4	RF1.3: Agentic Activism
	C1.4: Concealing Marginalized Identities	4	6	RF1.4: Humor
	C1.5: Identity Negotiation	1	5	RF1.5: Ignoring or Removing Self from the Situation
	C1.6: Limited Opportunities Due to Marginalized Identities	21	4	RF1.6: Contextualizing Discriminatory Experiences
Domain 2: *Striving Behaviors*	C2.1: Increased Striving to Counteract Marginalization	20	10	RF2.1: Recognizing Resources to Reduce Negative Consequences of Striving
	C2.2: Pressure to Succeed as a Marginalized Person	18	11	RF2.2: Striving Can Reduce Perceptions of Limitations Related to Academic Achievement
	C2.3: Increased Striving Due to Immigrant Parental Expectations	13	1	RF2.3: Internalized Parental Encouragement and Expectations
	C2.4: Risk of Burnout	2		
Domain 3: *Academic Sense of Belonging and Imposter Phenomenon*	C3.1: Experiences of Stereotype Threat	7	21	RF3.1: Mindset Shift
	C3.2: Trespasser Phenomenon	15	8	RF3.2: Sense of Self-Fulfillment
			5	RF3.3: Internalized Societal Norms
			1	RF3.4: Parental Encouragement
Domain 4: *Social Support System*	C4.1: Unequal Financial Support	13	105	RF4.1: Focusing on Available Forms of Support and Support Networks
	C4.2: Unequal Informational Support	20	4	RF4.2: Proactively Seeking Peer Social Networks and Support
	C4.3: Intragenerational Support or Lack Thereof	8		
	C4.4: Difficulty in Forming Friendships for Multiracial Students	2		
	C4.5: Parent-Child Disconnect	9		
	C4.6: Perceived Lack of Emotional Support from Parents	1		
	C4.7: Gendered Shift in Parental Support	3		

pre-university academic settings from both peers and educators, beginning as early as elementary school and persisting through high school. They recounted discriminatory experiences related to various held marginalized identities, though most were related to participants' ethnicity/race. A self-described racially ambiguous participant reported experiencing "racism and discrimination in past schools, mostly from other students but also somewhat from former teachers from different racial and religious backgrounds." She specifically recounted being told in elementary school that she was "gonna go to hell for like looking like this and … not being Christian." Another participant described discriminatory experiences related to her socioeconomic status: "I faced a lot of discrimination for being poor.… I remember having to stay behind on school field trips, free lunch and the relentless teasing. I have even had teachers make classist remarks in regards to me and my family…."

Participants also recounted witnessing discriminatory acts that left them feeling frustrated and further marginalized. One participant shared how a discriminatory act left her without her best friend in her senior year of high school:

> At my high school, the majority of the student body was white.… [there] was racist graffiti on one of our school entry ways that said "2020 BLDM" with "don't" written under the D. Implying that Black lives don't matter… That was shocking and very upsetting and so my friend and I skipped school and then his mom decided he wasn't gonna go to in-person school anymore.

Another participant shared a similar experience and sentiment of frustration:

> The same thing happened at my high school. The perpetrators were allowed to walk at graduation but they [the administration] didn't do anything. They were affluent white people. Their families have prominent positions in society. [The participant's tone of voice and choice of words conveyed a sense of defeat.]

C1.2: Ongoing Discriminatory Experiences in Non-Academic Settings. In addition to experiencing discrimination in pre-university academic settings, participants also highlighted constant discriminatory experiences since childhood in non-academic settings from strangers and even family members. For example, one participant, who immigrated to the U.S. as a child and whose first language is not English, was regularly told to speak "American." Another participant shared instances of discrimination during childhood "that was [were] really confusing and inaccurate:"

> So I'm racially ambiguous, right? It's confusing and I know that and so I get a lot of different terms that different races get to hear, and they're super fun. I've been told to go back to Mexico. … I was called the [*sic*] suicide bomber a couple times when I was a kid. … I've been called, like a monkey and a gorilla, like there's things and I'm just like ugh…

Other participants made clear that discriminatory experiences in non-academic settings did not dissipate over time but rather, remain an ever-present part of their reality. One participant shared, "I don't wanna go into sob stories about racial identities … but it happens to me weekly, every time I go outside. I have faced racial discrimination. I have like a weekly quota." Another participant shared of their sexual identity, that discriminatory experiences were "more of a daily thing that I deal with that just like society puts upon me …"

C1.3: Anticipating and Experiencing Discrimination at University. Despite participants being new university students in their first term at the time of the study, the majority anticipated experiencing discrimination at some point in their undergraduate careers. One participant shared that while she had yet to experience any discrimination on campus, she was not "betting on" never experiencing discrimination throughout her

undergraduate career. Another participant added that while she feels that the location of the university is more inclusive than her hometown, “no place is completely void of discrimination.” Meanwhile, a third participant shared that despite being only a few weeks into her first term, she had already experienced discrimination on campus. She recounted that she and her hijab-wearing Muslim roommate were walking by the campus library when a missionary stopped them. The missionary proceeded to hand only her roommate a bible, telling her “…she should change her religion to follow the one true god…” The participant seemed very uncomfortable as she recounted the experience and added that “it was very odd.”

C1.4: Concealing Marginalized Identities. To avoid discriminatory experiences, some participants revealed that they suppress concealable marginalized identities. One participant shared his apprehension of being open about his sexuality because of being in spaces where “people picked on LGBT people.” He also expressed a desire to avoid explaining his identity to others. Similarly, a self-described straight-passing participant also shared that she does not express her sexuality as she does not want to explain her identity to others or experience pressure from others to assume an identity.

C1.5: Identity Negotiation. Regardless of whether one can conceal or suppress a marginalized identity, participants noted the additional challenge of negotiating, or making meaning of their marginalized identities in the university context, particularly with the ever-present concern of being a target of discrimination. In seeking guidance and support about navigating this identity negotiation process, one participant asked of the first author, with other participants indicating interest in a response:

> … I've kind of experienced this and I've seen my friends experience this, like a disconnect between do you call yourself American or do you call yourself, like, Middle Eastern? Like how do you reference yourself, or do you, *can* [emphasized "can"] you even call yourself both because, are you both that sort of thing, did you ever have an issue with that?

***C1.6: Limited Opportunities Due to Marginalized Identities*.** Participants indicated an early awareness of limited or unequal access to opportunities due to marginalized identities. A participant recounted:

> I come from a low-income K-8 school, where I was in the Dual Language Immersion Program. I was made aware of the lack of funding we received because we were Latinos. Our parents would speak to district representative, but nothing ever changed. They were ignored because they were poor and didn't have education.

Participants also discussed feeling limited with regard to the type of career they can pursue because of their SES, ethnic-racial identity, and gender identity. One participant shared of their SES, "I feel like there are definitely jobs that are just out of my league because I come from a lower socioeconomic background. There are just jobs that would require levels of education I don't think I'd be able to get." Another participant shared of her gender identity: "…being viewed as weak because I am a small, petite girl. Being a girl alone has already received so many stereotypes in almost all existing working conditions." And a third participant shared of her ethnic-racial identity:

> … I have been concerned about my future in the film industry for many years because of my race … there are less successful people in a lot of careers that like look like me, you know? … If I looked like my [White] dad, I think I [would] probably have a different like opinion of this …

Resilience Factors Related to Marginalization Consciousness. Despite the challenges outlined above, participants also indicated resilience factors to counteract the

negative impacts associated with the conscious awareness of the marginalization of their social identities.

RF1.1: Seeking Out and/or Providing Peer Support. Several participants indicated talking to peers (i.e., emotional support) to cope or process discriminatory experiences. For example, one participant stated, "I have many peers and people that can relate to these feelings of discrimination. We talk about it often but never know how to act on it." Participants also discussed sharing resources and/or knowledge with one another to help mitigate the stress related to systemic barriers—specifically, a lack of informational support and perceived limitations due to their social identities. One participant explained,

> I talk to my peers a lot and share what information I have. During my senior year, I was part of Latinx Club where we mainly gathered to share scholarships that we found and internship opportunities. Because of my experience senior year, I have come to value sharing information with my friends a lot more.

RF1.2: Confronting Stigmatizers. Some participants discussed sometimes confronting perpetrators of a discriminatory act in the moment but also stated discomfort with confrontation. One participant said, "I call people out on what they did and try to get them in trouble for being a bigot." Another participant explained, "Sometimes confrontation works well to get people to apologize, but I am not very comfortable with confronting people, so I tend to avoid it." A third participant shared that in response to discriminatory remarks, he tries to subtly counter by sharing his opinion.

RF1.3: Agentic Activism. Participants alluded to a sense of personal agency in highlighting efforts to address more broad, systemic issues in response to being a direct target or witness of discrimination. For example, some participants discussed using social

media, in particular, to increase awareness about inequities and perceived injustices related to their marginalized identities. As one participant explained, “Social media [is] one of the fastest ways to spread information and raise awareness.”

Participants also discussed student-led organizing efforts in response to administrative inaction regarding injustices carried out within their academic environments. One participant explained that “the student body had to raise all this attention” demanding school administrators launch an investigation into an incident involving racist graffiti targeting Black students (see C1.1 for context).

Other participants highlighted prioritizing peer-to-peer informational support in an effort to address systemic inequities within their academic environments. As one participant explained,

> In high school, I felt that students were not properly educated on what AP classes offered. Junior year, I overheard advice that a counselor told a White peer of mine because they were telling their friend the advice. Senior year, I got opportunities to be part of discussions with CTE Career Learning Coordinator at Portland Public Schools, where I could share about this inequality.

RF1.4: Humor. Some participants indicated using humor in response to discriminatory experiences to dismiss or avoid internalizing the comments. Specifically, participants chose to liken discriminatory comments to the types of inflammatory comments that are common among stand-up comedians. One participant explained, “…if you don’t take it as funny, a lot of the time, [it] gets to you and can eventually mess with your mental health.” Another participant agreed they also use humor and choose to reframe racist and homophobic comments as “jokes.”

RF1.5: Ignoring or Removing Self from the Situation. Participants discussed choosing to ignore harmful comments to avoid drawing attention to themselves or removing themselves from a situation. For example, one participant explained that "sometimes it's ok to pretend like you're not even hearing them" and if with a friend, "you can tell [them] that you just need to go and don't want to be in that situation."

RF1.6: Contextualizing Discriminatory Experiences. Participants discussed educating themselves about structural inequities and the historical roots of racism. For example, one participant explained that contextualizing direct discriminatory experiences as a societal issue has helped them recognize that "people not liking me is their problem because I'm literally not doing anything but existing."

Domain 2: Striving Behaviors

Throughout the sessions, participants alluded to increased striving within the academic context to compensate for marginalized social identities. For example, in discussing her motivation for signing up for the current study's program, one participant said:

> … personally, I wanted to be a part of this program because as a Latina student that knows that there are a lot of people my age that don't have the same opportunities that I do. … I want to be able to, like, take advantage of what I have and what opportunities are available to me.

Challenges Related to Striving Behaviors. Participants' perceived need to strive, or work harder within the academic context revealed several challenges.

C2.1: Increased Striving to Counteract Marginalization. Participants discussed that marginalizing experiences in pre-university academic settings made them question their intelligence, abilities, and academic sense of belonging. Participants explicitly

voiced carrying these doubts with them into the university context. To quell self-doubts and prove to others their worth and right to belong in an academic space, participants exhibited increased striving behaviors. For example, one participant shared, "… they expect me to be the stupidest kid in this room because of how I am and because of my background, so I have to do more than everybody else …" She added,

> …I have also noticed, especially with my African American friends, … but like with a lot of people of color. Like other people in this school who don't have those same experiences will say things to them like, 'Oh, you're only here because of, like, this diversity thing.' And I think that's crap. I disagree. But because people say that to them, they feel like they need to prove that they're not…

Other participants highlighted increased striving due to systemic barriers. Despite simultaneously recognizing the structural inequities in place that dispel the notion of meritocracy, participants still indicated an internalized belief that striving to work harder will make up for these inequities and lead to success (i.e., hard work equates to success). For instance, one participant explained that coming from systemically disadvantaged backgrounds and being a first-generation college student, in particular, "makes it more difficult and you have to put in more work the further you want to go and you have to be proactive in the steps you're taking to get to where you want to be." Another participant shared:

> I think we've all heard 'people of color have to work harder.' We don't always get the same opportunities as our white counterparts, so we usually have to work twice as hard just to be seen as equal. But even then, people can be racist just because you're different.

Later, however, this same participant expressed, "I believe it [coming from systemically marginalized backgrounds] makes it harder because you don't have the same experiences

or resources as others, but it shouldn't limit what you can achieve. If you want it bad enough and work hard enough, you can do it." Another participant shared that "because I come from a lower socioeconomic background, I feel like I have to work a lot harder to like get a job and to like even provide for my family …"

C2.2: Pressure to Succeed as a Marginalized Person. Participants communicated an increased pressure to succeed to set an example for others. For example, one participant discussed her desire to set an example for her younger siblings:

> Being the first in our family to go to college, it *is* scary. Because it feels like you have all this pressure on you to do well; maybe not do well but you don't have any other options, you have to set the example. I have 5 younger siblings and my parents are counting on me to be an example. It feels hard to know that if I went a different direction in my life, I could be a disappointment.

Another participant shared that the pressure she puts on herself to succeed is born out of a desire to set an example and lift others in her community. She explained,

> I've heard it a lot, that I put a lot of pressure on myself … I feel like I should be doing something … There are a lot of Latinx kids who don't want to go to school and want to stay at their jobs. I just wanna influence people and tell them that there are opportunities for them. I feel like I've taken advantage of my opportunities and if I keep doing that it'll be good but I wanna tell kids to do that too. I never saw myself going to college and it's surprising being here.

Participants also communicated an increased pressure to succeed because they felt they had no choice but to succeed. This pressure stemmed from the financial burden tied to pursuing a higher education and the participants' commitment to fulfilling their responsibility of financially supporting their family upon completing their education. One participant, who comes from a low socioeconomic background, discussed the fear she has about having to start over if she realizes she does not like her chosen career path. She cited financial fallout and wasted time as the main contributing factors to her fear.

Furthermore, the pressure to succeed is so high that anything less than exemplary performance impacts self-worth. For example, the same participant shared how the pressure to succeed and avoid financial waste affects his self-worth: "… Personally, [if] I get a bad grade, my self-worth goes down even though I know it shouldn't…"

C2.3: Increased Striving Due to Immigrant Parental Expectations. Participants who are children of immigrants discussed the two main impacts of internalizing their immigrant parents' expectations regarding academic excellence and achievement in adolescence. Internalized immigrant parental expectations: (1) increased participants' tendencies to strive throughout their academic careers, including in the university context; and (2) anything short of excellence negatively impacted their academic sense of belonging. A participant explained:

> … at my high school there was this like competition… people felt like they had to be the best, and I think a lot of it is because so many of the kids that went to my school were children of immigrants who are told that, like you have to be the best all the time, you know; and so um, at least half of my high school would graduate with above 4.0 and that kind of gave a lot of kids, especially the people who didn't do well in school like the sense of 'I don't belong in school' …

C2.4: Risk of Burnout. Participants also explicitly discussed how the tendency to strive in BIPOC and first-generation college students also put them at higher risk of burnout. One participant shared:

> I think we have to [talk] about burnout in this, how like kids, people of color will feel like they have to achieve more. And then they feel like they have to work so much harder because they have to prove that they belong somewhere and then they work so much harder … So the fact that working *so* [emphasized 'so'] much harder than everybody else because they feel like they have to prove themselves leads to them being burnt out and that leads to like lack of academic success. …

Resilience Factors Related to Striving Behaviors. Despite the challenges outlined above, participants also cited several factors to counteract the negative impacts of striving.

RF2.1: Recognizing Resources to Reduce Negative Consequences of Striving. Participants highlighted several resources or methods to buffer the negative consequences of striving. For example, participants mentioned seeking out mental health services (e.g., talk therapy) or partaking in mindfulness exercises or self-reflection. Other participants mentioned shifting their definition of success and pushing back against internalized system justifying beliefs—namely, the idea of living in a meritocracy. One participant explained that they recognize their tendency to strive. Rather than strive to meet societal expectations, they instead choose to strive for what makes them happy and what is "good and healthy" for them.

RF2.2: Striving Can Reduce Perceptions of Limitations Related to Academic Achievement. While participants recognized and discussed at length the deleterious effects of their personal striving tendencies, some participants also highlighted how their tendency to strive facilitates the belief that they can achieve their academic and career goals, regardless of the structural inequities that increase barriers to success. For example, one participant shared that "as long as I take advantage of my opportunities and resources, once I set myself into something, I'm doing it. I don't care who tells me I can't. I'm doing it."

RF2.3: Internalized Parental Encouragement and Expectations. Participants also recognized the positive impact that their parents' expectations and encouragement

have on their perceived ability to achieve academic success. For example, one participant shared,

> One of my parents didn't graduate high school and my other parent only got their GED. So, they both wanted me to do really well, while I was in high school and, as I did well in high school they really wanted me to go to a good college and you know get a degree and get a higher education, because that was something that they weren't able to do…

In other words, his parents pushed him to excel and succeed in academia for a chance at a better future. Other students underscored the importance of parental expectations and encouragement for academic achievement, with one participant explaining that "even if they [parents] both got a college education … I feel like pushing your child to go to college is really what matters and affects academic achievement."

Domain 3: Academic Sense of Belonging and Imposter Phenomenon

Challenges Related to Academic Sense of Belonging and Imposter Phenomenon. Participants highlighted both external and internal factors in relation to marginalized social identities that impacted their academic sense of belonging as well as exacerbated feelings of imposter phenomenon (IP).

C3.1: Experiences of Stereotype Threat. In discussing their academic sense of belonging, or lack thereof, participants shared stories that highlighted experiences of stereotype threat, which also engendered feelings of IP. For example, one participant shared how experiences of gender-related stereotype threat in high school affect her present-day sense of belonging at university:

> When I was in high school, I used to be pretty good [at math] and I used to also have people like criticize the way that I did math because I was a girl, which was odd. My best example is one day I answered … one of the harder questions … and the guy behind me said 'Wait, you got that right, but you're a girl' and I was

> just like 'What?!' So these are my high school experiences, not my college experiences, but at points in time, I definitely felt like maybe I don't belong in this [university] class. Maybe I'm like the only girl in this class, and that's kind of an issue or maybe like these people think that I'm not smart enough because of like who I am and that's kind of an issue.

Another participant explained, "… I always feel incapable and am constantly being judged by my racial/ethnic identity plus mental and physical being as if I am either not smart enough or too smart to do the task." This participant added, "There was always a stigma of how all Asians are smart, which isn't true at all."

C3.2: Trespasser Phenomenon. Participants indicated that their ethnic-racial identity and socioeconomic status were the main sources of doubt regarding their belonging in higher education. For example, one participant explained that having to deal with racism and/or microaggressions "has made me feel like I don't belong in higher education…" Another participant shared, "… I get really down on myself and feel somewhat out of place because of my family's [socio]economic status. It feels like the people around me can easily afford things compared to me. …" A third participant added,

> In an academic setting, when you feel like you don't belong, right … when there are people in those classes that are willing to like, try to hurt you based off of your race, sometimes you feel like you don't belong. Also, sometimes even in those classes, people will criticize your intelligence because of the way that you look and a lot of that can *absolutely* [emphasized 'absolutely'] affect like academic achievement because if you're told something long enough, you tend to believe it, especially when you're a child. … like when you're told that you don't belong in a classroom, it's an outside influence that affects your brain. And a lot of kids that experience that, especially the ones who are in, in a mostly white classroom where they don't have anyone else to like, turn to, will do less well academically, or at the very least, will like believe in themselves less.

Resilience Factors Related to Academic Sense of Belonging and Imposter Phenomenon. Despite the challenges outlined above, participants also cited several

factors to counteract the negative impacts associated with a perceived lack of academic sense of belonging and feelings of IP in relation to marginalized social identities.

RF3.1: Mindset Shift. On an individual-level basis, participants discussed employing mindset shift tactics, such as positive self-talk and reassurance, to combat feelings of IP or a lack of belonging. For example, one participant motivates herself by saying "'I didn't come this far to only come this far.'" Another participant similarly reassures himself that he has been able to adequately navigate academia to become a college student, thus can succeed at this level of education as well. A third participant has learned that procrastinating only makes a task seem more daunting. She reminds herself of this lesson with each new task and tries to start tasks in a timely manner.

Several participants also mentioned that they remind themselves of the hard work they put in to get into college, and thus, deserve to be there. One participant shared "… I have worked so hard for years to be able to get a higher education. I don't think I have ever thought about not going to college." Another participant similarly shared, "I can recognize that I worked harder than my peers in high school to get to the position that I'm in today. I went through the work, and I did my part to make opportunities for myself in the future."

RF3.2: Sense of Self-Fulfillment. In addition to employing healthy mindset shift tactics to combat feelings of IP and lack of belonging, participants indicated reflecting on their sense of self-fulfillment for successfully gaining access to a higher education. One participant shared:

> … this is exactly what I have been waiting for my whole life. Being in college is like a dream come true. I didn't believe it was possible for someone like [me] to

> go to college. I think this is the place I was meant to [be in] at this point in my life.

Throughout this discussion, there was also an underlying theme that finding a suitable subject matter of study was essential to cultivating their sense of self-fulfillment, which in turn positively impacted academic sense of belonging and buffered feelings of IP. For example, one participant shared of the college courses they were enrolled in: "I'm taking classes that teach me about things I find meaningful … So far college has been a very nice experience."

RF3.3: Internalized Societal Norms. Participants also alluded to having internalized the societal norm of attending college after completing high school. For example, one participant explained, "…I feel like I should be in college but I feel out of place." Another participant shared that even in times where she felt a keen lack of academic belonging, she does not know where else she would be if not in college. A third participant echoed this sentiment, adding:

> …I don't know about for you guys, but for me like, getting a job is scary and like just going into the workforce especially if you feel like you're not experienced enough. I honestly think I would feel like I belonged less in an actual like, in an actual job … rather than being in school…

RF3.4: Parental Encouragement. While only one participant explicitly discussed parental encouragement in the context of academic sense of belonging, it is worth highlighting the apparent connection. The participant explained, "…I've kind of been encouraged my whole life to go to college and because of that, I feel like I belong here [in college], you know." In essence, her parents' continual encouragement throughout her life to pursue a higher education facilitated her sense of belonging in university.

Domain 4: Social Support System

Challenges Related to a Student's Social Support System. Participants highlighted several factors in relation to marginalized social identities that impacted perceptions of their social support system. Participants discussed challenges related to emotional, financial, and informational support.

C4.1: Unequal Financial Support. Participants highlighted how their socioeconomic status impacts their perceptions of support. Specifically, participants expressed that the lack of financial support increased academic-related stress. For example, one participant explained, "… Personally, my immediate reaction after receiving my acceptance letter was 'How am I going to afford this?' Something that was supposed to be this exciting, joyful moment was quickly diminished by the anxieties of affording college tuition." Another participant shared, to agreement from other participants:

> … I grew up pretty poor, and so … I'm always in, like, the mindset 'Do I need it? Like, how much do I need it?' And, like I know a lot of classes I'm taking, they're asking us to pay … like $200 just to get like a homework program just to complete the homework or like even $200 or like $500 to buy the textbooks. … I'm always thinking like 'Do I need to buy the homework program?' or 'Do I need to buy the textbooks?' because … that's really expensive, especially when you're taking like three classes and that's like $1500 right off the bat even though you are already paying tuition, which is already thousands of dollars so … I feel like [that] lower[s] my like academic prowess or like my ability to achieve in class.

C4.2: Unequal Informational Support. For participants who identified as first-generation college students, a theme of unequal informational support emerged. These participants detailed how this disparity contributes to heightened stress and a perception of limitations. One participant shared:

> … Being a first-generation college student is quite scary when you don't have support from your own family or other outside resources and educational systems. Most of the time, you spend finding your way through weaves of confusions. You may feel like a disappointment and all that precious time has been wasted for no reason….

Another participant explained: "…Being a first-gen [student], it's hard to ask for help from your family so it adds stress…" A third participant added,

> … my parents had like no idea how to help me with college things like going through the admissions process. All of that stuff, my parents didn't really know anything about it. So, it was you know kind of me going through it. There wasn't really anyone to help me with it besides a teacher at school.

C4.3: Intragenerational Support or Lack Thereof. Another important theme that emerged among participants who identified as first-generation college students was the distinction between access to intragenerational support, via an older sibling, or a lack of intragenerational support as the participant was the eldest in the family. One participant explained that because she was the eldest, she had to rely on friends for informational support. Another participant shared of her desire to provide support to her younger siblings:

> I feel like, 'cause I want to do that for my younger siblings and sometimes I envy that; I wish I had someone to help me with those things but I have to remind myself that it's okay that I have to do it alone because I already did it alone.

Even with a sibling to rely on, however, there is only so much they can provide in terms of informational support. For example, one participant shared:

> I have an older sister … Without her, I don't know where I would've been. She didn't literally help me. I did most on my own, but I feel like her advice was really helpful for me, and most of it was just like talking to advisors and financial aid and the colleges to see what my options were.

She added that, “Everything is so new to me at [university] that she didn’t prepare me for. … Now I’m here, I realize how much I never asked.”

C4.4: Difficulty in Forming Friendships for Multiracial Students. In addition to unequal access to intragenerational support, one participant highlighted the difficulty multiracial students face in forming friendships and thus, establishing a peer social support system. She explained that because of her ambiguous features, she frequently experiences pushback from others regarding her belonging to an ethnic/racial group and faces difficulties in forming friendships. She explained:

> … At least for me, because I don’t fit into one group, I can’t really do that [make friends from similar ethnic/racial backgrounds] and so it has negatively affected my life for sure, because I feel the sense of like I don’t belong in any one group …

This participant further explained:

> … And then also I’m bisexual so I’m in the middle of lots of things here, and all of that stuff kind of makes you feel like … there’s not one group that I fit into perfectly and so in both an academic and a social setting, it has kind of affected the way that I feel about fitting into groups.

C4.5: Parent-Child Disconnect. Participants who identified as FGCS also discussed challenges with their parents that stemmed from parents’ lack of understanding regarding the expectations and structure of higher education. For example, one participant shared:

> … my parents got like really upset … because I was only taking you know, three classes and they were like under the impression that I should be taking more, like because of high school … I actually had to schedule another meeting with my advisor for him to tell my parents that ‘No, these three classes [are] fine…’

Another participant added:

> I think my parents … think that I'm still like in high school or something. … Like they don't realize that like it's a lot, like I'm doing homework all day and they're like 'You're still doing homework?'… I don't know how to explain it [to them]. It's just a lot [of] like time. They don't understand the concept of like college time versus like high school time.

Participants who identified as both BIPOC and first-generation college students resonated with these sentiments and added that they also struggle to avoid conflict when communicating with their parents due to differences in mentality and/or envisioned goals. One participant said:

> … sometimes I wouldn't like share much with my parents or my family at all, 'cause like the way I think and the way they think is like totally different so whenever we do like share stuff, it like always leads to an argument which, I'm just like I might as well not say anything before it gets worse.

Furthermore, other participants explained that there was an expectation for them to pursue what their parents deemed to be more traditional career paths. For instance, one participant stated, "…my parents don't understand that I want to study social work …" and another participant shared, "…especially for like Asians, like, you have like your parents' expectation of you, [to] either [become] like a doctor or like a lawyer or computer engineering…"

C4.6: Perceived Lack of Emotional Support from Parents. Comments from BIPOC participants—who come from collectivistic cultural backgrounds where the social norm and expectation is for parents to financially support their children through young adulthood—indicated that while their parents were financially supportive, the lack of moral or emotional support from parents had a larger impact on perceived social support. In other words, a perceived lack of emotional support, as opposed to tangible (e.g., financial) support, has a greater impact on overall perceptions of support. For example,

one participant stated, “I don’t really have a support system. I think I am enough to support myself.” This same participant later stated, “My parents are supportive, but they are Asian. What do you expect? … They pay the tuition and feed me, but they have to do that [based on collectivistic social expectations]. They don’t do anything less or more.” Note that this participant’s statement should not be viewed from an individualistic lens, which would see this stated expectation as demanding and self-centered rather than a culturally internalized expectation and understanding of parental responsibilities.

C4.7: Gendered Shift in Parental Support. An interesting theme that emerged was the gendered shift in parental support. The parents of a male participant became less involved in the minute details of his everyday life, thus giving the participant a greater sense of autonomy; but, the parents of a female participant increased their level of involvement, making the participant feel that her parents do not trust her, which created tension in the relationship.

The male participant, living away from home, shared of the shift in parental support from high school to college:

> … My parents kind of trust me a lot more. Like they trust that I know what I’m doing, and you know I’m gonna pay my student account on time, I’m going to go to class. I’m going to make sure I remember to be, you know, going to be safe when I’m walking on the streets. And so they’ve kind of stepped back and just been like, yeah like, he knows what he’s doing. And so that was really cool because it was, you know, such a change from, you know, my parents always being invested in whatever I was doing or whatever was going on with me to now, you know, trust me enough that like, no like, ‘we don’t need to check in on him all the time – he knows what he’s doing.’

On the other hand, the female participant who was also living away from home shared a very different shift in parental support. She expressed that her parents “have very little

trust in me…" She explained that in high school, "We never had a support system where they really cared about me [but] …they were calling me every night since I started college, because they were worried about me." While she acknowledges that her parents are worried for her safety, her main perception of this shift is a lack of trust in her.

Resilience Factors Related to Social Support System. Despite the challenges outlined above, participants also cited multiple factors to foster perceptions of support.

RF4.1: Focusing on Available Forms of Support and Support Networks. While challenges related to a perceived lack of or an unequal level of social support of various forms were discussed, participants were still able to highlight the emotional, financial, informational, and instrumental support they do have and receive from their social support systems. Several participants highlighted the moral and emotional encouragement they have and continue to receive as well as the perceived sense of pride from their familial support system (e.g. parents, grandparents, and siblings) for pursuing a higher education that motivates them to persist, especially in the face of challenges. For example, one participant, who is a first-generation college student revealed that their family "was really supportive [because they] wanted me to go to college…" Another first-generation college student participant shared, "I am the first in the family to go to college, so they are very excited for me to attend," and a third revealed that her family reminds her "that they are 'very proud' of me."

Participants also highlighted receiving emotional support from their non-familial support networks (e.g., established pre-university friendships and to a lesser degree, university peer mentors, university classmates, and co-workers), with one participant

explaining, “I use my support system whenever I need a boost in my mood or energy. My friends and sister are always there when I need them.” Another participant revealed, “I rely a lot on my friends when it comes to when I am stressed.” A third participant shared, “…my 2 best friends … encourage me and tell me I’m capable of anything.”

Several participants also discussed the financial and instrumental support their family provides so they can prioritize their education. One participant revealed that while she eventually found a part-time job, her immigrant parents initially insisted she not work, telling her “‘No, I will work for you, so you can study.’” Another participant explained that her family cares for her dog while attending university.

Regarding informational support: as inadequate as this form of support is for first-generation college students, in particular, participants did highlight instances in which they do receive informational support. For example, one participant shared, “I reach out to my friends a lot when I struggle on an assignment.” Another highlighted the invaluable, albeit sparse, advice she received from her sister ahead of beginning her college career (see C4.3 for context); and a third participant stated, “… my mentor who is also a PSU student on [the] pre-med track … helps me figure out PSU and studying…” A fourth participant highlighted receiving valuable career-related informational support which informed her career choice and subsequently led to expanding her support network with peers on the same career path. She explained,

> “I’ve always, like, am interested in the medical field … I heard about physician assistant from a friend and … like they do the same thing as a doctor, but they don’t need to, like, go to medical school. And since like school started, I met like a few people that are doing the same, like route as me, which is pretty cool too…”

RF4.2: Proactively Seeking Peer Social Networks and Support. Participants generally indicated a desire to seek out peer social networks to foster a sense of community and increase their access to informational support, in particular. One participant shared that she is "working on establishing [a support system] in Portland." Another participant shared that he has met people "both, like in person for study groups … and then online, I'm part of the Discord servers, the chat servers with PSU. I joined those before I even moved up here … that brings a supportive community…" A third participant shared that in an attempt to make friends and increase access to informational support, she joined a year-long support program for first-generation Asian and Pacific Islander college students offered through the university.

Discussion

The current study applied a strength-based risk and resilience framework to qualitatively explore how first-year undergraduate students' marginalized ethnic-racial identity, sexual identity, college generational status, socioeconomic status, geographical identity, gender identity, and religious identity intersect and interact with their academic environment to influence their university experiences. By employing an identity-based approach, we gained insights into the complex processes by which systemically marginalized students navigate their academic experiences and the importance of considering identity dynamics in promoting their success and well-being within higher education.

Findings revealed four domains: (1) consciousness/awareness of marginalized identities in a university setting; (2) striving behaviors; (3) academic sense of belonging

and feelings of imposter phenomenon (IP); and (4) perceptions of a social support system. Across the four domains, participants highlighted various challenges related to their marginalized social identities within pre-university and university contexts. These challenges included institutional barriers, limited access to resources, experiences of discrimination and stereotype threat, heightened pressure to succeed, and difficulties in forming supportive social networks.

Despite facing significant structural barriers and having to contend with other challenges related to their marginalized identities, participants showed remarkable resilience and agency in their pursuit of academic success and empowerment within their respective educational contexts. Resilience was demonstrated through proactive advocacy efforts, seeking out available resources and support networks, reframing definitions of success, embracing one's sense of self-fulfillment, and challenging negative self-perceptions. Participants also exhibited resilience by actively engaging in community-building opportunities, fostering solidarity among other marginalized peers, and advocating for systemic change within academic environments. Both challenge and resilience factors are discussed in more detail below.

Challenges Stemming from Systemically Marginalized Identities

Participants in the current study reported persistent marginalizing experiences related to various systemically marginalized identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, SES, sexual identity, gender, and religion) from both peers and educators, beginning as early as elementary school and persisting into the present-day university context. Additionally, whether experienced or observed, the endurance and prevalence of marginalizing

experiences both in and outside of academic contexts appears to have translated to a chronic salience, or heightened conscious awareness, of their marginalized identities in the academic context. It is understandable, then, that despite being new university students, many participants anticipated experiencing discrimination and other forms of marginalization during their undergraduate careers.

Instances of stereotype threat in pre-university academic contexts were specifically highlighted when recounting marginalizing experiences that undermined their academic confidence and sense of belonging. Other pre-university marginalizing experiences, such as microaggressions, a lack of classroom diversity, and heightened awareness of socioeconomic disparities in comparison to peers also appeared to foster a pervasive sense of not belonging in higher education. Current findings also revealed that merely witnessing instances of marginalization in pre-university academic contexts exacerbated present-day feelings of marginalization for participants. These past experiences were notably less associated with present-day feelings of being an imposter and more closely linked to a general sense of exclusion from academic spaces. In other words, participants conveyed a sense of feeling like trespassers rather than imposters. The same feeling was conveyed when discussing possible careers (i.e., future selves). This distinction highlights a sense of feeling unwelcome or out of place in academic settings and pursuing certain career paths, rather than participants feeling fraudulent in their academic accomplishments or abilities.

Consistent with past research that highlights the long-term adverse effects of stigmatizing or marginalizing experiences on academic identification, engagement, and

outcomes (Bodenhausen & Richeson, 2010; Silverman et al., 2023), participants' marginalizing experiences in pre-university contexts fueled present-day feelings of not belonging and IP. Specifically, participants questioned their competence and place within their university environment, indicating challenges in negotiating their identities within the university context. Participants expressed concerns with whether to emphasize one aspect of their identity over another and the potential consequences of such choices. Some participants expressed the desire to conceal their marginalized identities—at least, those identities which are concealable (e.g., sexual identity)—to avoid stigmatization and the pressure to conform to societal norms and expectations.

While some participants communicated academic disidentification due to marginalization, the overwhelming majority exhibited increased striving behaviors to compensate for their marginalized social identities. Specifically, participants articulated how experiences of marginalization in pre-university academic contexts, which often instilled doubts about their intelligence and abilities, led to increased striving to counteract perceived academic inadequacies. This finding contradicts Steele's (1997) assertion that stereotype threat produces an affectively motivated behavioral response based on a fear of and accompanying pressure to avoid being negatively stereotyped within the academic context.

Instead, current findings align more with the racial-ethnic self-schema (RES) framework (Oyserman et al., 2003), which posits that given the fixed nature of one's race/ethnicity, individuals may develop a racial-ethnic self-schema, though not all will. Oyserman and colleagues (2003) found that students who developed a dual or minority

RES, as opposed to an in-group RES or not developing a RES at all (i.e., aschematic), responded to instances of stereotype threat with resistance rather than disengagement. In accordance with the RES framework, it seems that participants in the current study had developed minority self-schemas, such that they recognized their status as an in-group member as well as a member of a marginalized group within broader society.

Participants' heightened striving behaviors, driven by a keen awareness of systemic barriers, exemplifies the notion of developing a minority RES. With that said, despite their recognition of structural barriers and inequalities that contradict the notion of a truly meritocratic system, participants still exhibited an internalization of system fairness via the belief that through hard work, they could achieve academic success and upward mobility (i.e., Protestant Work Ethic (PWE); Heine, 2010). While this finding may seem intriguing given past research linking the endorsement of system justifying beliefs with a denial of societal unfairness (Crosby et al., 2006), other work has highlighted that the internalization and rationalization of oppressive social structures is common among members of marginalized groups (Cross et al., 2017; Jost et al., 2004), which could explain why perceived pressures to succeed further fueled striving behaviors among participants. Desires to serve as role models for siblings and uplift their communities, alongside the need to evade the financial repercussions of failure and fulfill familial expectations further fueled pressures to succeed. Among participants with immigrant backgrounds, parental expectations added to this pressure, creating a competitive atmosphere that heightened feelings of academic inadequacy for those who did not meet these expectations, further motivating students to excel.

However, this relentless pursuit of excellence carried significant risks, with participants acknowledging the looming threat of burnout due to the constant pressure to surpass their peers and validate their place in academic environments. This is particularly concerning as studies have consistently shown that in addition to increased risk of burnout and subsequent academic disengagement (Salmela-Aro & Vuori, 2015), striving among systemically marginalized students is linked to significantly greater mental and physical health problems while at university as well as later in life (Brody et al., 2016; Hartley, 2011; Kundu, 2019).

The detrimental impacts of striving behaviors and experiences of marginalization within academic settings are compounded by challenges related to financial, informational, and emotional support stemming from students' marginalized identities. Social support is an interpersonal process comprised of both perceptions and experiences of belonging to social networks where one feels cared for and valued (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Taylor, 2010). Social connection and support has been consistently linked with physical and psychological health benefits, particularly during times of stress, such as during the transition to college or coping with marginalizing experiences (Dover et al., 2020; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017; Taylor, 2010). Importantly, although receiving social support can be beneficial, *perceptions* of social support play an equally crucial role in promoting positive health outcomes (Taylor, 2010), as do perceptions of the quality of social relationships (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017).

Past research has also demonstrated an impact of self-construals (e.g., independent vs. interdependent) on perceptions of and seeking out social support (Heine,

2010; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2019; Taylor, 2010). Other work has highlighted differences in social support seeking behavior based on social identities. For example, Chang et al. (2020) found that FGCS and BIPOC students are less likely to seek social support for fear of burdening others or appearing less capable. Extending past work, current findings suggest that one's social identities also influence perceptions of social support. Participants highlighted how their marginalized SES background influenced their perceptions of support, with the stress of imminent financial strain overshadowing the excitement of college acceptance and causing anxieties about affording tuition and other expenses. Moreover, FGCS faced distinct challenges navigating higher education without familial guidance, leading to increased stress and perceptions of limitation due to disparities in access to information. Within this group, disparities in access to intragenerational support were also evident, with some relying on older siblings for guidance while those without older siblings lacked familial informational support altogether.

Findings also shed light on challenges within parent-child relationships, particularly in relation to gender identity, college generational status, and ethnic-racial identity. Gender differences in parental involvement emerged, influencing participants' perceptions of support and autonomy in college. Specifically, male participants communicated experiencing increased autonomy and trust from their parents, while female participants encountered heightened parental involvement, via phone call check-ins, which was perceived as a lack of trust.

Furthermore, FGCS participants faced difficulties communicating with parents who lacked understanding of higher education expectations and structures, leading to conflicts and feelings of being misunderstood. BIPOC FGCS encountered additional difficulties in conflicting mentalities and expectations regarding academic choices, exacerbating existing parent-child tensions. This is especially relevant when considering that for BIPOC participants, perceived emotional support, rather than tangible (e.g., financial) support, significantly influenced overall perceptions of support from parents. This finding is also concerning given past research primarily tying the health advantages of social support to perceptions of emotional support (Blascovich & Mendes, 2010).

Even with attempts to seek support from peers or educators, the absence or negative perceptions of familial support compounded the challenges of transitioning to and navigating college life, especially for participants who struggled to establish a supportive peer social network. This challenge is particularly pronounced for multiracial participants who communicated facing obstacles in forming same-race friendships due to pushback regarding their belonging to an ethnic or racial group, which contributed to a sense of not belonging to any particular group as well as a general lack of belonging. A lack of social connection has been shown to exacerbate feelings of isolation and hinder students' social integration efforts, both of which have been linked to poorer psychological adjustment during the transition to college, increased rates of burnout, and decreased rates of academic persistence (Gorrese & Ruggieri, 2013; Kundu, 2019; Salmela-Aro & Vuori, 2015).

Resilience Stemming from Systemically Marginalized Identities

Despite facing numerous challenges due to their marginalized identities, participants demonstrated remarkable resilience through various coping mechanisms and proactive strategies, both individually and collectively. At an individual level, responses to discriminatory experiences throughout their academic careers varied. Consistent with past research (Dover et al., 2020), some participants exhibited problem-focused coping strategies, choosing to confront perpetrators directly or removing themselves from situations to avoid drawing attention or further harm. Others preferred more subtle, emotion-focused strategies. For example, using humor, some participants reframed discriminatory comments as jokes to avoid internalizing the negativity or choosing to ignore harmful comments. In line with the RES framework, participants also contextualized their experiences within a broader societal framework, recognizing discrimination as a systemic issue rather than a personal failing. This is relevant as past work has demonstrated considerably worse health outcomes for marginalized individuals who perceive the system to be fair, particularly via the endorsement of the belief that hard work equates to success (i.e., PWE; Dover et al., 2015).

Linking academic experiences to broader societal contexts empowered participants to navigate and challenge marginalization in the academic context as a collective, fostering a sense of community and solidarity within that environment. Peer social support networks, in particular, appeared to play a significant role in coping with both experienced and observed marginalizing experiences in pre-university academic contexts. Participants described engaging in agentic activism through social media and student-led organizing efforts to address injustices within their pre-university academic

environments, showcasing personal agency in confronting systemic issues. Participants specifically highlighted instances of collective action to address perceived injustices and subsequent unequal retributive justice related to ethnic-racial identity, both well-documented antecedents of collective action along with social identity (Thomas et al., 2020; van Zomeren et al., 2008).

Participants also emphasized the priority placed on the provision of informational support among peers. Forms of informational support included sharing resources, information about opportunities, and other relevant knowledge. Given their awareness of the value in having a peer social support network, it is not surprising that participants actively sought out peer social networks upon entering university to foster a sense of community, as well as circumvent limitations and mitigate stress related to systemic barriers. This proactive approach of finding and/or sharing typically inaccessible opportunities demonstrates their proactive approach to building resilience in the face of adversity and can also be viewed as a form of resistance with participants pushing back against the disadvantage associated with their marginalized identities (Holland et al., 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Indeed, despite encountering challenges with social support, participants emphasized the invaluable emotional, financial, informational, and instrumental support received from both familial and non-familial networks. Positive perceptions and experiences of social support are important as past work has demonstrated the link between social support and resilience in response to marginalizing experiences (Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017; Taylor, 2010). Participants highlighted the valuable

emotional and informational support provided by friends and peers, turning to them for encouragement and reassurance during times of stress; and, albeit limited, they recognized the role of peer informational support in augmenting their access to resources.

Familial encouragement, especially from parents and siblings, served more as a source of motivation to persist in the face of challenges and less so a source of reassurance, with participants expressing gratitude for their family's unwavering encouragement and pride in their academic endeavors. Notably, it seems that participants' unwavering determination (i.e., striving) partly stems from internalized parental encouragement and expectations, propelling them forward with a sense of purpose and commitment to their educational aspirations. Financial and instrumental support, such as immigrant parents encouraging their children to prioritize education over work, enabled participants to focus on their studies. Although individuals from lower-SES backgrounds may lack similar financial support (i.e., ability to forgo working while pursuing college education), they acknowledged alternative and equally valuable forms of familial assistance, like instrumental support (e.g., assisting with tasks like relocation or pet care during the academic year), allowing them to focus on their studies as well. In line with previous work (Boonk et al., 2018; Fan & Chen, 2001; Wilder, 2014), participants who receive ongoing support and encouragement from their parents as well as other family members throughout their educational journey feel a stronger sense of belonging in university settings.

Interestingly, compared to the collective reliance and externalization exhibited in response to discriminatory and other marginalizing experiences, the resilience factors that

emerged in response to feelings of IP, a lack of belonging in the academic context, and striving behaviors were arguably more individualistic or self-reliant. For example, despite recognizing the inherent risks of striving to their well-being, participants recognized that their drive served as a catalyst for achieving their academic and career goals. They maintained a steadfast belief in their ability to succeed, regardless of systemic barriers, as long as they leverage available opportunities and resources.

To combat feelings of IP, reinforce their sense of belonging in a higher education setting, and mitigate the adverse effects of striving, participants discussed employing mindset shift tactics like positive self-talk and redefining success on their own terms as well as utilizing resources such as mental health services and mindfulness. Consistent with self-affirmation theory, participants in the current study developed coping strategies to address the implications of marginalizing experiences to their self-concept rather than address the marginalizing experiences themselves (Steele, 1988). Reminders of the diligence and effort they invested into accessing higher education affirmed participants' perceptions of their deservingness to be in a higher education setting and quelled feelings of IP and doubts of belonging.

Internalized societal norms regarding higher education (i.e., viewing college as a natural progression; Rosario et al., 2024) further contributed to participants' sense of belonging at university as did reflecting on and finding fulfillment in their academic pursuits. Importantly, though, participants' sense of self-fulfillment and overall university experiences (i.e., lower feelings of IP, greater sense of belonging) appears to be contingent on finding meaningful subjects of study. Regardless of whether this societal

norm has been internalized, though, if students cannot see themselves in a higher education setting, such as because of a lack of expectations communicated by educators or an inability to see themselves in the curriculum, they are less likely to gain admission to a higher education institution or excel academically once enrolled in university (Carter, 2013; Jacob & Linkow, 2011).

Conclusions and Contributions

The current study provides a deeper understanding of how students' systemically marginalized identities intersect and interact with their academic environment to influence university experiences. Findings underscore the relevance of an identity-based approach to exploring the current experiences and needs of systemically marginalized students within a higher education setting. Findings also shed light on the process by which students establish a link between their academic identity and systemically marginalized identities, such that when their academic identity is cued, so too are their systemically marginalized identities, even in cases of incongruence.

Although the current study was focused on experiences within higher education, it was evident that marginalizing experiences in pre-university academic and non-academic contexts significantly shaped participants' perceptions, expectations, and trust within higher education institutions. Current findings highlight the development of a chronic conscious awareness of systemically marginalized identities within early academic contexts that persists into the present-day university context. This extends past research, which has found that students develop a conscious awareness of marginalization in the academic context at an early age (Banerjee et al., 2018; Benner & Graham, 2013;

Carter, 2013). Bigler and Liben's (2006) developmental intergroup suggests that the chronic salience of race/ethnicity and gender, in particular, stems not only from their perceptual salience but also their corresponding psychological functionality in anticipating perceptions and subsequent treatment from interaction partners. Empirical studies demonstrated that the readily perceptible nature of race/ethnicity and gender facilitates their psychological salience in early childhood, and become increasingly accessible with age, particularly if in the minority and specifically in the academic context (Bigler & Liben, 2007; McGuire et al., 1978, 1979). This early conscious awareness of marginalization in the academic context extends to social class differences with researchers showing that children as young as 5 years old have an accurate reflection of their subjective social standing in relation to familial SES along with an understanding of the stigma attached to being from a low-SES background (Mistry et al., 2015; Ramsey, 1991).

Participants invariably linking marginalizing experiences in their academic environments to those in non-academic settings also reinforce the idea that schools serve as microcosms of broader societal dynamics, where marginalizing experiences in academic contexts mirror those in non-academic contexts (Carter, 2013; Holland et al., 2001). Benner & Graham (2013) additionally found that marginalizing experiences in broader society also heightened racial awareness in adolescents. Identities that are imposed on individuals also determines how others will treat them (Brown, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) as evidenced in the current study with participants recounting instances of marginalization related to identities they did not hold. These findings are consistent

with the theoretical understanding that identity exploration and development, including the development of positional identities, or an understanding of one's social position or status in relation to others, is a multifaceted process rooted in sociohistorical, cultural, and structural contexts that begins in early childhood and continues through adulthood (Holland et al., 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 2003; McAdams, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Taylor, 1998). Participants consistently referencing multiple identities when sharing marginalizing experiences aligns with the understanding that identity is complex, multiply constructed, and dynamic (Markus & Wurf, 1987; McAdams, 2001; Swann Jr. & Bosson, 2010; Swann, 1987), underscoring the importance of employing an intersectional approach to understand how students' identities influence their university experiences.

In addition to the anticipation of discriminatory and other marginalizing experiences in the university context, current findings highlight that the transition to university does not mark a clean slate for students. Rather, transitioning to university represents a continuation of the identity negotiation process shaped by past experiences that begin immediately upon entering one's academic environment in early childhood. Instances of stereotype threat and microaggressions in pre-university academic contexts, for example, undermined participants' academic confidence and sense of belonging, contributing to feelings of IP and exclusion in higher education. Such experiences also increased awareness of systemic inequities and structural barriers.

Furthermore, findings from the current study suggest that the development of a chronic conscious awareness of systemically marginalized identities occurs regardless of

the congruency of these identities with their academic identity. Past work has found that high academically identified students may distance themselves from systemically marginalized identities in an effort to avoid being subjected to negative stereotyping (Steele, 1997). This implies that systemically marginalized identities would not be salient in the academic context among high academically identified students, but current findings suggest otherwise. For most participants in the current study, salience of systemically marginalized identities within the academic context, particularly their ethnic-racial identity, seems to be a source of resilience and form of resistance against systemic inequities, as suggested by Rivas-Drake and colleagues (2022), highlighting the complex interplay between identity, agency, and the social context.

Oyserman and Destin (2010) contend that the chronic salience of systemically marginalized identities does not imply that these identities will be activated or accessible in all contexts—in this case, the academic context—and thus, will not impact motivation or behavioral outcomes (i.e., university experiences). However, current findings suggest that due to the early onset and persistence of marginalizing experiences that students face in early academic contexts, merely being in an academic setting is enough to activate, or make salient, identities that have been historically marginalized within academic environments. The chronic salience and accessibility of systemically marginalized identities in the academic context may, therefore, provide support for the notion that as part of the identity development process, students may develop racial-ethnic self-schemas (Oyserman et al., 2003). On the other hand, it could be argued that participants' marginalized identities were primed since the conversations through which the data was

collected took place in the context of an intervention program that explicitly focused on promoting resilience by highlighting the strengths in students' marginalized backgrounds. Future studies should investigate whether marginalized students organically connect their academic experiences to their systemically marginalized identities. Put another way, future work should explore whether students are negotiating their place in higher education settings and how to behave (i.e., engage in social interactions) through the lens of their systemically marginalized identities outside of the context of an intervention program.

The current research also highlights the challenges systemically marginalized students face in receiving and/or seeking social support due to stigma or lack of understanding from family members and peers. Correspondingly, these findings highlight the significance of social relationships in navigating marginalizing experiences in academic contexts and on university campuses. Peer support networks play a significant role in coping with discriminatory experiences, mitigating perceptions of isolation and fostering sense of belonging on university campuses, as well as in offsetting social capital inequities. Current findings additionally emphasize the equally important role of familial support networks in the academic success of systemically marginalized students. Familial encouragement, in particular, serves as a source of motivation and support, especially for FGCS and BIPOC students.

Finally, the resilience and agency exhibited among participants in the current study as they strive for academic success despite systemic barriers underscores the necessity to shift away from a deficit-based approach when examining the experiences of

systemically marginalized students. Instead, current findings provide support for shifting toward the notion that educational disparities stem from a gap in opportunities rather than a gap in achievement (Carter & Welner, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2013). As Flores (2007) explained, framing disparities in educational attainment as an achievement gap essentially employs a deficit-based approach that focuses on the symptoms of an inequitable system and reinforces the prejudiced narrative that students from disadvantaged backgrounds lack the skills and/or determination necessary to succeed. However, consistent with past work (Carter, 2013; Oyserman & Destin, 2010), systemically marginalized students in the current study held achievement-oriented attitudes and demonstrated remarkable resilience in their pursuits toward educational attainment. For example, participants expressed a deservingness to be in the university setting despite enduring persistent marginalization within pre-university and university contexts. Marginalized students employ various resilience strategies, such as reframing negative experiences and seeking supportive networks, demonstrating their agency in shaping their academic journeys. In line with identity theory (Holland et al., 2001; Oyserman & Destin, 2010), students engage in a dynamic and continuous identity negotiation process upon entering university. Through the lens of salient identities, including systemically marginalized identities, and a keen awareness of systemic inequities, current findings demonstrate that students *interact with* as opposed to simply reacting to stimuli (e.g., norms, marginalization) to understand who they are and establish their place within their university environment.

While collective responses were observed in addressing and challenging discriminatory and other marginalizing experiences, such as student-led organizing efforts, individualistic resilience strategies, such as positive self-talk and seeking fulfillment in academic pursuits, were employed in addressing feelings of IP, academic sense of belonging, and striving behaviors. These findings suggest that students externalize marginalizing experiences within academic contexts that mirror marginalizing experiences in broader societal contexts. In other words, students witnessing their peers undergo similar experiences of marginalization, such as discrimination and inequities in informational support, helps them to externalize their own marginalizing experiences and turn to peers for support and collective organizing. Conversely, while phenomena, such as feelings of IP, a lack of academic sense of belonging, and striving behaviors also stem from systemically marginalized identities, they are less likely to be observed or discussed among peers. Additionally, and notably, perpetrator(s) of these forms of marginalization are not easily identifiable as they would be in cases of discrimination or microaggressions. Thus, students are more likely to see such struggles as personal failings that need to be addressed individually and privately as opposed to seeking out support from peers who, as evidenced in the current findings, are likely experiencing the very same struggles.

Practical Implications

The current findings highlighting the early onset and enduring impact of marginalizing experiences underscore the need for educational interventions to begin in early childhood given the development of a chronic conscious awareness of systemically

marginalized identities in early academic contexts. Specifically, efforts to cultivate positive identity development beginning in early, and continuing through secondary academic contexts is essential. To lay the foundation for positive identity development, educators should incorporate identity-affirming curricula which can help validate diverse identities, foster inclusivity, and mitigate the impacts of marginalization in early and later academic environments. Increasing representation and inclusivity in the curricula also fosters identity exploration and affirmation and facilitates academic engagement among systemically marginalized students.

Current findings linking both peer and educator discrimination to decreased academic sense of belonging and academic confidence, along with previous research linking both to poorer academic outcomes (Banerjee et al., 2018; Benner & Graham, 2013), correspondingly call for increased efforts to reduce marginalizing experiences in academic environments altogether. Providing training for educators and peers on recognizing and addressing implicit biases, fostering inclusive classroom environments, and promoting culturally responsive teaching practices in primary, secondary, and higher education institutions can help reduce the prevalence of such experiences.

Importantly, recognizing the intersectionality of marginalized identities, resilience-building efforts should adopt an intersectional lens that acknowledges the complex interplay of race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual identity, college generational status, and other intersecting identities. Institutions should aim to provide resources that better address the needs of students with multiple marginalized identities or communicate the availability of resources explicitly to them.

The importance of social support in the academic success of systemically marginalized students, as evidenced in the current study, suggests the need for institutions to prioritize networked service intervention approaches as these types of interventions are more likely to account for the social capital inequities among systemically marginalized students (Whitley et al., 2018). Peer mentorship programs, affinity groups, and student-led initiatives can serve as valuable platforms for providing mutual encouragement and building solidarity, resource sharing, and collective problem-solving.

Relatedly, the vital role of familial support networks in the academic success of systemically marginalized students suggests that institutions should consider ways to integrate and sustain these networks within the university context. This might involve providing resources and programs that acknowledge and encourage familial involvement in students' academic journeys. Additionally, institutions could explore strategies to foster stronger connections between students' families and campus communities.

Finally, the employment of individualistic resilience strategies in addressing feelings of IP, academic sense of belonging, and striving behaviors underscore the importance of fostering self-efficacy and self-worth among systemically marginalized students. To do this, institutions should actively promote the development and utilization of proactive coping strategies among marginalized students, including problem-solving skills and emotion regulation techniques. An effective approach involves integrating resilience-promoting techniques into curricula. This approach can foster a culture of self-efficacy, empowering students to effectively navigate challenges. It can also cultivate a stronger connection to the curriculum, ultimately enhancing the learning experience.

Like with the current study's social integration support program, the proposed implications align with a systems-change approach as they focus on enacting small, but strategic shifts within at least one systemic structure to trigger transformative change (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007; Foster-Fishman & Watson, 2017). However, it is important to recognize that even if the suggested implications were implemented, they do not address key underlying causes of inequities in educational attainment—student socioeconomic status and educational funding. Inequitable per student funding in primary and secondary schools translates to disparities in resources for educators and students, alike. This puts students in poorly funded school districts at a distinct disadvantage compared to students in better funded schools, leading to adverse effects on their academic performance (Farrie & Kim, 2023; Jackson, 2020; Wiederhold, 2019). These effects are compounded by other sociostructural and sociocultural factors prevalent in underfunded districts, including students predominantly coming from low-SES and ethnic/racial minority backgrounds, often with parents who have lower levels of education (Barnett & Lamy, 2013; Duncan & Magnuson, 2011; Farkas, 2011). Likewise, the erosion of state and federal funding for higher education institutions, coupled with shifting the onus of financial responsibility to students via rapidly increasing tuition rates, further exacerbates the existing disparities in access to and persistence within higher education institutions (Mitchell et al., 2019; Pratt et al., 2019). Indeed, consistent with past work (Pratt et al., 2019), participants in the current study voiced concerns regarding the affordability of a college education and grappled with considerable financial stress. Consequently, while the current study's social integration support program and proposed

implications may yield positive individual student outcomes, without tackling the fundamental structural inequities that underlie opportunity gaps, substantial progress towards achieving equitable access to and attainment of a higher education will remain elusive.

Limitations

The current study significantly contributes to our understanding of the process by which students' systemically marginalized identities intersect and interact within their academic environments to influence their university experiences. A qualitative approach was employed due to its effectiveness in exploring process-oriented research questions (Fine & Elsbach, 2000). Qualitative data sources included pre-session guiding questions (see Appendix A), participant observation, and whole group discussions. Each data collection method has both limitations and strengths that warrant consideration.

Asking participants to complete pre-session guiding questions was intended to encourage them to think about the topic of the upcoming session and aid in structuring the upcoming session's discussion. However, this approach may have reduced the spontaneity and richness of input during the small and whole group discussions, as participants tended to reiterate their previously shared pre-session responses. Likewise, group dynamics may have been altered due to advanced knowledge of the discussion topics, potentially stifling organic discussion. The possibility of some participants over-preparing (e.g., searching certain terms) and creating an imbalance in knowledge levels among participants could have also led to certain voices dominating the conversation while others may have felt less confident to contribute, possibly limiting the emergence

of diverse perspectives. Additionally, the quality of pre-session responses can be inconsistent with some participants providing detailed answers and others offering minimal or rushed responses, affecting the overall quality of the data.

To account for these limitations, the primary analysis team reviewed responses ahead of each session, noting areas within participants' responses for further clarification and discussion during the session. Furthermore, the first author, who served as the moderator for all five sessions, ensured that all participants had the opportunity to share their perspectives. She continually reminded participants that this was a space for learning and growth, which helped address the potential issue of some participants feeling reluctant to contribute due to a lack of knowledge about certain topics.

Participant observation was employed during the small group discussions in the breakout rooms of each session where researchers were able to capture rich, contextual information through detailed field notes, including salient themes, body language and facial expressions, natural interactions and reactions, and the general vibe of the conversation. To facilitate natural participant interactions, the research team took on the role of *observer as participant*; however, despite having their cameras and microphones muted, except in cases of technical issues or discussions veering off-topic, participants were aware of researchers' presence in the breakout rooms. Participants' awareness of being observed may have introduced social desirability bias or altered communication dynamics among participants, potentially affecting the authenticity of their interactions and responses. The inherent subjectivity in participant observation and accompanying field notes is another limitation that should be considered. The influence of researchers'

positionalities and biases on what they notice and how they interpret behaviors and interactions can lead to inconsistent field note data collection. To address this possibility, the research team used structured guidelines for observation to ensure data collection remained focused and relevant. Furthermore, to enhance consistency of field notes and allow for a systematic comparison across groups, researchers and participants were assigned to the same breakout rooms for all sessions.

Whole group discussions provided the third and final source of qualitative data in the current study. Social desirability bias and groupthink in the context of whole group discussions are limitations that should be considered as they can reduce the quality of the collected data. Whole group discussions also have the potential to be dominated by certain individuals, limiting input from quieter participants. Despite these limitations, whole group discussions are efficient as they enable data collection from multiple participants simultaneously, which can generate rich qualitative data that captures a diverse range of opinions and experiences (Kitzinger, 1994). They can also foster an interactive environment that can encourage in-depth responses and promote sense of community among participants (Kitzinger, 1994)—a primary goal of the current study's social integration support program. The semi-structured format employed during these discussions also allowed for flexibility and enabled the research team to explore emergent themes and insights that arose spontaneously throughout the session.

Triangulation techniques were employed to enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of findings. Specifically, triangulation across multiple sources of data aimed to address the limitations inherent in each qualitative data collection method employed in the current

study, thereby enhancing the credibility and dependability of findings. For example, while the role of *observer as participant* led to missed opportunities for clarifying responses in real-time and more in-depth probing, follow-up questions were incorporated in the whole group discussions that followed and added greater depth to the collected data.

To further enhance the credibility and dependability of findings, triangulation across multiple researchers—a fundamental component of the CQR methodology used in the current study—was employed to mitigate bias across both data collection and analysis (Hill et al., 1997, 2005). Throughout each stage of the research process, the research team engaged in reflexivity by critically examining their own biases, assumptions, and perspectives. This practice aimed to minimize the influence of individual researcher biases on data collection and the identification of core ideas, categories, and domains during data analysis. CQR's audit process, where analyses are audited by someone who is not part of the primary analysis team to ensure that the primary analysis team's findings accurately represent the data (Hill et al., 1997, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005) helps to further minimize individual researcher biases and facilitate the confirmability and dependability of interpretations, ultimately enhancing the rigor of findings.

Another limitation to consider is the reliance on Zoom for the implementation of the current study's social integration support program. Online qualitative research may constrain rapport-building efforts and hinder participants' ability to engage naturally. Additionally, limitations in capturing nonverbal cues or subtle nuances in communication inherent to Zoom recordings may compromise data completeness and accuracy (Carter et

al., 2021). Technical difficulties can also disrupt the observation process, affecting data quality. Despite the limitations of conducting online qualitative research, Howlett (2022) argues that given the societal shift towards an increasingly online existence, these virtual spaces should be considered valid environments for conducting research.

The transferability of the current study's findings to other demographic groups or educational contexts also warrants discussion. The sample primarily comprised BIPOC and first-generation White college students participating in a social integration intervention program at a PWI, largely comprised of commuters in a predominantly White urban environment. The program was implemented during the Fall 2021 term, at which time the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing. Though the intervention program took place online, via Zoom, the university had made the decision to provide some in-person and hybrid (i.e., online and in-person) classes, in addition to online classes, for the first time since the lockdown in the Spring 2020 term. Thus, participants, who were incoming first-year students, were transitioning to university at a time when the campus was just starting to reopen, with limited social events and the required use of masks while indoors.

Moreover, participants in the current study—each with a unique combination of marginalized identities, including race/ethnicity, SES, college generational status, sexual identity, gender, and religion— represent a small subset of systemically marginalized students. As such, there is a possibility that the topics and experiences discussed in the current study may be unique to the participants in the current sample and thus, may not be transferable to a broader population of systemically marginalized students.

Future research should address these limitations by employing diverse methodologies to corroborate findings and enhance the transferability, or generalizability of findings. Additionally, exploring the experiences of systemically marginalized students in different university environments with varying student body demographic can provide a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences and needs. Implementing interventions across various platforms and settings can also shed light on the effectiveness of different approaches in supporting marginalized students' academic experiences, social integration processes, and well-being.

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Appendix A:

Zoom Sessions Themes and Guiding Questions

Each session will be broken down as follows:

- 20-25 minutes: Guest Speaker (a PSU professor or administrator) with Q&A
- 20-25 minutes: Breakout session where students can discuss that week's guiding questions
- 40-50 minutes: Regroup and have students share their responses to that week's questions and/or what they learned from other students in their breakout sessions and if/how it has helped them to see a different perspective

Session 1 - Deciding to go to College and experience in college so far

- **Purpose:** Allow students to get to know one another and focus on the student experience
- **Guiding questions:**
    - Why did you decide to attend college?
    - Was your family supportive of this decision? How did they show their support (e.g., moral, financial, etc.)?
    - Do you have a support system (e.g., friends, family, coworkers)? If yes, please describe who is included in your support system. Please also explain how/when you use your support system.
    - How has COVID affected your experience at PSU so far and your experience as a college student in general?
    - What resources from PSU would you find useful during COVID? What resources do you think you would find useful post-COVID?

Session 2 - Discussing Stigmatized Identities

- **Purpose:** Explicitly discuss discriminatory experiences
- **Guiding questions:**
    - How would you describe yourself? What identities do you hold?
    - Have you dealt with discrimination in the past (before attending PSU) because of an identity you hold or group you belong to? At PSU? From whom (e.g., peer, professor, staff, someone from a different racial background)?

- Have you witnessed discrimination occur in the past (before attending PSU) because of an identity you hold or group you belong to? At PSU? Who did it involve (e.g., professor to student, peer to peer)?
- What resources or skills have you used in response to perceiving discrimination?

Session 3 - Imposter Syndrome/Belonging at PSU

- **Purpose:** Explicitly discuss imposter syndrome and sense of belonging at PSU and in higher education, in general
- **Guiding questions:**
  - Do you feel that you belong in college in general? Why or why not?
  - Do you feel that you belong at PSU? Why or why not?
  - Describe a time you felt that you did not belong in higher education or at PSU specifically. If you could go back, what would you change about the experience (or interaction) so that you felt like you belonged?
  - Describe a time you experienced imposter syndrome as a college student. If you could go back, what would you tell yourself so that you felt less like an imposter?

Session 4 - Critical Race Theory in Education

- **Purpose:** Bring awareness to the main tenets of Critical Race Theory and its impact on academic achievement for various social groups
- **Guiding questions:**
  - What do you know of Critical Race Theory in education?
  - In what ways do you think household income and social class (e.g., poor, middle class, wealthy) could influence academic achievement?
  - In what ways do you think parent education (i.e., college-educated parents) could influence academic achievement?
  - How do you think racism has impacted academic achievement for ethnic/racial minorities?

Session 5 – Careers: Infinite possibilities

- **Purpose:** Highlight that there are many different career paths available and understand the limitations that students perceive in pursuing different careers
- **Guiding questions:**
    - Have you ever felt, or do you currently feel limited by the type of career you can have because of your social standing or because of your racial/ethnic identity? Explain why you have felt this way.
    - What are you planning on majoring in? What types of careers have you considered? What has inspired you to pursue your current academic track/ intended career?
    - Do you think being a first-generation college student and/or BIPOC student limits what you can achieve or the type of career you can have? Please explain.

Appendix B:

Screening Questionnaire and Demographic Questionnaire

Screening

1. What is your full name (first and last name)?

2. Please provide your email address (please use your **PDX email**):

3. What is your age? Please use Arabic numerals (ex: 18).

_____

4. Which of the following describes your race?
    a. American Indian or Alaska Native
    b. Asian
    c. Black or African American
    d. Hispanic or Latino
    e. Middle Eastern or North African
    f. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
    g. White or Caucasian
    h. Other: _____

5. What is your current status at PSU?
    a. Freshman
    b. Sophomore
    c. Junior
    d. Senior

6. **Instructions:** Please indicate whether these statements accurately reflect you.

Response items: Yes/No

1. I identify as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person of Color).
2. I identify as White.
3. I am a first-generation college student (i.e., my parents did not receive college degrees).
4. This is my first year in college.

Ability to Attend
Instructions: Please answer the following questions.

Response items: Yes/No

1. I will be able to attend the 5 biweekly 1.5 hour Zoom sessions on Fridays, 5 pm – 6:30 pm, Weeks 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9.

   - 4/2/21, 5 – 6:30 pm
   - 4/16/21, 5 – 6:30 pm
   - 4/30/21, 5 – 6:30 pm
   - 5/14/21, 5 – 6:30 pm
   - 5/28/21, 5 – 6:30 pm

2. You will also be asked to prepare for each Zoom session by answering a few guiding questions. Answers should not be more than 2-3 sentences long. (10-15 mins).

I am willing to answer a few questions before each session.

3. I am willing to take an exit questionnaire at the end of the project (30 mins).

4. I have the necessary technology to attend live and participate in Zoom sessions.

Open-Ended Question

1. What do you hope to gain from participating in this project?

Demographics

(Adapted from MEIM; Phinney, 1990)

1. People come from many different countries and cultures, and there are many different words to describe the different backgrounds or ***ethnic groups*** that people come from. Some examples of ethnic groups are Latino, African American, Mexican, Arab American, Lebanese, Asian American, Chinese, and many others.

In terms of ethnic group, I consider myself to be:

_____

2. Do you go by a different name other than your given name?
   a. Yes
   b. No

3. Do you go by a nickname?
   a. Yes
   b. No

4. Please put the name you prefer to be called at school.

_____

5. (If yes to 4) Why do you go by a different name?

_____

6. (If yes to 5) Why do you go by a nickname?

_____

7. What is your gender?
    a. Man/Male
    b. Woman/Female
    c. Other: _____
    d. Prefer not to say

8. Do you consider yourself transgender?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Prefer not to say

9. Do you consider yourself:
    a. Heterosexual
    b. Homosexual
    c. Bisexual
    d. Other: _____
    e. Prefer not to say

10. Were you born in the U.S.?
    a. Yes
    b. No

11. (If no to 12) At what age, did you arrive to the U.S.? Please use Arabic numerals (ex: 18).

_____

12. Was your mother born in the U.S.?
    a. Yes
    b. No

13. Was your father born in the U.S.?
    a. Yes
    b. No

14. What is the highest level of education your parents have completed? (Refer to the **parent with the most education**).
    a. Did not complete high school
    b. High school graduate
    c. Some college or university, but no degree
    d. 2 year degree or Associate's
    e. 4 year degree or Bachelor's
    f. Bachelor's degree
    g. Master's degree
    h. Professional degree
    i. Doctoral degree
15. Is English your first language?
    a. Yes
    b. No

16. (If no to 17) What is your first language?

_____

17. What is the main language spoken at home?

_____

18. Do you speak any other languages?
    a. Yes
    b. No

19. Please list **ALL** the languages you speak in order of fluency (**most to least fluent**).

_____

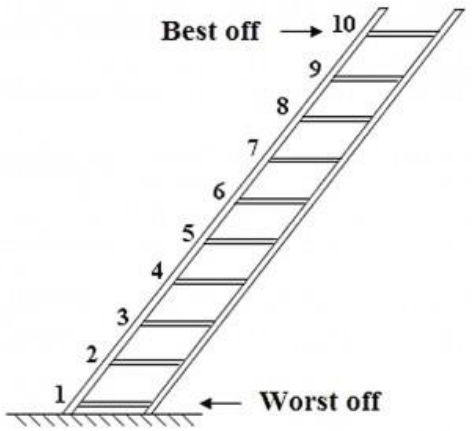
20. In high school, was the area you lived in:
    a. Urban
    b. Rural
    c. Suburban
    d. Other (please specify): _____

21. (MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status)
Instructions: Think of this ladder as representing where people stand in the United States.

At the **top** of the ladder are the people who are the **best off** – those who have the most

money, the most education, and the most respected jobs. At the **bottom** are the people who are the **worst off** – those who have the least money, least education, the least respected jobs, or no job. The higher up you are on this ladder, the closer you are to the people at the very top; the lower you are, the closer you are to the people at the very bottom.

Where would you place yourself on this ladder?



a. 1
b. 2
c. 3
d. 4
e. 5
f. 6
g. 7
h. 8
i. 9
j. 10

22. Please indicate the degree to which you agree with the following statements.
Note: Neighborhood refers to the local area around your home.

Scale: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), Strongly Agree (5)

a. The neighborhood I grew up in was racially/ethnically diverse (residents belonged to many different ethnic groups).
b. Most of the people in the neighborhood I grew up in belonged to the same racial/ethnic group as me.

c. The high school I attended was racially/ethnically diverse (students belonged to many different ethnic groups).
d. Most of the people at the high school I attended belonged to the same racial/ethnic group as me.

23. Do you currently live:
    a. On campus
    b. With parents
    c. With roommates
    d. Alone

24. What was your GPA for Winter 2021 quarter? (Ex: 3.00)

_____

25. What was your cumulative high school GPA? (Ex. 3.00)

_____

26. Are you currently working?
    a. Yes
    b. No

27. How do you describe your political orientation?
    a. Very Liberal
    b. Somewhat Liberal
    c. Neither Liberal nor Conservative
    d. Somewhat Conservative
    e. Very Conservative

Chapter 4: Discussion

The current dissertation employed a mixed-methods approach to identify and understand the interrelated intrapersonal and interpersonal processes that either promote or inhibit the socioemotional well-being and social integration processes of students from systemically marginalized backgrounds. Specifically, across two studies, students' ethnic-racial identity, immigrant generation status, gender identity, sexual identity, college generational status, socioeconomic status, geographical identity, and religious identity were examined as determinants of social integration processes and psychosocial outcomes.

In a sample of Latinx college students, Study 1 (Chapter 2) quantitatively explored the mediating roles of maternal and peer relationship quality in the relationship between ethnic identity commitment and socioemotional well-being (i.e., depression, self-esteem, and anxiety). To account for the multidimensional and intersectional nature of identity, the potential moderating effects of gender and immigrant generation status were also explored. Results partially supported the hypothesis that ethnic identity commitment is associated with healthier socioemotional well-being, particularly in terms of higher self-esteem and fewer depressive symptoms. Ethnic identity commitment was not associated with anxiety symptoms. Maternal and peer relationships were found to mediate this association, with maternal relationships having a stronger mediating influence. Contrary to expectations, gender and immigrant generation status did not moderate the indirect effects between ethnic identity commitment and socioemotional well-being. However, initial analyses via *t*-tests suggested differences by gender and

immigrant generation status on ethnic identity commitment, providing support for the intersectionality of social identities.

Drawing from discussions that occurred within the context of a social integration support program, Study 2 (Chapter 3) employed a strength-based risk and resilience framework to qualitatively explore the nuanced processes through which first-year students who hold identities that have been historically marginalized in the academic context (e.g., ethnic/racial minority, low-SES, first-generation college student) navigate their university experiences in relation to these, often multiple, and intersecting marginalized identities. Findings revealed an early and chronic conscious awareness of marginalized identities within the academic context that stemmed from marginalizing experiences, such as discrimination, microaggressions, and instances of stereotype threat, beginning in elementary school and persisting into students' present-day university environment. These early and persistent marginalizing experiences shaped students' perceptions and expectations of higher education institutions. Participants expressed facing difficulties negotiating their identities within the academic context and revealed increased striving behavior to counteract perceptions of academic inadequacies from both educators and peers. Challenges extended to inadequate social support within available social support networks that perpetuated social capital inequities and impacted participants' academic sense of belonging.

In line with a risk and resilience framework, participants demonstrated remarkable resilience despite facing significant challenges due to their marginalized backgrounds. Participants employed collective coping strategies to challenge systemic

barriers and marginalization, such as proactively establishing peer social support networks with an emphasis on cultivating a network of informational support and fostering solidarity through collective action and activism. In response to feelings of imposter phenomenon (IP) and striving behaviors, however, individualistic coping strategies, such as positive self-talk and redefining success, emerged. Study 2 findings highlight the complex interplay of identity, marginalization, and resilience in students' pursuit of a higher education. These findings also underscore the necessity of shifting away from a deficit-based approach when examining the experiences of systemically marginalized students.

Contributions

The persistent gap in educational attainment and the rising health crisis among systemically marginalized students (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Brody et al., 2016; Hartley, 2011; Kundu, 2019; Welner & Carter, 2013) reveals a notable gap in our understanding of the processes by which a student's identities impact social integration efforts and psychosocial outcomes. Employing concepts related to identity work, identity negotiation, and identity-based motivation (Deaux & Major, 1987; Oyserman, 2013; Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Swann Jr. & Bosson, 2010; Swann, 1987), the current research addresses this gap, offering a comprehensive exploration of how students' intersecting systemically marginalized identities influence social integration processes and psychosocial outcomes within the university context. Despite differing foci, both studies align with past work in suggesting that the transition to university represents a continuation of the identity negotiation process that begins in early childhood (Brittian et

al., 2013; Holland et al., 2001; Kalsner & Pistole, 2003; McAdams, 2001; Rosario et al., 2024), highlighting the relevance of exploring identity development through adulthood, and particularly in the university context. Increasing our understanding of how students come to perceive themselves and their fit within their university context is vital as these perceptions influence social integration and psychosocial outcomes, which in turn are predictive of academic persistence within higher education (Hartley, 2011; Iacovino & James, 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Rosario et al., 2024; Stephens et al., 2012; Tinto, 1975). The current research contributes to our understanding of how systemically marginalized students negotiate their identities in the university context, elucidating the intricate interplay between academic identity and historically marginalized identities within the academic context.

Across both studies, findings emphasize students' active participation in the dynamic and continuous identity negotiation, or meaning-making, process to make sense of who they are and how they fit within their new university environment. In particular, the Study 2 finding of participants developing an early chronic conscious awareness of their systemically marginalized identities that persists into the present-day university context underscores the enduring impact of early marginalizing experiences on perceptions and expectations within the academic context. Coupled with past academic experiences, students are extracting meaning from social interactions through the lens of their chronically salient systemically marginalized identities to make sense of who they are, where they fit, and how to behave within their new university environment. This is

demonstrated by the significant impact of Latinx students' ERI commitment on perceptions of maternal and peer relationship quality in Study 1.

Specifically, Study 1 findings suggest that greater ERI commitment among Latinx university students was associated with perceptions of better quality maternal and peer relationships, both of which predicted fewer depressive symptoms and higher self-esteem. Comparatively, maternal relationship quality was found to have a greater mediating influence than peer relationship quality in the ERI commitment–socioemotional well-being association. These findings suggest that the perceived quality of maternal and peer relationships play crucial roles in explaining the link between ERI commitment and socioemotional well-being among Latinx university students, extending existing identity theory which highlights the role of identity in shaping social interactions (Swann, 1987; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Taylor, 1998). Study 1 findings also suggested that the ethnic identity commitment–well-being association is a complex one that may be explained by factors other than social relationships, especially in the context of transitioning to university, which brings with it a host of additional and unique challenges for systemically marginalized students (Dennis et al., 2005; Kenny & Rice, 1995; Mattanah et al., 2011; Padgett et al., 2012). Study 2 sheds light on factors, including discriminatory experiences, feelings of IP, and increased striving behaviors, that could explain the ethnic identity commitment–well-being association in the university context.

Furthermore, maternal relationship quality emerging as a stronger mediator highlights the ongoing importance of parental support for university students, even as they transition into young adulthood and are expected to turn to peers more often than

parents for support (Sokol, 2009). Indeed, Study 2 findings underscore the significance of perceiving quality familial support as negative perceptions of familial support were found to compound the challenges of transitioning to and navigating the university context, especially for participants who struggled to establish supportive peer or educator social networks. This is especially relevant when considering that social integration within the university context was originally, and has typically focused on successful interactions and cultivation of social support networks with peers and educators (Hartley, 2011; Swenson et al., 2008; Tinto, 1975), and less so on the incorporation and maintenance of students' familial social support networks. That past researchers typically approached this work from an individualistic perspective, with the assumption that students hold independent self-construals, likely contributed to the lack of focus on familial social support during the transition to and throughout students' university careers. However, students across both studies in the current research were more likely to hold interdependent self-construals due to their collectivistic ERI and/or low-SES backgrounds, both of which emphasize family- oriented and relationship-oriented interdependent values (Fuligni et al., 1999; Silverman et al., 2023).

Both familial and peer social relationships were expressed as being instrumental in navigating marginalizing experiences in academic contexts and on university campuses, ultimately facilitating the academic success of systemically marginalized students. Consistent with past research (Dennis et al., 2005; Spiridon et al., 2020, 2021), peer support networks appear to play a significant role in coping with discriminatory experiences, mitigating perceptions of isolation, and fostering sense of belonging on

university campuses, as well as in offsetting social capital inequities among systemically marginalized students in Study 2. Participants explicitly linked familial support to academic persistence, citing familial encouragement as a source of motivation to persist in the face of challenges and internalized parental encouragement and expectations as a source of their unwavering determination (i.e., striving) and commitment to realizing their educational aspirations. While past research has linked pre-university parental involvement, encouragement, and expectations, in particular, to academic achievement (Boonk et al., 2018; Fan & Chen, 2001; Wilder, 2014), the current research underscores the importance of continued familial (i.e., parents and other family members) support in systemically marginalize students' academic persistence and achievement at the university level. Furthermore, extending past work that has demonstrated a differential impact of self-construals and social identities on perceptions of and seeking out social support (Chang et al., 2020; Heine, 2010; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2019; Taylor, 2010), the current research contributes to our understanding of how students' historically marginalized identities influence perceptions and utilization of their social support networks. This, in turn, contributes to our understanding of how to effectively address the needs of systemically marginalized students to facilitate their educational attainment.

Methodological Contributions

Comprising both quantitative and qualitative methodologies across two distinct studies, the mixed-methods approach employed in the current research makes notable contributions to the overall depth and breadth in understanding the experiences of systemically marginalized students. The quantitative exploration of the association

between ERI commitment and socioemotional well-being, the mediating roles of maternal and peer relationship quality, and the moderating roles of gender identity and immigrant generation status in Study 1 offers a broad overview on the intersection of identity and well-being and the role of social relationships in the context of higher education.

Complementing the quantitative findings, Study 2 introduces a qualitative exploration using a strength-based risk and resilience framework. This methodological choice allows for a rich, in-depth examination of the nuanced processes through which students navigate their university experiences in relation to various intersecting marginalized identities. The qualitative insights derived from discussions within the social integration support program provide a rich narrative that quantitative data alone cannot capture. It allows for the identification of unique challenges, sources of resilience, and contextual nuances that contribute a layer of understanding not attainable through quantitative measures alone.

Overall, the combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies creates a comprehensive and well-rounded approach to examining the experiences of systemically marginalized students in higher education. The quantitative findings offer general trends and associations, while the qualitative insights provide a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of individuals within these broader trends. This integrated approach not only addresses the limitations of relying solely on one method but also enriches the overall validity and applicability of the research findings. Moreover, the mixed methods approach aligns with the complex and multifaceted nature of the research questions,

providing a more holistic understanding of the interplay between identity, social integration, and well-being in the university context.

Practical Implications

While many universities have invested heavily in resources aimed at facilitating the academic success of systemically marginalized students, they have been largely ineffective in creating the type of systemic change necessary to bridge the gap in degree attainment between students form disadvantaged and advantaged backgrounds (Chang et al., 2020; Pratt et al., 2019; Stephens et al., 2012; Whitley et al., 2018). To address this issue, the current research aimed to identify the factors perpetuating this achievement gap. Consistent with past research (e.g., Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Boykin & Noguera, 2011), findings point to systemic and structural factors that exacerbate disparities in opportunities throughout the academic careers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Current findings also underscore the importance of considering intersecting identity dynamics to promote academic success and well-being among systemically marginalized students in university settings. These findings carry important implications for the development of more effective resources on university campuses, particularly for students attending PWIs.

Given the ongoing process of identity negotiation within university settings, as highlighted in the current research, it is imperative for universities to enhance representation and inclusivity in both curricula and the backgrounds of educators. Culturally responsive curricula can communicate to marginalized students that their identities and experiences are valued, thereby fostering identity exploration and

affirmation. Additionally, diversifying the backgrounds of educators enables systemically marginalized students to more readily identify with the academic space. Implementing both initiatives will ultimately facilitate greater academic engagement among systemically marginalized students.

To work toward creating more inclusive and equitable academic campuses, universities must also acknowledge the intersectionality of marginalized identities. An intersectional lens recognizes the dynamic construction of social identities, particularly politicized social identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexual identity), that have a multidimensional and intersectional influence on experiences and outcomes (Brekhus, 2008; Burke, 2003; Crenshaw, 1991, 1997; Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Providing resources that effectively address the needs of students with multiple, intersecting marginalized identities is imperative. Alongside this, universities should explicitly communicate the availability of resources and specify their intended beneficiaries. It cannot be assumed that students, particularly FGCS, are aware of campus resources and spaces, or that they perceive them as relevant to their needs.

A simple and cost-effective approach to address this lack of informational support and enhance the social integration of marginalized students could involve implementing exit surveys for graduating university students from marginalized backgrounds. These surveys would inquire about the information they wish they had received, and at which point in their academic journey they would have found it most helpful. By gathering this feedback, universities can proactively share valuable insights with incoming students, helping them avoid similar challenges and struggles.

Current findings also underscore the importance of recognizing the adverse effects of marginalizing experiences on students' well-being, which include feelings of IP, a lack of belonging, and a heightened pressure to succeed academically, all of which lead to an increased need to strive. Universities must prioritize access to culturally competent mental health resources and support services for systemically marginalized students to promote their well-being and resilience. Additionally, integrating culturally relevant content into the curriculum can promote positive self-concepts and cultivate a sense of agency in students to challenge racist narratives, which is essential for their empowerment.

Finally, universities should consider developing resources that acknowledge the significance of interpersonal relationships, particularly with regard to familial, peer, and educator support networks, in mitigating the adverse effects of marginalization. This encompasses addressing issues like perceived social isolation and the perpetuation of social capital inequities. By recognizing and leveraging familial support networks, higher education institutions can enhance the overall academic experience and success of systemically marginalized students, particularly for students living away from home for the first time (see Mattanah et al. (2011) for review). Regarding peer support networks, universities should offer resources and support for student-led activism initiatives, empowering students and increasing their sense of agency, while also ensuring that marginalized voices are heard and valued in decision-making processes. Furthermore, efforts to mitigate marginalizing experiences on university campuses are crucial for promoting a sense of belonging and academic confidence among systemically

marginalized students. Thus, providing training for educators on recognizing and addressing implicit biases, fostering inclusive classroom environments, and promoting culturally responsive teaching practices can help reduce the prevalence of stereotype threat and microaggressions.

It is important to recognize, however, that even if the suggested implications were implemented, they do not address key underlying causes of inequities in educational attainment—student socioeconomic status and educational funding. Inequitable per student funding in primary and secondary schools leads to disparities in resources, disadvantaging students in poorly funded districts and negatively impacting long-term academic outcomes (Farrie & Kim, 2023; Jackson, 2020; Wiederhold, 2019). Additionally, state and federal defunding of higher education, combined with rapidly rising tuition rates, exacerbates disparities in access to and persistence within higher education institutions (Mitchell et al., 2019; Pratt et al., 2019). Indeed, participants in Study 2 voiced concerns about the affordability of a college education and grappled with considerable financial stress. For example, students reported needing to work one or more jobs while attending university and having to choose between unaffordable course materials, the lack of which could diminish their chances of excelling in their coursework. Therefore, despite the likelihood of the proposed implications yielding positive individual student outcomes, the absence of efforts to tackle fundamental structural inequities that underlie opportunity gaps impedes widespread progress toward equitable access to and achievement in higher education.

Limitations

Both studies provide valuable insights into the experiences of systemically marginalized students in academic settings, but they also have several limitations that warrant consideration. Study 1 highlighted the importance of ethnic identity commitment and social relationships in influencing socioemotional well-being among Latinx college students. However, the nonexperimental design of the study limits the ability to establish causality. Additionally, the convenience sample of mono-ethnic Latinx individuals, overrepresentation of females, and lack of consideration for other caregiver relationships restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should expand to include participants from various ethnic/racial backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses to explore differences between groups. Moreover, adopting more inclusive measures for gender identity and sexual orientation would provide a more comprehensive understanding of participants' identities. Future research should also delve deeper into participants' living situations and friend groups to better understand the impact of these factors on ethnic identity and peer relationship quality.

In Study 2, the qualitative approach provided rich insights into how systemically marginalized students navigate their academic experiences. However, the reliance on qualitative methodology comes with limitations, including the potential influence of researchers' positionalities and biases across data collection and analysis. To mitigate bias across both data collection and analysis and enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of findings, triangulation across multiple sources of data and across multiple researchers were employed. The use of the Zoom platform for data collection may have hindered natural interactions and rapport-building efforts, impacting the completeness and

accuracy of the data. Moreover, the small sample primarily consisted of BIPOC and first-generation White college students participating in a social integration intervention program at a PWI, largely comprised of commuters in a predominantly White urban environment, which limits the transferability of the findings. Future research should aim to include a more diverse sample and explore experiences in different educational contexts to enhance the applicability of the findings. The following section provides a more in-depth exploration of future directions.

Future Directions

The current research lays a solid foundation for further exploration of the experiences and needs of systemically marginalized students. A longitudinal study could be conducted to track the trajectories of systemically marginalized students over time, providing a deeper understanding of how their identities, experiences and needs evolve throughout their academic journey. This longitudinal approach would offer valuable insights into the long-term impact of social integration support programs and identity dynamics on academic and psychosocial outcomes. Furthermore, implementing and assessing the impact of support programs informed by a strength-based risk and resilience framework could offer practical insights into improving systemically marginalized students' overall university experience.

A deeper exploration of the multidimensional and intersectional nature of marginalized identities involves not only acknowledging the coexistence of various identities but also comprehending the dynamic interactions and influences that shape the experiences of individuals within the complex system of higher education. Future studies

can delve deeper into this exploration by investigating how broader sociostructural and sociocultural factors influence the intersectionality of identities within university contexts. This could involve investigating the impact of cultural shifts, policy changes, and societal attitudes on the experiences of individuals with intersecting marginalized identities. Exploring these contextual factors can significantly contribute to refining strategies for fostering inclusivity, developing targeted interventions, and addressing the diverse needs of marginalized students in higher education settings.

Future studies should also aim to include a more diverse range of voices, capturing a broader spectrum of experiences. This might involve exploring the perspectives of faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders to gain a comprehensive understanding of the systemic factors influencing the university experiences of marginalized students.

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