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Online Higher Education Experiences for First-Generation and/or Low-Income Students During the Covid-19 Pandemic: An Explorative Study Through the Lens of Self-Formation

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ABSTRACT

The experiences of First-generation and/or Low-income (FGLI) students in elite higher education institutions (EHEI) are important to analyze as often they are further disadvantaged due to the large discrepancies between them and peers who are not FGLI. Through the lens of the COVID pandemic this research seeks to understand what experiences FGLI students had and how it led to their outcomes. This case study focuses on Columbia University due to its location, reputation, and proximity to Covid. In thinking about their institutional experience students discussed disparities/stressors, their livelihood, and prestige. Through the impact of Covid, issues of housing, mental health, and loss were expressed. With the transition to online learning students examined academic policies, digital inequality, and the importance of interior spaces. Through these difficulties' students brought forth concepts of Simon Marginson's (2022) higher education as self-formation. Through independent conscious action, growth/moral responsibility, motivation/drive, and transformational change. These FGLI students had a mutually beneficial relationship with their higher education institution in which they helped create programs for students as well as improve their personal outcomes. Many participants were able to overcome these obstacles, and many spoke about coming out better in the end through self-formation. In looking at higher education as self-formation we can see how these high achieving individuals consider higher education as a means to better their lives and advance their livelihood. By examining this population, we can further understand the needs of this marginalized community, and in learning some of the difficulties these students face, institutions can be better prepared to assist current and future students.

Keywords: capital, Covid-19, elite higher education institution, first-generation student, inequality, low-income student, online education, self-formation

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations	Phrase
Covid	Corona Virus-19
EHEI	Elite Higher Education Institutions
FGLI	First Generation and/or Low-Income
FLI Net	First-Generation Low-Income Network
NYC	New York City
Wi-Fi	Wireless Internet

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study and Statement of the Problem

The Covid pandemic has altered the daily lives of people around the world causing numerous deaths, changes to economic and employment sectors, closure of business and schools, and behaviors around the world (Chriscaden, 2020). These changes also affected the way many students attended classes and interacted with their educational institution. The National Conference of State Legislatures affirmed that the pandemic threatens to alter all forms of university life and finds that during the spring 2020 semester more than 1,300 higher education institutions across all 50 states closed and transferred to online-only instruction (Smalley, 2020). The vast majority of educational institutions were unprepared to move into online modes of teaching causing various difficulties amongst students. The pandemic affected all students, but First-generation/Low-income (FGLI) students had distinctive disparities when compared to their privileged peers, and these variances are greater when they are in elite higher education institutions (EHEI).

While there has been previous research on FGLI students, the Covid pandemic allows a new lens from which to analyze the effects of shifting suddenly into online education. Gonzales et al. (2020) find that even in a highly connected population, students of color and those of lower socioeconomic status experience hardships at larger rates. In showing that minority groups are disproportionally represented as FGLI students we can see how moving to online modes of instruction can cause differences in educational outcomes. Moving from in person learning to online instruction was difficult for all students, especially for those students at institutions that did not previously offer online instruction. According to De Brey et al. (2021) between 2015-2016 only 10.8% of students reported taking their entire degree program online, the majority reported taking mostly in-person classes.

Elite private and public institutions that had large residential populations saw intense shifts that required the most adaptation from students and educators (Kiebler & Stewart, 2021). EHEI historically use in-person learning as their primary form of teaching, as they realize the multitude of benefits that come with this mode of teaching. When

attending elite institutions FGLI students gain access to resources and insight their wealthy and connected peers have access to (Kiebler & Stewart, 2021). Historically, elite institutions were for the privileged few, and through the testing and admission process continue inequality by amassing financial wealth as well as social and cultural capital (Massey, 2007).

This study explores the perspectives of FGLI students at elite institutions who were impacted by the Covid pandemic. Integrating the Covid lens to this research allows insight to the added burdens that FGLI students faced. The ongoing pandemic caused all educational levels to incorporate technology like never before, creating a large population that can give insight into the student experiences of online learning (Alfonsin & Punyanunt-Carter, 2022). Changing the educational mode may have complicated the success of students who were not familiar with this approach, causing issues of accessibility and equity to come to the forefront (Strawser, 2022). As internet technology has advanced, educational institutions have increasingly incorporated online learning to their curriculum, however the Covid pandemic rapidly transformed online education into the primary method of teaching (Alfonsin & Punyanunt-Carter, 2022). Martel (2020) reported that 86 percent of higher education institutions altered their instructional mode, with the majority moving from in-person to online instruction. Analyzing how FGLI students interacted with elite higher education systems through the Covid pandemic gives new insights into higher education's effect on student's process of self-formation.

Purpose of the Study

What constitutes an FGLI student can have a variety of meanings. This exploration utilizes Nunn's (2019) definition that "neither of your parents ever earned a bachelor's degree" (p. 113). Students even within the same group may face different challenges, but often times it is found that most first-generation students are also from low-income backgrounds (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2018; Nunn, 2019; Tran, 2021). The classification of being low-income is not definitive but is considered as part of a student's identity. While both classifications can be mutually exclusive there is often an interrelatedness between the two, for this reason research participants can define themselves as either or both. Being

FGLI can create unequal experiences in and out of the classroom that informs how they further advance in their post academic career (Benson & Lee, 2020).

Enrolling in a higher education institution is a function of several factors including academic ability, social and cultural capital, costs, labor market opportunities and future benefits (Perna, 2000). Applying to Ivy League institutions, is not an easy decision for FGLI students, as these institutions have been historically white, and often give preference to students with connections and financial resources, perpetuating past discriminatory practices (Lee & Harris, 2020; Todd, 2019). Through governmental policies and institutional practices, the number of FGLI students in higher education institutions has increased steadily (Rimer, 2007; Stephens, 2010). De Brey (2021) finds that for the 2018/2019 school year the cost of undergraduate tuition kept increasing, with private institutions averaging $47,419 which is more than double the cost of public institutions. It is found that a large proportion of FGLI students in the U.S. do not graduate within 6 years of enrolling into a higher education institution (Demetriou, 2014; Saenz et al., 2007). As admissions into higher education have increased, so have the admissions cost. With these statistics it can be found that FGLI students in elite institutions face even greater barriers than their wealthier counterparts.

The stress of Covid, new methods of teaching, not having the ability for in person interactions, and various other factors created a distinct student experience, yet it allowed students new ways to examine their college experience (Strawser, 2022). Seeger (2018) finds that "Academic under-preparation and lower levels of social and cultural capital may contribute to preventing first-generation students from building supportive relationships with faculty that could be very beneficial to their success in college" (p. 6). If FGLI students do not find academic mentors and leaders to help support them, it may hinder them from achieving their goals. Walton and Cohen (2007) find that for students who experience adversity, changing how they interpret their sense of belonging can be effective in helping increase their achievement. This means that FGLI students who have a strong sense of belonging and community tend to have better outcomes in their educational institutions.

Research Questions

This study explores the experiences of FGLI students transition from in person teaching to online instruction and its impacts on their educational experiences. By exploring this specific time and process we can better see how institutional practices could be put into place to help communities that may be impacted in the future. In seeing how students viewed their transitions during lockdowns we may get insight into institutional practices that can help or hinder students and their relationships with the institutions. Primarily, this exploration gauges student experiences through a difficult time. While all students experienced some kind of difficulty during this time, FGLI students who were at elite institutions had additional financial and familial burdens. Iniguez (2022) writes, "As trailblazers for their families and communities, first generation students must overcome a greater number of obstacles in order to transform into role models and inspirational figures of perseverance for future generations" (p. ii). Additionally, this study explores how on top of these difficulties and a global pandemic, FGLI students described a process of self-formation through the higher education institution.

By focusing on Columbia University as a case study, we are able to see how an elite institution within an immensely affected city dealt with the pandemic. Through these difficulties we will also see how students overcome obstacles and see how higher education leads students to self-formation. Firstly, this research seeks to examine some of the experiences that FGLI students faced in transitioning to online higher education during the Covid-19 pandemic. Through their discussions of difficulties and successes we can analyze how elite institutions supported or hindered first-generation and/or low-income students and the impacts they had on students. Finally, through participant interviews the research will seek to analyze how this experience helped FGLI higher education students through self-formation.

Theoretical Framework

Theories, which are directed by reasoning and evidence are useful to explain a causal explanation in the social world (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2022). Simon Marginson's (2018; 2022) concept of higher education as self-formation is the theoretical framework

that will be used to analyze the findings of this research. This framework focuses largely on international students coming into the host country and institution and the interrelation between the cultures and students (Marginson, 2018). Likewise, FGLI students enter a new institutional culture when gaining admittance to an elite institution with similar cross-cultural encounters. Similarly, to international students the cultural exchange that occurs within the university culture allows FGLI students to interact with the norms of the institution. Elite institutions come with historical traditions, ones that are often not customary for FGLI students. Often participants discussed feeling foreign in their own institutions, showing how similarly to international students, FGLI students experience new practices that have the ability to make students feel welcomed or left out.

Marginson's (2022) upcoming chapter indicates that higher education as self-formation contains four essential elements which are the "autonomy of the learner, reflexive agency, the will to learn, and immersion in collective knowledge" (p. 4). Each of these elements contain different aspects which allow FGLI students to find their place within elite institutions and achieve success. During the interview process many participants spoke candidly about their experience and the difficulties they experienced, yet they talked about the process and its ability to help them to transform into improved versions of themselves and achieve their goals. Several participants spoked about the frustration and disillusion the transition caused them, but through the difficult process they were able to discover new aspects about themselves. They often used phrases such as, "I can't believe I am on the administrations side", or "looking back they did their best", these phrases show how students overcame obstacles and through higher education, self-formation took place. As Kiebler and Stewart (2021) mention, simply being and succeeding in an educational institution allows students to gain a sense of belonging and deserving of the resources available to them. Similar to how achieving success for international graduates weakens the belief that economic factors can constrain their hopes and dreams (Marginson, 2018), FGLI students also attain confidence in overcoming economic determinism upon graduating. Hood (1865) wrote a similar notion on self-formation writing, "all education must be Self-Education; feeding the body, or feeding the mind are

alike pieces of workmanship that no one can do for us; all the education that has ever been in the world has been the result of self-determination, self-training, and self-reliance" (pp. 37-38). Often, FGLI students contain these elements to successfully gain admittance and graduate from elite institutions.

Summary

The Covid Pandemic brought forward issues of access, inequality, and resources within higher education. FGLI students at elite institutions often face these issues, but through the pandemic found themselves confronting additional issues in their educational setting. While many of the students discussed the issues, they faced they also mentioned that through the hardships they were able to alter themselves for the better. This study looks at the experiences of students and how they were able to use higher education as self-formation. Chapter 2 discusses the current literature on FGLI students and some of issues they previously faced, as well as their experiences within elite institutions. Finally, self-formation is brought in as the lens from which to analyze participant discussions. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology of the study. It gives insight into how the institution, location, and participants were chosen as well as study design. It also discusses the positionality and limitations of this study. Chapter 4 talks about the findings discovered through participant interviews and themes that were coded. Chapter 5 is the discusses the findings and how they help answer the research questions. Chapter 6 concludes the study and poses questions for future studies.

CHAPTER. 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

First-Generation and/or Low-Income Students

FGLI students who attend elite institutions are outstanding students who had to self-advocate, work hard, and often sought difficult courses (Benson & Lee, 2020). They are an important demographic to study as they continue to enroll in tertiary education at greater rates than before, with approximately one-third of all students being first-generation (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2018). However, over the last decade the number of students from lower income backgrounds that are entering higher education have remained relatively the same, while the participation of those from middle to upper income backgrounds have continued to increase (Baum et al., 2013). While there is increased growth of FGLI students in higher education, it is still lower than those who are middle and upper class or with parents who attend a higher education institution. Corak (2013) also recognizes that there has been a growth in the gap of college completion amongst students from low- and high-income backgrounds, which has contributed to income inequality. Additionally, they find that in the U.S. a college education is a pathway to gain higher incomes, especially if it is from a selective institution.

For FGLI students meeting the criteria to apply and enroll in an elite university has the transformational power to change their lives and their communities (Iniguez, 2022). FGLI students often are self-selected to attend EHEI as they often apply independently and have some desire to develop an autonomous self (Stephens, 2010). Often FGLI students have to make important educational decisions without parental or family guidance and often choose colleges based on expense rather than fit (Benson & Lee, 2020). The Factsheet (2021) from the Postsecondary National Policy Institute informs that FGLI students are more likely to be enrolled in two-year institutions and also in exclusively online programs when compared to their counterparts who have had a parent with at least a bachelor's degrees.

The financial burdens of attending higher education become a challenging hurdle to overcome for FGLI students. Admittance to EHEI become an even larger obstacle for FGLI students. 27% of FGLI students come from households that make 20,000 or less

when compared to the 6% of student's who have at least one parent who attended a higher education institution (Factsheet, 2021). “The American Dream”, or the perception that one can attain anything if they work hard enough, is often thought to be true; However, statistics show that social reproduction, where a person remains the same socioeconomic position similar to the one they were born into, is more likely to happen (Ardoin, 2018; Nunn, 2019). Those who have parents or family members that attended higher education institutions have greater access to tertiary education and more likely to graduate (Fry, 2021). As Lareau (2011) finds “One of the best predicators of whether a child will one day graduate from college is whether his or her parents are college graduates” (pp. 28-29). While parents of FGLI students have lower levels of education that does not mean there is less encouragement and expectations (Ceja, 2004). While the majority reproduce their parents’ educational outcomes, they go on to explain that one-third of people decide to take a different path. This is important as FGLI students who succeed in elite universities are breaking the cycle of social reproduction (Nunn, 2019).

Nearly 94% of FGLI students apply for financial aid to help fund their educational studies and are twice as likely to work and take out loans to pay for their studies which can be detrimental to their future (Benson & Lee, 2020). They also find that students who are FGLI and from under resourced schools are less likely to apply to selective institutions leaving administrators with few examples of what applicants should do. Often times due to financial insecurities FGLI students must take time away from schoolwork to work and support themselves, further challenging their educational journey (Nunn, 2019). Students intersectional identities and institutional structures frequently distribute FGLI students into different contexts that lead to distinctive connections, social engagements, and extracurricular activities (Benson & Lee, 2020). If there is a lack of strong guidance and culture which encourages students to attend higher education institutions financial aid sometimes is not enough for FGLI students to attend higher education (Corak, 2013).

The aspect of race also plays another factor for which to place a focus on FGLI students experiences, as students who are FGLI are also often minority students (Nunn, 2019; Tran, 2021). Benson and Lee (2020) similarly find that “Black and Latinx students

(35%) are more than twice as likely as their White counterparts (14%) to grow up in households without a parent or guardian that graduated from college" (p. 24). This is significant to recognize as these populations are disproportionality underrepresented in higher education, and more so in EHEI's. Even without considering social class Black and Latinx students experience racial harassment, hostile environments, and microaggressions at elite White institutions, causing difficulty in their ability to feel a sense of belonging (Benson & Lee, 2020). FGLI students are aware of bias, racism, and intolerance that exist in educational institutions (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2018). Regulating identities based on race, class, gender and a multitude of different classifications can determine students' access to knowledge and the subsequent benefits that come on and off campus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2018). FGLI students often are willing to subject themselves to these situations due to the fact that a college degree helps give students a multitude of different benefits (Baum et al., 2013).

Table 1 is from Iniguez (2022) study that shows a list of top ranked universities. In looking at these highly ranked universities the majority of their populations are White Americans. There are only two instances in which there are percentages higher in other categories that are not White American. Columbia's International population which is 7.5% higher and MIT's Asian American population which is 0.8% higher. Looking specifically at Columbia's demographics it is found that the Hispanic American population accounts for 7.9% of the population, and the African American population is only 4.7% of the population. These two populations are amongst the lowest found within any of the universities. Both groups combined are similar to that of the Asian American population at Columbia. Even if the Asian, Hispanic, and African American population at Columbia were combined their population would still be less than that of White American, and even less than international students. International students are difficult to analyze as they are all categorized into one group, and while the international population is sizeable, it may only include those from countries in the global north.

Table 1: Race/Ethnic Demographics

Undergraduate Racial/Ethnic Demographics – Year 2022 Top Eight Nationally Ranked Universities

University	2022 Rank	White American	Asian American	International	Hispanic American	African American
Princeton	First	40.2%	22.3%	12.4%	10.6%	7.9%
Columbia	Second	30.1%	12.3%	37.6%	7.9%	4.7%
Harvard	Second	37.7%	21%	12.3%	11.2%	8.7%
MIT	Second	28.8%	29.6%	10.5%	15.4%	6.2%
Yale	Fifth	41.4%	15.1%	20.8%	10.4%	6%
Stanford	Sixth	32.6%	18.2%	25.4%	11.2%	4.2%
U.Chicago	Sixth	37.2%	18.7%	15.2%	14.2%	5.5%
UPenn	Eighth	40.7%	16.2%	21.3%	7.8%	6.7%

Note. From Rafael Iniguez "Community Cultural Wealth and the Inspirational Narratives of First Generation Mexican American Elite University Students"

Another important aspect that is often overlooked are FGLI student's motivation and aspirations that play a part in their ability to overcome certain structural barriers and graduate from EHEI (Beattie, 2018). As Benson and Lee (2020) find, many FGLI students have differences between their motivation, aspirations, and the resources available. Attending an EHEI has a multitude of short-term personal, social, and cultural benefits for students as well as its ability to help with a person's social standing (Iniguez, 2022; Perna, 2000). For these and various reasons there needs to be recognition of students' diverse needs and educational aspirations in relation to the different factors which affect a student's admittance and experience at EHEI's (Friend, 2021). Additionally, incorporating further resources for FGLI students as they withdraw at higher rates than those students who have parents that are college educated do to their academic struggles (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2018; Nunn, 2019). FGLI students believe that education has the potential to not only improve their lives, but also those of their families (Nunn, 2019). Often this belief and

having adequate support motivates students to continue to overcome hardships and eventually graduate.

As previous research shows active engagement throughout their academic tenure allowed students to create greater connections and persist through difficulties on order to graduate from the institution (Kuh et al., 2007; Lee & Harris, 2020; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For FGLI students engaging with the faculty and attending office hours may be a form of capital that they are not used to (Rowan-Kenyon et al, 2018). While students from underrepresented backgrounds in EHEI form social networks that benefit them during and after university, many form bonds with people from the same background in order to navigate the institution, which does not create the same social advancement for all students (Friend, 2021). Not only do FGLI students arrive with less economic capital, they also tend to arrive with less cultural and social capital then their counterparts which may lead to difficulty in integrating into their new campus setting (Rowan-Kenyon et al, 2018). When compared to their advantaged peers, FGLI students have less access to cultural capital such as travel experiences, visits to the museums or libraries, or attendance to the theaters (Benson & Lee, 2020).

Experiences in Elite Institutions

Elite institutions, in the US and globally are important to analyze not because of their prestige but because due to their history and often times cost, elite institutions have the power to replicate the societal structures that exist within society (Lee & Harris, 2020). This is an important consideration as “they are often in the vanguard of innovative change in higher education” (Espenshade & Radford, 2009, p. 10). Institutions that have a large population of wealthier students have greater educational benefits which may not be available at institutions that have a majority of students from lower socioeconomic levels (Astin & Oseguera, 2004). EHEI are in a position of power to create opportunity for marginalized students due to their vast amount of resources including higher graduation and retention rates, larger investments in campus resources and support services, future earnings as well as a rigorous academic education (Hout, 2012). While there are various resources available for FGLI and marginalized student's, it is often found that they are not

evident and not discussed or taught until students request help (Tran, 2021). As leaders of higher education, their policies and inclusion of certain groups and ideas hold strong values that may have the power to change societal views.

Elite institutions make and reproduce social hierarchies into academic hierarchies and perpetuates a social order which correlates to the power structures that exist in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). “Without exception every sphere of social action is profoundly influenced by structures of dominancy” (Weber, 1978, p. 941). Additionally, he mentions that status gives certain privileges which are founded through formal education. Fry (2021) finds that students who have college educated parents are more likely than FGLI students to attend private institutions. Higher education institutions appear to let those with the skills and merit to attend, but “the most culturally privileged find their way into institutions capable of reinforcing their advantage” (Bourdieu, 1973, p.85). He states that the method of selection for elite institutions, which take into account merit and talent disguise the monopoly of enabling ruling class to hold power in these institutions, by making it appear that everyone can make it through. Student's from privileged backgrounds who have had family members attend higher education institutions are able to know how to navigate the application process and gain admittance to the educational institutions they desire (Schleicher, 2020).

While all students experience higher education differently, those from marginalized backgrounds often have common threads. Forms of classism which are present in higher education may be deepened due to disparities such as access to reliable internet, technology, library services, or learning aids (Kiebler & Stewart, 2021). Since elite institutions have a history of admitting wealthy and connected people, FGLI students may come feeling out of place (Stephens, 2010). Not only do FGLI students experience imposter syndrome at elite institutions, they also have bouts of inadequacy due to some of the social and cultural capital they lack. Leaving their families and support systems for independence and new beginnings is a cultural cost that may cause these students to feel isolated and unwelcomed (Stephens, 2010; Iniguez, 2022). Culture plays an important part in a student’s ability to feel welcomed, as Anzaldua (1987) writes, “Culture forms our beliefs. We

perceive the version of reality it communicates" (p. 16). As Ceja (2004) discusses, the influence of parents allows individuals to realize the exclusionary forces which have constrained their parent's success. They may also feel certain disadvantages at play in the classroom. Discussions of book cost and accessibility were mentioned throughout participant interviews, causing students not to take certain courses due to additional costs. Feelings of inadequacy may also be related to digital shortcomings, such as not having appropriate technology, connectivity, or equipment. Due to the lack of financial resources these students often are left out of social outings, and formal events that have additional costs.

Digital Inequality

The Covid pandemic exposed many insufficiencies and inequities that are present in the educational systems such as lack of technology and access to the internet, to the absence of support for students in the digital sphere (Schleicher, 2020). The shift into the digital sphere during the pandemic allowed for more research to be conducted online than ever before. Barber et al., (2021) found that FGLI and minority students were heavily impacted by the transition to online education as they have long standing issues of access to computers and internet connectivity. The absence of these resources has always existed but have now been placed at the forefront of some of the barrier's students, especially those with FGLI backgrounds, face. There is a need for institutions to identify and address obstacles that may create structural, cultural, and educational constraints for student's when implementing digital education programs (Chatterton, 2022). With the redesign of educational models, institutions need to consider these factors in order to help all students. This also does not account the Federal Communications Commission (2019) reports which finds that while more people have gained access to broadband internet, more than 21 million people are left without access. With this large amount of people not having access to the internet many students, especially those living in rural areas will miss out on educational outcomes. Spires (2020) finds that in places such as North Carolina approximately 225,000 students' do not have internet access due to cost, but even without cost being an issue, 75,000 students are left without internet access due to their location.

Education is thought to be a great equalizer for people, but unless the digital divide is addressed, students may fall further behind in educational attainment (Spires, 2020). Technology offers "a uniquely powerful potential for the transmission of important capital without which First generation college students are at a significant disadvantage" (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2018, p. 22). Online education can give students from disadvantaged backgrounds the possibility to build on their social and cultural capital if there are programs in place to assist these students. One of the biggest concerns that Covid brought about for elite institutions was the important question of social and networking values that were seen as a regular part of the educational journey (Schleicher, 2020). With these values minimized students are less likely to attend elite institutions if they are unable to experience forming relationships with their professors and other students. In the digital sphere higher education institutions will need to find ways to reinvent the aspect of relationship forming, so that students may feel like they are getting their money's worth (Schleicher, 2020). With any form that online education takes place student experiences will need to be more personalized and connected in order to enhance their knowledge and skills (Chatterton, 2022). With the expansion of the digital domain, new topics and the way we look at these topics should be considered, this is even when using the digital as a tool for research or topic of research (Quinton & Reynolds, 2018)

Self-Formation

The notion of self-formation allows students to have agency even within rigid higher education institutions. It is argued that "students have become interested less and less in study and knowledge for its own sake and more and more in the material payoff, or utility, which their studies and degree have on the open market" (Mbembe, 2016, p. 31). However, Marginson's (2022) upcoming chapter explains that higher education as self-formation involves a strong student-centered approach that is open to the lasting cognitive and social potentials, which contrasts the idea of students as economic consumers of the education market. Using this definition in line with student discussions we can begin to explore how FGLI students can be successful at elite universities and prosper through self-formation. While the impact of Covid affected most people around

the world, FGLI students had additional difficulties that were uniquely theirs. The belief that students who are disadvantaged have less agency due to societal structures, does not consider "the potential for democratization that occurs through education" (Marginson, 2022, p. 3). He explains that self-formation is made up of autonomous agency, reflexive agency, the will to learn, and the immersion of knowledge.

Self-formation amongst FGLI students who attend elite institutions allows them to validate their sense of belonging and taking advantage of the resources that are available in order for them to achieve the outcome they desire (Kiebler & Stewart, 2021). Stephens (2010) also finds that FGLI students enhance performance when they receive culturally matched messaging and have various resources available. After these students are able to connect with students, administrators, and groups they are able to respond positively to the university environment which may have previously felt foreign. Self-formation allows distinctive ways for students to build agency and use their autonomy to enhance themselves, even when resources are unevenly dispersed (Marginson, 2018).

Self-formation has long had a historical discussion, Edwin Paxton Hood (1865) wrote in his book titled Self-Formation, "E*ducation is the cultivation of power*" (p. 34). He did not write it to mean that obtaining a university degree was the only way to become self-formed but meant that to become powerful one must continuously use the necessary resources and tools to keep learning. "Our whole life is an education, - we are 'ever learning,' every moment of time, everywhere, under all circumstances something is being added to the stock of our previous attainments" (Hood, 1865, p. 36). To be self-formed one must not become complacent but instead continue to develop themselves through different means. When considering structural inequalities there is potential for agency that allows people to make their way through and help slowly change social structures (Marginson, 2022). Likewise, FGLI students at EHEI, often join groups that strive to create a change to better their community.

Summary

FGLI students face a great amount of difficulties especially when considered within the space of EHEI. Analyzing the experiences of these highly motivated students gives

insight into the struggles they face. With issues of economic, digital, and social inequality these students face greater obstacles to enter elite spaces. By looking at how they interact with difficulties we can see how they overcome obstacles and become successful. FGLI Students at EHEI face different institutional cultures causing inequalities that may lead to different outcomes for students. With the rapid transition into online education students faced issues of digital inequality. Even through the issues that FGLI students faced in higher education their agency, willingness, and immersion help them go through the process self-formation.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Method

The exploration of how FGLI students fared during the Covid pandemic came about when working with FGLI students and discussions about the difficulties in transitioning to online education. Hearing the vast differences amongst the lives of these students created interest to analyze the experiences that FGLI students encountered at elite institutions. FGLI students have a unique position within the higher education realm and for this reason felt that this perspective would be important to analyze. By focusing on FGLI students at elite institutions this research is able to explore whether there would be additional burdens that FGLI students face and what resources were attainable or hindered their growth. The location of the institutions also played an important part as to what policies and decisions impacted students. This chapter looks at the choices this research considered, and the possible limitations faced within the study. Ultimately through conversations with participants and the coding process, the hypothesis of this study changed as a process of self-formation occurred for the majority of participants.

Institution and Location

There are several elite institutions within the U.S. context, but through the lens of Covid this research sought to analyze a city that was heavily impacted by the pandemic. This exploration focuses on Columbia University in the City of New York as the case study. Columbia University was selected for several different factors. Firstly, it is one of the Ivy League institutions, which are considered to be top elite institutions and include Brown, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, Princeton, and Yale (Best College Reviews, 2021). These institutions are known to have low acceptance rates and high tuition costs (Mullen, 2009). Columbia specifically engages in what is called the Core which is a part of their undergraduate degree program that teaches students the classics in spaces such as literature, art, and music (The Core Curriculum). Having this program creates a transmission of certain cultural cannons to be passed down generationally. This relates to Bourdieu's (1973) theory of Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction, which shows how capital is distributed amongst different classes

through societal systems. By selecting an EHEI such as Columbia, we can analyze the transmission of certain values which may not be aligned with those of FGLI students.

Columbia University was also chosen due to its location. New York City was an epicenter of Covid and therefore was one of the first states to implement governmental policies (Thompson et al., 2020). Due to the rapid evolution of the Covid pandemic in 2020, policy makers and educational institutions in NYC were at the forefront of decision making. Due to the rapid spread of Covid and enormous amount of deaths it was one of the first states that rolled out policies such as mask mandates and distance guidelines. While other states in the U.S. awaited government guidelines, NYC tried to stay ahead by creating policies that seemed beneficial to stop the spread of Covid.

Institutional Decisions and Changes

The population, the institution, and its location become an important factor as to why this study was designed in a certain way. For this study it becomes important to analyze how higher education institutions in this area treated students of FGLI backgrounds. With NYC being one of the first American cities to face a substantial amount of Covid cases, Columbia first announced it would extend spring break an extra week. On February 26, 2020 the Interim Provost, wrote, “To date, there are no known cases in the New York area and no known cases involving our students, faculty, staff, or affiliates… the University has not made changes to classes, activities, operations, and events on our New York campuses” (Katznelson, personal communication, February 26, 2020). On March 10, 2020 the classes before spring break were to be online, with the Universities president Lee C. Bollinger stating, “For the week following Spring Break, all of our campuses will be open and courses will resume virtually as scheduled” (Bollinger, personal communication, March 10, 2020). On March 12, 2020 President Bollinger (personal communication, March 12, 2020) emailed students to say that due to the rapid spread of the virus in NYC and need to reduce the density of student population, the university would remain open with classes taking place online for the rest of the term and encourage students to move out of residence halls. After the initial thoughts of a quick campus lockdown, in March of 2020 it was announced that all classes for the remainder of the semester would

be virtual. As seen from these emails it was a 2-day span from believing that classes would resume normally, to then officially being online. For FGLI students the quickly changing circumstances created additional burdens to navigating the institution.

Design

When designing this study, there were several research methods and modes of analysis that were considered. The digital can be the method or instrument from which to conduct research as well as a topic of interest to analyze in research (Quinton & Reynolds, 2018). As they discuss digital research now forms a large portion of the social sciences, so it is important to include different perspectives and disciplines. Analyzing the digital and different perspectives were important to the study as it seeks to examine the perspectives of often overlooked students. The design of this research focuses on the lived experiences of FGLI students' lives through the pandemic. "Each individual experiences life in a unique way. Each finds significance in life events by interpreting and reinterpreting meaning through lenses of memory and identity, culture, and prior experiences" (Salmons, 2015, p. 2). The experience of each individual student gives insight into how they viewed their educational experience during the pandemic.

Interviews

After considering different research methods, interviews were considered to be the best way to gather information from students. "Interviews yield rich insights into people's biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes, and feelings" (May, 2011, p. 131). Interviews were chosen as it allows a person's authentic voice and their experiences to come through (Rickinson, 2005). Since this study is an exploration of students' education through the Covid pandemic it was important to be present and listen to their stories, not only see how they dealt with the transition into online learning, but also how it impacted their outcomes. Qualitative interviews provide access to participants self-reflexivity of what occurs and how they make sense of it, allowing researchers to try and better understand the social world (Miller & Glassner, 2020). This research was composed of semi-structured interviews, where a single interviewer asked questions and the interviewee answered (Roulston, 2010). These questions began with simple question and

progressed to more difficult questions. A semi-structured format allows for additional probing and a deeper dialogue with the participant (May, 2011). In this format the questions were thought out and serve as a guide to make sure certain questions were answered, but often these can be modified based on the interviewee where additional questions and follow-ups may be asked (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The semi-structured arrangement allowed for questions that were specific to this study, but designated space for follow-up questions and probing for further detail.

Before each interview it was imperative to think about who I was meeting in order to "make the subjects feel that their participation and answers are valued, for their cooperation is fundamental to the conduct of the research" (May, 2011, p.142). The interviewees for this project were open about their experience and gave insight into what it was like for FGLI students to transition into online education and how it related to their self-formation. All of the interviewees were asked the same questions, but some were asked to elaborate on what they meant or to further discuss certain ideas. Interviews are useful as the word's participants choose and their cadence allows for greater insights into their complex view of the world (James & Busher, 2012). Interviews were conducted digitally which allowed participants to be in a familiar setting and allowed for greater flexibility in time and location than would have happened if the interviews were taking place in person (Salmons, 2015).

Questions

Upon deciding to conduct interviews, the next step was to think about which questions would help analyze student experiences. The questions were divided into four different sections, with different components within each section (see Appendix B). Interviews started with warm-up questions which help both the participant and researcher get comfortable before moving on to important questions (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The first proportion of questions were an introduction to make the interviewee feel relaxed. I then moved to ask questions about the impact of Covid, their experience in an elite institution, and with online learning. The final component focused on their personal growth after graduating.

This study uses open ended questions, which allows participants to answer freely in their own words and can then be followed up by the interviewer with further questions or probes (Roulston, 2010). By using this format, the interviewees may say what they desire and bring up new concepts or ideas that the interviewer did not previously consider. This allows for the experiences of the participants to be discussed from their viewpoint. The use of participants language and behavior gives insight into what lies behind certain actions and beliefs of participants (Robson & McCartan, 2016). By investigating participants beyond the words they say we can get a full scope of students lived experiences (Roulston, 2010).

Candidate Selection

The study went through ethics approval and upon approval, the recruitment process began (See Appendix F). Participants were originally recruited by reaching out to Columbia's Director of Multicultural Affairs to see if they would communicate information about the study in order to gather participants. After reaching out several times without a response, I reached out to someone else in the office and discovered that my contact no longer worked there. I then reached out to Columbia's First Generation and/or Low Income Network, who according to the websites "purpose is to provide appropriate communities and platforms for First-generation and Low income students to talk about and act upon a range of issues that pertain to these intersectional identities" (FLI Network, 2022). This group focuses on issues that affect the FGLI community at Columbia. They mentioned that they would put information in their weekly emails, but that the majority of their subscribers were current students. This was a bit of an issue as this research focuses on students who were at the university during the transition into online education and were about to graduate or have graduated. I then decided to reach out to the previous presidents of the FLI Net during the Covid pandemic. I contacted the two co-presidents and explained the basis of this research. They both agreed to do the study and recommend other people who were a part of the group during the transition into online classes. This snowball sampling of participants helped me in recruiting students who met the participant criteria. Sampling is useful and important to find participants that help give insight into the population being

studied (Gorard, 2001). I had reached out to 18 different people via email, and social media and in the end, I was able to conduct 10 participant interviews.

Informed Consent

In looking at the ethics of this study it was important for me to protect individual participants. Due to the study involving questions about the Covid pandemic I did not want to cause harm or distress. Interested participants were emailed the participant information form, so that they may make an informed decision about partaking in the study (See Appendix E). If they agreed a response via email was requested so that I may answer any questions and know if they wanted to partake in the study. Since all participants graduated from Columbia University none of the participants were under the age of 21 at the time of the study.

As discussed by Eynon et al., (2017) due to distance and the online environment it may be difficult for participants to fully understand what they are consenting to and require additional discussions in order to ensure they understand the implications of partaking in the study. Once verification that they would like to take part of the study was received, their availability was requested to coordinate and conduct the interviews online. Since many of the students were based across the United States it was an 5-8 hour time difference from the United Kingdom. Due to time differences some participants were not able to schedule an interview time. Additionally, some participants stated that they no longer were able to be a part of the study. Once they mentioned not wanting to be a part of the study all communication ceased.

On the scheduled time and date, I would reach out to them through their preferred mode of contact. The large majority of these calls took place over facetime. At the beginning of the interview I asked if it would be ok to record the call in case I needed to go back to the recording for clarification. Upon their verbal confirmation I would begin to voice record the interview. This proved to be helpful in transcribing the conversations. Since the majority of the interviews were conducted late at night in the United Kingdom, transcription did not occur until the following day. As mentioned by Robson and McCartan

(2016), it's a good habit to take notes during interviews, so notes were taken during the interviews so that I could ask for clarification or to probe further.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Making sure that participants felt empowered to discuss their true feelings about the institution was important, so all interviewees names were changed to participant numbers. While there were no physical or psychological harms in the research, I was aware that answering some of the questions may elicit different emotional reactions from participants. While many of the questions did not discuss highly sensitive topics, I realized that some questions may provoke emotional reactions as Covid caused significant disruptions in people's lives. I was cognizant of the emotions that may arise during the interview process and tried my best to minimize and discomfort. In the Participant Information Form, I let interviewees know they did not have to answer any questions they did not want to answer (See Appendix D). They were told if there was something they did not want to answer or discuss they could stop the interview or request not to answer. While most participants answered all questions, the only time participants did not answer was when they could not think of any further examples.

Ethics

Ethics played a big part into how this study was designed and produced. "Ethical decisions are contextually situated – socially, politically, institutionally, culturally, personally – and each piece of research raises ethical issues and dilemmas for the researcher" (Cohen, 2017, p. 111). Researchers should want to be as unbiased as possible, yet it is important to recognize that all studies have a form of biased based on the different factors. "Ethical issues enter into considerations of choice of topic and the design and operationalization of the research" (Cohen, 2017, p.120). While researchers do not intend to be biased, the simple choice of what we research and what we do not could be considered a form of bias. Subjects that get chosen over others and what questions get asked, include some form of bias. These notions were considered when thinking about this study. Beliefs and theories cannot always be taken as fact, as they should be open to criticism and revision, the only thing a researcher can be is confident if they have conducted a rigorous

analysis (Pring, 2015). I wanted to make sure that the study placed rigor and ethical importance as one of its foundational features. As a part of the FGLI community I was able to place myself in the shoes of the participants I was interviewing and thought about how I could make sure that this study was ethical for all parties.

Positionality

As part of the FGLI community it was very important to show my participants that not only am I a member of the community, but also that I care deeply for the community. Previous research argues that researchers should be members of the populations they study in order to subjectively comprehend their experiences (Collins, 1990; Miller & Glassner; 2021; Taylor et al., 1995). While this may not always be the case, for this research I thought it be beneficial to disclose my FGLI identity to participants. This allowed participants to understand that as a member of this group they could speak freely about anything without judgment or criticism.

It is important to recognize that interviews contain a distinct point of view, beliefs, and perspectives that are created by the researcher (Salmons, 2015). By letting participants know the underlying principles of the research they can get a sense of their importance to the study. Before starting the recording, I let participants know about myself and my identity to form a sense of familiarity. I let them know why I had chosen to focus on FGLI students and why I felt it was pertinent to examine how education has been impacted by the Covid pandemic. I mentioned to them that while I may be the one asking them questions, the interview should feel like a discussion where they can discuss anything openly and freely.

Data

Interview transcription often took a full day as interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 1 hour and 14 minutes. The interviews were transcribed in full detail with additional written notes so that participant emotions and corporal actions would be considered. Often times while listening to the voice recording, I would notice reactions to the question or changes that could be heard. When watching participants on video some questions elicited their eyes opening up or different emotions occurring when discussing triggering topics.

In looking at the study, both a deductive and inductive approach to the data analysis took place. Before research began a deductive approach was chosen. After transcribing interviews, they were put into NVivo for analysis (see Appendix A). Within these themes' codes were selected based on which participants discussed the most. FGLI experiences and what that meant for these students was a major focus. The Covid pandemic was another theme of focus, as the research specifically looked at students' experiences during this time. The transition into online learning was the third major theme that was thought about before conducting interviews. These themes formed the basis of the research.

Upon further data exploration the theme of self-formation through higher education emerged, instigating a change in the theory that was used. This research originally hypothesized that most students would talk about the negative experiences of online learning, but many participants spoke about the difficulty everyone faced and how the university tried its best at the time. They often spoke about how the difficulties allowed them personal growth beyond what they expected. Quotes in this research were selected based on different underlying patterns of discussion.

Summary

This chapter discusses the planning and design of the study. It starts by looking at how the research topic came about, as well as how the university, and location were chosen to formulate the study. Interviews and questions were thought out before commencing research. Candidate recruitment started with some difficulty, but ultimately participants were selected based on referrals from other participants. Prior to being interviewed, participants received research information in order to allow them to make informed decisions. Since the study deals with topics of institutional difficulties it was important to inform them that their identities would be protected in order to speak freely or without fear of repercussions. As a researcher, thoughts of positionality and ethics were foundational features of this study. Once participant interviews had been conducted, coding commenced. Codes were then selected based on greatest frequency.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

During the interview process these FGLI students discussed a multitude of different factors that occurred during the process of transitioning into online higher education through the Covid pandemic. Originally this research hypothesized that students would mostly have negative reactions toward their institutions and discuss the negative aspects of their experience. However, participants discussed that even through the difficulties they were content with educational outcomes, considering difficulties were worldwide. Woven throughout the stories of these students there was a relation between their FGLI identity, the Covid pandemic, and their institution, which related to their experiences transitioning into the digital realm and self-formation. While there were other topics that various participants discussed, this research focused on the most prevalent themes found in participant interviews.

This research seeks to analyze the experiences of Columbia University students before, during, and after the Covid pandemic. The experience for FGLI students differs at an elite institution, discussions of disparities, their livelihood, and capital are found throughout. The study finds that intertwined with the pandemic are difficulties of housing, mental health, and the loss of not only loved ones, but also of a sense of normalcy. The transition to online learning brought up diverse feelings for students as they discussed the institutional support, the inequality they experienced, as well as how having the ability to view one's interior spaced caused them to think about their social status. Finally, through this discussion FGLI students at Columbia University found a sense of self-formation through their educational institution. Through independent conscious action, moral responsibility, motivation and drive, shaping their own transformation these students were able to attain successful achievement. Participant 10 discusses the process of higher education as self-formation by mentioning, "I wasn't really an adult until I moved to New York City and I actually started going to Columbia. Until I had to support myself completely and had to be alone in that huge city".

FGLI Student's Elite Institutional Experience

FGLI participants reflected on some of their experiences in an elite institution which elicited different codes. As previously mentioned, FGLI students face adversity throughout their educational journey (Beattie, 2018). Highlighted through the interviews are discussions of the disparities, livelihood, and capital that FGLI students must deal with when attending an elite institution. As Dale and Krueger (2002) find, attending institutions that are highly selective may benefit some students more than others. FGLI students and continuing students from middle and upper class backgrounds have very different experiences within the university. While all students face difficulties in adjusting to new institutions, FGLI students must not only learn new teaching methods, but also new institutional cultures they may not have been accustomed to.

Disparities / Stressors

In their research Manzoni and Streib (2018) dispute if a college degree is really an equalizer amongst FGLI students and continuing students. They discuss how factors such a university attended, degree chosen, parental earnings, and parental education can cause disparities for FGLI students which can lead to different outcomes. FGLI students have different outcomes as they are often overrepresented in less selective institutions and are underrepresented in institutions known to be highly selective (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Manzoni, 2018). When participants were asked about their experience at an elite institution such as Columbia many of the participants highlighted and recognized the disparities they faced when compared to their wealthier counterparts. As Participant 6 mentions:

> It was different in the sense that I came from a low funded public high school and other students were coming from private boarding schools or private schools that are very renown. They're prestigious and known as feeder schools, where they're literally being geared up and prepared to go to fancy schools like Columbia University.

This gives insight into FGLI students understandings in how they relate to their institutions. Some understand the educational and financial differences amongst them and their privileged peers. Similarly, Participant 4 discusses their understanding of themselves while also recognizing the differences from their institution. “I understood the value of my own intellectual palace and curiosity and creativity, but I knew that just based on the resources I had coming prior to Columbia I was at a disadvantage”. The participant recognized that due to their economic background they felt they were at a disadvantage. For both participants the acknowledgement of differences did not deter them as they were able to succeed in the institution.

Even as students experienced disparities before arriving and having to maintain themselves through working, they also had additional burdens of imposter syndrome and feeling like they were behind. Often FGLI students struggle as they do not have a sense of belonging to their educational institution (Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Stephens, 2010). Imposter Syndrome is defined as high achieving individuals that fail to objectively acknowledge their success as deserved and instead believe it is due to luck and other external factors (Bravata et al., 2020; Holden et al., 2021; Parkman, 2016). As Participant 1 discusses when asked about their experience they mention:

> It was scary to think that I might not belong. It was scary to be like, well what if I'm not smart enough. What if I reached out to high because I did well in Community College, but that doesn't matter at an Ivy League school.

Believing they were not smart enough or that they may be reached to far and would not be able to succeed was prevalent throughout several of the interviews. In the early part of being admitted to Columbia these students spoke about not belonging or feeling that they were not fit to attend. Participant 4 similarly mentions “For me I came from my high school where like 30% of my graduating class that graduated illiterate, and so having that kind of context and coming to Columbia I just felt like I was consistently behind”. Students describe how the Ivy League system is much different to the one they went through. Often,

they would be told that an ivy league education is out of their reach. As described by Participant 7, **"**It was very much a culture shock…I remember our counselor came in and they told us most of you will go to a Community College. So, it was absolutely not even an option for me to go into an Ivy". Often FGLI students are given signals that an EHEI is out of their reach, but in attending elite institutions they are successfully overcoming these obstacles.

Livelihood

Often FGLI students find themselves having to work in order to be able to afford the living costs (Ardoin, 2018; Savoca, 2016). These Columbia students talked about the cost of living in NYC and how simple tasks such as food and necessities were expensive to get. Similarly, Participant 10 describes how having to work made it easier for her at Columbia. She said:

> It was kind of hard at the beginning just because we are a low income family and all the expenses we had. I don't know the first couple of months were really hard, but then I got a work study job and that actually helped me a lot.

As the literature and participant discuss having to work is a normal part of everyday life for FGLI students. As Participant 8 mentions, "I think at one point I was juggling three jobs. I was just very busy because I had to do school and work at the same time, and also had stressors like my family". They continued saying it was easier to be friends with other FGLI students. Several participants mentioned the toll that being a working student took on in their social life. They built community with other students that are similar to them so that they were not questioned or ostracized. As Participant 2 describes:

> Going out of the city and trying to do fun things sometimes it was more of a compromise because most of my friends ended up having to have jobs. Whereas I know other people who were affluent didn't have to have a job.

They often had to find different forms of entertainment, since they could not afford going out.

FGLI students had to continue working through the pandemic which added to the stress of having to not only focus on their studies but also think about their livelihood. Working for these students not only occurred while school was in person, but also as it transitioned to online. FGLI students found themselves having to work in order to help their family survive through the pandemic. While talking about some of the issues FGLI students faced during the pandemic Participant 7 mentioned:

> There were students that needed to work, because they've gone back home because of the pandemic. You know its people losing their jobs or looking for new ones. Then we have students obviously that were working during this pandemic, during their courses, and when you're going to school at 12 AM 5:00 AM it takes over your schedule. You know it affects your health, your work, and your papers.

This was a big burden for students who found themselves having to go back home. Since the majority of jobs were considered essential jobs such as working in grocery stores or pharmacies, they found themselves not only having to manage their time with school, but also risking their health during the pandemic. This differs to affluent students and non-FGLI students, as they often were able to work from home and live comfortably without leaving their home.

Social and Cultural Capital / Prestige

Initially this research hypothesized that the participants were going to discuss issues of inequality and capital in abundance, but through the interview process other notions came about. Capital as defined by Bourdieu et al., (2021) “is a form of power that is effective within a certain space, where it produces effects – in particular effects of differentiation – and the differentiation linked to the unequal distribution of capital is the principle structuring the field” (p.16). Whether the capital was cultural, social, or economic FGLI students at Columbia felt that they had missed out on certain aspects due to the Covid

pandemic. Many discussed how their networking and social facets, or ability to attend plays and shows had been diminished. Often the decision to attend an elite institution is based on several factors. As discussed by the literature often elite institutions come with greater resources (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Hout, 2012). Participant 3 comments, “When you're in a big name university like Columbia University the expectation is there for academic rigor, but also academic engagement, learning, and support.” Having these resources available to students is one of the benefits of attending an elite institution. It is having the ability to not only gain knowledge but also have additional resources to help students succeed. At a university such as Columbia, students decide to attend not only due to its prestige, but also capital that they are likely to gain. As discussed by Participant 1:

> It was just great seeing all these prestigious professors. I loved the people I got to meet and the doors it opened for me. The only reason my boss hired me without an interview was because I went to Columbia. So that that feels amazing to be recognized, even though you didn't have that role model of your parents to follow.

FGLI students viewed Columbia as having the ability to help them attain a better future. They mentioned how being recognized by others is beneficial when you attain it even if no role models were present. When discussing teaching modes Participant 6 discussed the benefits of meeting other students and creating lasting relationships which can be beneficial for the future. They placed importance on this by stating:

> I think it's easier to make personal connections when you're in person, with the professor or with your peers, which is such an important thing for First-gen students. Being able to create that network. You go in without having people, for me I didn't know doctors, lawyers, and stuff like that. Going in and being able to connect and network, that's the whole point of an Ivy League education right”

For participants the benefits of connecting with peers is an important part of attending an elite institution. It is beneficial for students who do not have affluent backgrounds to associate with others that have more resources. Similarly, Participant 7 mentioned Covid's ability to diminish connecting with students. They discuss:

> You're signing up for the networks, it's not enough to have that school on your resume everybody has that in New York. Everyone is coming from NYU, Cornell, Columbia, Harvard, Yale; they're coming here and it's not enough to have Columbia University or an elite university on your resume. It's knowing the right people and they took that. I didn't get to meet the right people I didn't get to interact with the people that knew the right people.

This participant gives insight that now it is no longer only about the institution you attend, but also the connections you have made. Even for those that have attended these elite institutions, employment competition has made networking an important aspect of the educational experience.

Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Covid impacted lives around the world. Throughout the discussion several issues regarding Covid were raised such as housing, mental health, and the loss of life and normalcy. These experiences caused students' lives and educational journeys to be changed forever. While the world was implicated by the pandemic, students had the additional burden of attending classes and having to complete course work. As discussed previously FGLI students had other stressors in their lives such as not having resources available to succeed and having to work during the pandemic. Even as the pandemic occurred these issues continued to arise.

Housing

With the majority of educational institutions shutting down students had to quickly move out of their institutions often with little to no help. The complexities of being FGLI

and dealing with the pandemic caused students to have different reactions. Participant 9 discussed how the pandemic caused them to realize his financial situation saying:

> Never in my life did I realize how poor I was until the pandemic was declared. The day it was declared both my roommates, who were very wealthy individuals took the next flight home, both of them… I did not have the option of going anywhere else besides my Columbia dorm. My Columbia apartment was my home. I did not have some secondary address.

They mentioned feeling stressed about the situation and as they could not get out of the situation. They went on to discuss how they moved in with 3 other friends to rent a 1 bedroom apartment in Chicago and how grateful they were to find others in the same situation.

Some participants also discussed having to go back home to live with their parents. Having to share a space with others was difficult for participants. Participant 2 mentioned having to share a household with parents and siblings:

> I did end up coming back to my home and it was with my whole family, so there is eight of us and we were all living in the same house. It was quarantine so we would all just be in here. Then my parents ended up getting COVID in May 2020 so that just added to the stress of finals, because it was right around finals.

The added stress of having to take classes online while sharing a space with family members often caused students frustration. In a similar discussion Participant 5 stated:

> I lived in a two bedroom apartment back then as my classes were happening online. It was a challenge because my parents would try their best, but I would ask for quiet and for a small space for me to have privacy.

The lack of privacy and space was a burden for students who had become accustomed to having their own space on campus. Participants not only discussed the lack of space but also the difficulty in simulating study spaces such as libraries and classrooms to study became difficult when confined in spaces with multiple people.

Mental Health

Through the pandemic the rise of mental health issues became widely acknowledged. Studies find that FGLI students are less likely to report fewer mental health problems than their counterparts (Jeong et al., 2021). With the added burden of having to quickly move online many students discussed issues of mental health. This is best described by Participant 5 who discussed the difficulties of the pandemic by stating:

> My mental health did take a huge dip, and so it did hinder me from participating in classes more than it should. My mind wasn't all there, but I did try my best to focus on the work, but it was really challenging because like I said my mental health took a dip.

As demonstrated by this, having the difficulties in higher education can cause mental health issues and create difficulties in students' educational journeys. Participant 9 discussed how his past trauma created difficulty during his transition to online education. they mentioned that at the start of pandemic:

> I was very much in that survivalist trauma mentality… I hated that feeling. It's that feeling that you don't know where you're gonna go tonight, you don't know where your next meal is gonna come from. That stuck with me for a long time and I'm finally out of that trauma and deep state of my life.

They mentioned how going through the pandemic brought up past issues that they had gone through. Due to the difficulties they faced during the pandemic distress of how they would

survive crept in. Surrounding themselves with others helped them get into a better mental and emotional state.

One positive attribute to online education was the ability to remove oneself from the conversation if it arose. Participant 6 discussed having a class which caused discomfort and how having it online was beneficial:

> What I did instead would be not to go to class in real time and watch the recordings instead. I felt like watching the recording would be easier for me to take the time and space for myself where I could let myself recover from whatever he was saying. Give myself like the mental space to not have to expose myself to that. If I felt like it was going in a direction that was problematic like sexist or really violent just fast forward, which is not something you could do in person.

The ability to asynchronously watch lectures allowed students who were dealing with sensitive topics to remove themselves and take care of their mental health. This created some easiness in a world that was strenuous for FGLI students.

Loss

All students who went through the Covid pandemic persevered even under difficult circumstances. The majority of the world population was dealing with some form of loss. This was no different for FGLI students. Not only did they experience the loss of loved ones, but dealing with parents losing jobs, and the loss of normalcy in their education. In conversations had with these students, they spoke about the difficulties that came with transitioning into online education and how even though they experienced losses they were able to overcome these difficulties. Participant 4 discussed the academic difficulties they faced while also dealing with the pandemic. They mentioned, “I knew say like maybe nine or ten people that passed away from COVID intimately. It was just really difficult to constantly see all of this loss”. Seeing loved ones pass away was traumatic and affected students having to do their work. Students often brought up the trauma they had to endure while still having to do their academic work.

The loss of income due to parents being laid off or fired was also discussed amongst some of the students. As well as how the relation to loss affected their studies and their view of the university. Participant 6 spoke about their father's job loss and the stress it caused their family. They mentioned, "It was just there's a lot going on and everyone was pretending as if like a pandemic wasn't killing people and like people weren't like financially devastated. My dad had lost his job". Income instability was a loss discussed by most participants of the study.

The loss of normalcy was also prevalent throughout. Students discussed not having the ability to do some of the things they wanted to do, such as join groups and sports teams, or attend events. Participant 2 discusses this in detail mentioning:

> If the pandemic hadn't happened, I would have had the chance to try out and participate in that. There were just so many things that I was looking forward to. I had this plan in place, and then just like that I was kind of devastated that you can't participate in those things.

A sense of loss was discussed by the majority of participants. They all mentioned loss in their interviews. The sense of loss related to either loss of a loved one, loss of jobs, or loss of normalcy in their academic experience.

Transition to Online

With the transition to online learning different policies were enacted through the university causing students to feel both supported and frustration. It is found that having supportive institutional policies assist FGLI and at-risk students to persist in their institutions and contribute to their success (Demetriou, 2014; Seeger, 2018). When it came to institutional policies some participants discussed some of the benefits while others mentioned the dissatisfaction they had with academic policies and support.

Academic Policies / Institutional Support

Through Covid students found that new policies and digital tools created alternative resources for them. Participant 6 describes **"**There were times where there were resources

that could have been provided to us before the pandemic made things more easily accessible". They mentioned how it was only after the pandemic that the university allowed for digital books to become readily available, which could have occurred earlier, and would not have happened if the pandemic did not occur. They go on to further discuss how financial requests could be made to the university but would have to explain their trauma and make students haggle to get money. Throughout several conversations, FGLI students expressed having to exploit themselves and their trauma in order to receive any financial support.

Participant 4 discussed being happy with how the pandemic was originally handled even with a quick turnaround, but described feeling discontent the following semesters. They mention:

> I actually was really happy with the way that Columbia dealt with the pandemic Fall 2020. Spring 2021 I think they did a terrible job, because A, they lied to First gen student's, at least in Columbia College and SEAS, the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, they lied to the student body in the sense that Columbia had said either you can come back to campus and live in the dorms or we're going to give you $4000 living stipend to live at home and like pay for electricity and Wi-Fi and iPads and printers and whatever else you may need. They said they were going to do that, but if you read the fine print, they didn't do that.

The dissatisfaction with certain policies upset students. As mentioned by Participant 4 not receiving these funds to help offset the costs of being home were detrimental. It upset students that they received the funds as part of their financial aid package.

Some students felt that the university did the best they could in handling the pandemic. Participant 5 mentioned:

> I'm pretty happy with Columbia's response. I know they were trying really hard to keep the community healthy, and you and I both know Columbia is not always the best when it comes to certain stuff, but I think they handle the pandemic pretty well.

For this participant feeling supported through the pandemic was extremely helpful and beneficial. They recognized that Columbia is not always known to fully support students, but that during this time they did their best to help students. Throughout the discussion they recognized the difficulty of the pandemic and mentioned how in retrospect they felt that policies that were implemented were beneficial for students. Participant 3 discussed being given financial assistance to move and rent a U-Haul, they also were in a better position than most by having a partner who helped them move. Other students mentioned the same policy and discussed how often moving was more than the stipend they received

Digital Inequality

With the transition to online, FGLI students experienced difficulties they had not thought about previously. The shift in living situations reduced FGLI student's participation in online classes as they reported having to balance household responsibilities and schoolwork (Barber et al., 2021). Issues of being able to access technology and Wi-Fi from their homes were some of the inequalities that these students discussed. As participant 4 mentions, "They weren't giving us money to stay at home and pay for Wi-Fi, or for things that would give us parity in the same way that on campus, living in the dorms we have parity with other students". Not only did this participant find that not having similar access to Wi-Fi can cause problems for students, they go on to further discuss how having therapy in a space where others can hear you discuss home life can be traumatic. This sentiment was discussed by several others including participant 8 which describes:

> I think one of the big ones that we don't talk about is Wi-Fi and people who had slow Wi-Fi, like you could just tell people would get upset. People would get frustrated with them even though it's not their fault. You can't control a rural areas

> Wi-Fi, it's gonna suck. Also, if you're a low income family you might not be able to afford high speed Internet.

The issues with FGLI students and connectivity was something that was a burden for students. Having to worry about whether their Wi-Fi would disconnect and what others thought of them as they cut out or froze online was discussed throughout the interviews. Connectivity issues were thought of as showing class differences amongst students.

Along with digital inequality there was also talk about the equipment needed to connect and use in the digital sphere. Several participants discussed not having the proper tools being able to properly transition into the digital realm. Participant 6 talked about digital inequality when it came to equipment. They mentioned, “There are things such as cameras, or something on laptops not working, or not having headphones. When I first went remote, I didn't have proper headphones”. Not having the proper tools were thought of as deficient for these students. It created differences in the digital space for FGLI students. Participant 3 similarly discussed how they had equipment that was not the latest and greatest. They mentioned:

> I think for me at least it was probably my computer from maybe 2012, 2013. It's a refurbished Apple MacBook, kind of heavy, and you know it was passed down to me. My husband bought it refurbished so he didn't even buy it new and then he passed down to me.

Not having the newest form of technology caused some difficulties when transitioning to the online space. This did not allow FGLI students to create digital backgrounds or fully use the functions available in the online classroom. To create digital backgrounds and use all the chat and video functions students needed newer technology. Often FGLI students found themselves at a disadvantage for having outdated technology and equipment.

Interior Spaces

The ability to look into others personal space became a large topic in the conversation. Participants discussed the discomfort they felt in having to share their private spaces with classmates. This was not something students thought about when classes were in person. Often, they discussed not seeing differences in class because the university was located in an urban area. Participants were cognizant of their surroundings and how it would appear to others. This instance was discussed by Participant 5:

> I knew everyone was gonna have a space of their own, but I was hoping that nobody would notice that I barely had any personal space in mine. Luckily no one said anything or made a comment, like why are you in the kitchen or why can I just see your chair and the wall, but not really your personal space.

In most interviews' participants discussed trying to hide their spaces so very little was shown on camera. The majority of participants discussed being cognizant of their space and having to think about how it would look like online. As shown by Participant 8 they mentioned:

> I only ever sat in one space in my room. I made sure my setup was mainly just like a white background, mostly my white wall. I would never be this student who was able to sit in her backyard and take class or like sit on her couch. I was never comfortable doing that, I couldn't even do that because my family is very loud and busy.

Not only is the discussion about how their space was set up present, but also an underlying discussion about class difference. They recognized how others had the ability to showcase their homes without having to think about it. Participant 9 similarly mentioned:

> Some of those zoom backgrounds were like crazy ridiculous to me because all of a sudden, it's like, oh my God, you are a very wealthy privileged individual. When I tell you, it wasn't even like a fake background this was just this person's backyard. They were laying out on their Tunisian villa overlooking the Mediterranean Sea with like palm trees in the distance and Roman statues in their courtyard. It was so evident about the different class structures in this institution.

The differences in class were more easily seen when students had the ability to look at others spaces. Those who were wealthy did not mind showing their space when attending online classes. This caused awareness into the class differences that existed at Columbia.

Several participants discussed trying to hide their spaces as much as possible or creating simple spaces so that people could not look at their spaces. Many discussed feeling exposed in having to do it from their family home. They felt discomfort in having to do it from their bed since often they did not have desks in their room, leaving them without options of where to attend online classes. While these insecurities existed in the online realm, these students did not allow it to stop them from continuing their education and graduating.

Self-formation

Not only were different concepts and ideas expressed through different interviews, but the notion of higher education as self-formation was present throughout. As I investigated this theory it became apparent that this was a useful tool to discuss the process that students discussed when looking retrospectively at their experience in higher education. Using Marginson's (2022) definition of self-formation, this study finds that this study is relevant in analyzing FGLI students through the process of self-formation. FGLI students are high achievers who encompass what Marginson considers essential for self-formation. These features are autonomy of the learner, reflexive agency, will to learn and immersion in knowledge (Marginson, 2022).

Independent Conscious Action

Often FGLI students find themselves having to complete the admissions process by themselves without parental guidance. These students seek out help from administrators and faculty in order to achieve admittance to the university (Benson & Lee, 2020; Iniguez, 2022). Through what Marginson (2022) calls autonomous agency these students take conscious action and find which resources will suit their needs. As Participant 8 describes:

> My parents never really knew what Sociology was and continue to not know. I think that was a similar experience that I had across with all my peers. Juggling multiple responsibilities, juggling the responsibility of thinking of our future, and ourselves, but also our families. Juggling the responsibility of finding any personal expenses during college. Having to juggle multiple jobs and doing intense schoolwork at the same time. I think it's a similar experience across the board, but also another similar experience is not really having your parents or your family as like people to go to when it comes to more tangible career and academic support.

Here we see how this participant describes having to do it all on their own. The juggling aspect of all these responsibilities create a similar experience for other FGLI students. Often, they find themselves having to inform their parents of their decisions as they do not rely on them to help make educational decisions, which differs to the experiences of continuing students.

Similarly, Participant 4 describes the isolating experience of having to do it on their own. They discuss:

> I feel like my experience was really unique in that I came from an underperforming high school and got into Columbia without any kind of external programming or help. So, for me that felt doubly isolating because I feel it's very rare to find people at Columbia who didn't have some kind of access or like institutional proximity to privilege before attending.

Several participants describe having to do things on their own. The autonomous drive for FGLI students were to better themselves and circumstances. Achieving something they do not have an example of shows how these students take independent conscious action of their higher education.

Growth and Moral Cognizance

A person's sense of self allows one to acknowledge their growth and realize the morals that are important to them. This reflexive aspect allows participants to recognize that through their hard work they are able to achieve growth. Participant 2 discusses this reflection stating:

> I feel even though once you graduate you may come up, you may grow out of the low income aspect, you'll still be first generation. Those experiences that you had as low income or first generation are not something that you can just learn or be given a project or assignment and be like, oh yeah, I understand. You really have to live it through, and it has to be an experience that is just unique to you, but through the friends that I made at Columbia I was able to really share a lot of unique experiences. I feel like it was really good to have that community and personally for me that was one of my favorite communities on campus.

The important aspect of community helps FGLI students discover different facets of themselves and their personal experiences. This process of reflexivity does not only change the person, but also allows them to see how they can use their skills to help others as well.

Participant 9 discussed having to become an advocate not only for themselves but also for other students in the university. They mentioned:

> Columbia did not live up to the expectations in terms of support, but also, I don't take no for an answer. So, my friends and I created our own list of institutional aids of scholarships or fellowships of grants that people could qualify for and we ended

> up sharing that with the entire our entire New York system… When I tell you at any given day it looked like there was maybe 50 people looking through that list on the Google doc. I just wish Columbia would have done something like that.

These reflections show how students go through a reflexive process during their educational experience as moral values are instilled in them. Being a part of the FGLI group helps them create lasting bonds and recognize the values and morals that are important to them. They often talked about giving back to their own community even if it is an extra burden on them.

Motivation and Drive

Students in the study discussed having various motivational factors to earn their degree. For some it was financial and economic reasons, for others it was simply to find a stable place to live. All these factors gave participants a will to continue their education and graduate from Columbia. Participant 4 describes their motivation by stating, “I think for me personally, my number one goal has been to move out of my mom’s house and to get social and fiscal mobility which hasn't happened for me in the pandemic”. This participants drive was and still is the ability to achieve social and fiscal mobility, but mention that the pandemic has made them focus on these goals even more. Similarly, Participant 9 discussed wanting to find home stability and realizing that through education this would be possible.

> I hated feeling like I don't know where I'm gonna live next, I don't know where I'm gonna go next, I don't know who's gonna take care of me next, and it all depended on needing to hunker down for a little bit more, take these classes, do good in the classes, get your degree, and get a job that pays you enough where you don't need to worry about these things anymore and after a while I did achieve this.

Motivating factors for FGLI students vary, but often these high achieving individuals understand the importance of achieving their goals through education. Their motivation to break barriers and overcome obstacles allowed participants to achieve success.

Similarly, others discussed the importance of having goals and working towards them. Participant 10 describes:

> I had a Goal which was to graduate in spring 2021. I was actually starting to think about grad school. I made a really strict schedule for everything. I knew I had to do another internship, I knew I had to continue doing research, I knew I had to start getting ready for the application process and everything. So, I made a schedule that really helped. My parents were really supportive as well, they are great. I think that having a goal was the number one thing that actually helped me to get through all this yeah.

This participant describes the schedule they made for themselves in order to admittance to their PhD program at Harvard. By having a goal and a strong support system they were able to progress through the obstacles and achieve their goal.

Engagement / Shaping Transformation

While FGLI students face obstacles, they immerse themselves in their education and strive to overcome obstacles. Often, they find their own resources and ways to gain the outcome they want. Participant 7 described having to do most of the work themselves, before having administrators offer to help. They explain:

> I don't think my counselors really did anything until I did all the work myself and I followed up with my professors. Until I was mentally and emotionally secured in my new school. Until I was done until I was almost 100% secure in my position at this new school was when they offered help. They were like OK now let's talk about your next steps. Well OK, but help would have been great when I was going into this really awful mindset at the beginning.

The difficulties faced by this participant could have been diminished if administrators had stepped in earlier. However, allowing the student some agency allowed them to figure out their own path. Even without these additional resources this participant graduated and had a job after graduation. The difficulties they faced allowed them to become resourceful and immerse themselves in their educational outcomes. While all participants discussed facing difficulties the majority mentioned how looking back, they found the experience more positive than negative.

When discussing how they felt about the digital forms of creating community Participant 3 mentioned, “if I wanted to see the positive aspect of that it was like kind of a reminder that you can just always create community no matter the circumstances. It's really up to you to participate or not.” Having this outlook allowed this participant to see that while there were many negative aspects of the Covid pandemic, there is always a way to have a positive outlook. Similarly, Participant 9 discussed much of the difficulties faced, but described that based on his outcomes:

> I have a good paying job now. I have my own place; I can afford to live and thrive. I felt during my time in undergrad and then when the pandemic was declared it was like this never ending uphill battle to the point where I really considered is this for me, is this something that I even can continue with… That's where I was really considering, is this all worth it. I'm just so happy looking at it in hindsight, that yeah it was all worth it.

As this participant describes, the difficulties they faced during the Covid pandemic caused them to question their abilities, but in hindsight they felt that this experience was beneficial for them. This process of overcoming obstacles allowed participants to find their strength and achieve what may have felt impossible.

The concept of growth was also discussed in participant interviews. Participant 10 mentions, “I actually started at Columbia being one person and ended up graduating and

being a whole different person, not only like professionally or academically but personally I grew a lot those years". For this participant through their experience in higher education they were able to grow in all aspects of their life. Showing how education has the ability to shape transformation for FGLI students.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This case study brought forth an informative discussion of FGLI students' relationship with EHEI through the Covid pandemic. Even with the difficulties that FGLI students faced during the pandemic, they often discussed that while their institution failed to meet the full needs of students, they tried their best. The original hypothesis focused on students lost capital through Covid, which occurred for some participants, but found that participants did not focus on it as originally planned. While there was no intention to discuss these experiences through the lens of self-formation, conversations showed that these students were not being molded to think as the institutions would have them, but rather as an exchange where students not only learned from the institutions, but also advocated to create conversations and changes at their institutions. The four fundamental steps that Marginson (2022) speaks about were present in most conversations. Talks of doing it on their own, advocacy, and engagement with knowledge systems led to further questions regarding students process of self-formation. To be an FGLI student at an elite institution, students take active engagement in overcoming obstacles and barriers that withstand to keep students like them out (Stephens, 2010). Through the difficulties these students faced they worked hard in order to overcome obstacles and graduate during the Covid pandemic.

FGLI students in elite institutions find themselves with several disparities and stressors. EHEI buy into the notion of capital as they often reproduce the culture and values of the wealthy privileged, leaving all others out (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). The discussion of some of the disparities and stressors FGLI students faced was plentiful. Besides talking about educational inequality and imposter syndrome, students spoke about financial burdens, lack of resources, and various other issues. When talking about disparities and stressors FGLI students had various points to discuss. The talk about resources available to them and whether they belong at EHEI brought out notions of imposter syndrome and inequality. Coming from poorly funded public schools or schools with less prestige caused students to recognize the disadvantages they face. When gaining admittance to a prestigious institution such as Columbia, they often discussed the culture

shock and difficulty they felt when they first entered the University. This did not deter students as they all graduated and went on to enter the labor market or gain admittance to Doctoral programs.

When FGLI students attend elite institutions, especially ones based in expensive metropolitan cities the discussion of their livelihood comes up. The way FGLI students interact with higher education is different when compared to students who have had parents that attended higher education institutions and are middle and upper class (Benson & Lee, 2020; Lareau, 2011). A large proportion of participants discussed having to work during their time in higher education. While some discussed having scholarships, they mentioned the need to work in order to be able to afford the activities that were occurring on and off campus. Often these discussions were not only about the need for food and shelter, but also how working gave them the ability to live in a city such as NYC. However, working also hindered them as it often affected their social lives and inhibited their abilities to build a network outside of the university. Participants also discussed that often they found that their middle and upper class peers did not have to work and had the ability to live in the city without worrying about money or expenses.

Students often talked about capital throughout the conversation. When considering cultural capital, educational systems have the ability to reproduce existing structures that create class differences (Bourdieu, 1973). When discussing reasons for choosing to attend an EHEI its relation to opportunity was considered. Many mentioned that they never thought it would be possible for them to attend an EHEI and having the opportunity they decided to seize it. While the cost of such an institution is high, they believed that this opportunity outweighed the cost. While participants discussed difficulties and having to work for their livelihood, they also brought up the resources that came with attending Columbia. Often discussions of institutional prestige and prominence were discussed. They also conveyed the importance of making connections and networking. These were often not only discussed in terms of networking benefits, but also as a means to create community with those that are similar to them. This played an important part in students' self-formation.

The Covid pandemic brought forth issues for FGLI students that could have hindered others, but these high achieving students found strength in overcoming these obstacles. Students discussed various impacts due to the pandemic, but the majority focused on housing, mental health, and loss not only in terms of death but also jobs and community. When discussing housing the majority of students found themselves having to move back home and leave their residences in NYC. Discussions of financial instability were brought up showing the isolating experience of not being able to leave. There was much dialogue about the lack of space and privacy for students. Some often shared small spaces with their families, and while they had their family support, they often found that the lack of space caused difficulties when trying to study. Their hinderance of space often caused students to mention how it motivated them for the future.

Along with the pandemic came mental health issues. Having to be confined to a space and still continuing to do their studies created a lack of participation amongst participants. They often discussed that in the early stages of the transition they did not participate in class because their mental health was suffering. The helpless feeling of being powerless and being fearful of what might occur caused some students to have mental health issues. Some discussed how the pandemic caused a resurgence in trauma mentality. They mentioned that some of the benefits of having online classes was the ability to asynchronously watch lectures when classes made them feel uncomfortable. Participants mentioned that for their own mental health having the option to fast forward parts that made them uncomfortable was beneficial. Issues of mental health were prevalent for the majority of the global population, but also affected students who additionally had educational responsibilities.

The discussion of loss was numerous as these participants did not only consider loss in terms of death but also in terms of loss of jobs, community, and opportunities. There was a dialogue about the experience of death around them. They mentioned that not knowing how Covid worked at the beginning caused fear for them and their loved ones. Having to deal with death and their lectures made it difficult for many of them to focus on their studies. Some discussed not having the ability to continue to do their work study and

witnessing their parents and family member losing their jobs. This added to the financial burden of their daily lives, as many talked about the responsibility they felt when they were back home. There was also much talk about the loss of community and activities. Often participants discussed the inability to connect and continue to do things in person during the Covid pandemic which hindered their ability to gain social and cultural capital. This often meant students were not able to form relationships or try out for clubs and sports they had intended to join. The difficulties brought on by the pandemic were numerous but caused many students to reflect on these instances and how these issues propelled them toward new goals.

With the transition to online learning several topics arouse. These students often pointed out the policies they found helpful and those they did not. Students who benefited from helpful policies tended to speak better about their institution overall. Some viewed policies where students did not receive letter grades and more resources became available as beneficial and helpful. They spoke about advocating for additional funds and often times receiving them. For those that did not find much institutional support, it was often the case that they felt they had to go through hoops or barriers in order to obtain any financial assistance. For these students not having direct access to institutional financial resources equated to a critical lens from which the university was looked at. Retrospectively FGLI students discussed feeling as though their institution had done the best it could given the circumstances. The majority of students felt they did their best and believed that the university were effective in protecting students from the rapidly evolving pandemic.

When thinking in terms of digitizing the educational sphere students often discussed the lack of resources to create parity in the digital realm. They mentioned how living on campus often meant that all students had access to Wi-Fi and library resources. The lack of help to fund students Wi-Fi or equipment was prevalent in the conversation. The difficulties that students had when it came to Wi-Fi caused them to feel inequality as they assumed that others would be critical of their connection. They often believed that lacking newer equipment was also a hinderance in their experience within digital education. Having older hardware meant that they were not able to have filters or

backgrounds to hide their interior space. Not having newer technology caused students to feel inequality amongst other students.

The notion of interior space was also prevalent in the discussion of the digital realm. Students expressed being cognizant of their space and acknowledged the reciprocation of being able to look into others spaces as others looked into theirs. FGLI students recognized that the ability to look into someone's space can create differences amongst peers, as they often talked about looking for different backgrounds to hide their living conditions. Thinking about how their spaces were set up and what could be seen was constantly discussed. These students talked about their backgrounds and how they would only showcase certain parts as to not give away their FGLI identity. Inequality was believed to be created through the digital space as they spoke about their wealthier peers showcasing their space and wealth. They spoke about the lavish backgrounds that these students showed during class. This led to conversations of discomfort and class inequality.

This case study was originally intended to look at how the Covid pandemic affected FGLI students at elite institutions, however this led to the outcome of higher education as self-formation. These high achieving individuals often spoke about their difficulties and complications in terms of how they lead to their outcomes. The retrospective lens was important in this discussion as these students often expressed that in the moment it felt as though the institution was not doing enough, but in retrospect they felt that the institution tried its best. This was articulated throughout the conversations and often found that through the institution they were able to create a change from where they had previously started. By looking at Marginson (2018; 2022) it is found that autonomous agency, reflexive agency, the will to learn, and the immersion in knowledge are present for FGLI students. While these have been coded differently, they fit what Marginson (2022) finds to be essential elements of higher education as self-formation. As the literature shows FGLI students often have to figure out their own steps into higher education without parental guidance (Benson & Lee, 2020; Ceja, 2004). They often must reach out to mentors and administrators for help in applying to institutions. This independent conscious action is integral as students with FGLI backgrounds often face greater barriers than those with

family members who have attend the university. Participants sometimes find that gaining admittance to an elite institution can be an isolating experience, as they have had to work hard in order to overcome obstacles. This autonomous drive may be one of the reasons FGLI students are successful within EHEI's.

Through their reflexivity students find their growth and moral cognizance. They often find solace in being with other FGLI students, making them feel they are not alone through the difficulties of attending an EHEI. Having others who may feel the same and that understand the struggles that may be occurring helped FGLI students feel at ease, even within elite institutional spaces. Often these students discussed feeling difficulties when they first started, but mentioned it getting better after finding their community. These shared experiences often lead to advocating and helping one another. Several of the participants discussed their advocacy work within the community due to witnessing inadequacies within the FGLI community. Through this work they described the importance the community had on their educational journey.

Being at an elite institution meant that FGLI students had the motivation and drive not only to attend an EHEI, but to complete their studies. There were several different factors that came to what Marginson (2022) describes as the will to learn. Participants of this study had the will to learn and succeed in their studies as they all graduated from Columbia. Several students discussed the drive for social and fiscal mobility. They mentioned that being home through the pandemic compelled them to graduate and achieve mobility not only for themselves, but also for their loved ones. Setting goals played an important part for several participants as they mentioned this helped them through the difficulties they face. The determination to continue even in the face of adversity helped them achieve goals and graduate. Through their goals these students discussed the continuous will to learn in order to achieve what they want.

FGLI students often find themselves immersed in university culture which helps mutually engage and shape transformation not only in themselves, but also the university culture. As Lareau (2011) states, Americans are more likely to recognize the power of the individual than the power of social class, but "as social behavior shifts, new cultural

forms arise" (p. 388). These students immerse themselves in the culture but create change to university practices through activism and participation. Through their advocacy and active engagement, they find resources to help others while they are simultaneously shaping their experiences. Involvement with different groups and university administration leads to students finding their power within elite institutions. Through their engagement with communities they are able to transform their educational experience. When they reflected on their past most participants experienced a sense of growth and realization that they were not the same person when they first started at Columbia. This sense of growth and change shows how higher education acts as self-formation within students.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

FGLI students at elite institutions often are high achieving individuals with set goals they aim to achieve. These individuals are an important group to analyze as often even without resources they are able to achieve higher levels of educational success than previous generations (Iniguez, 2022). Often this is done without the resources that other students who attend elite institutions have. While there has been an increase in FGLI students attending tertiary education, it is often at institutions that are less selective (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Manzoni, 2018). Analyzing those at elite institutions is important as there are greater disparities amongst FGLI students and those of wealthier backgrounds. By examining how these students overcome these obstacles one can better look at how to support future FGLI students and students overall.

While this case study originally meant to look at the experiences of students and the lack of resources they experienced, the majority of students spoke about the transformation that attending an EHEI had on them. For FGLI students the decision to attend an elite institution is not one that is easily made. Due to the high cost of attending, they often grapple with the cost benefit analysis (Benson & Lee, 2020; Nunn, 2019). They often discussed disparities, the cost of working, and the social and cultural capital that was found within the university. Yet attending Columbia University for these students was worth the cost, although several participants argued that it was only worth the cost when classes were in person. During the Covid pandemic these students faced several difficulties including housing, mental health, and loss. With these experiences participants often mentioned that having the right support helped them deal with the difficulties of the pandemic. In transitioning to the online space, they discussed having both positive and negative notions of academic policies, as well as experiences with digital inequality and lack of privacy in their interior spaces.

Even with difficulties participants often described their outcomes and experiences in terms of self-formation. FGLI students showcased higher education as self-formation as described by Marginson (2022) through autonomous and reflexive agency, a willingness to learn, and immersion in knowledge. These students exhibit independent action in that

they often find themselves having to figure out how to apply and enter EHEI spaces with little to no help. Through growth and moral cognizance participants recognized the importance of their relationship with other FGLI students. Through personal reflexivity they often found themselves advocating and trying to create inclusive spaces for others. They mentioned that their determination and drive allowed them to work towards their goals. This became apparent as all participants were working or attending graduate school upon graduation. Engagement was important for students as this helped drive them to continue even through the difficult moments. Creating a community with other FGLI students allowed them to motivate and hold each other accountable to achieve their goals. Often these participants discussed a personal evolution from when they first started their undergraduate degree. This transformation occurred even as students faced some of the most difficult moments in recent history. The power that higher education has for student's self-formation is one that can empower them to achieve beyond their personal expectations.

Limitations

With this study several limitations came about which could be worked out for future studies. The time frame of this study was one of the major limitations. The Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approved this study on March 29, 2020, which allowed for 4 and half months to conduct this case study (see Appendix E). Having more time would have allowed a greater number of participants to be interviewed. A small time frame for conducting research is limiting when it must be produced within a rigid deadline. Having a short period of time to produce a substantial piece of research shortens the time the researcher has to analyze data and investigate the information.

Having a larger number of participants would have given broader insight into the feelings of the FGLI community. The sample cannot always be representative of the entire population, the only thing researchers can control is the confidence in their sample, and a larger sample does help strengthen the research (Gorard, 2001). With time limitations it was difficult to continue recruiting and interviewing participants. While this community is a small population within Columbia, it could have been beneficial to conduct more interviews and include the experiences of students who had started their education during

the transition into online education. Since this study included students that had graduated from the university many spoke about the process of self-formation through their experience. By being able to compare and contrast both types of students' different themes could have arisen.

While this study was looking at the digital sphere, it is also important to recognize that some FGLI students did not have the proper access to a be a part of the study. They often face problems with technological equipment and connectivity. Meaning some students would not be able to partake in this study if they have inadequate equipment and connectivity. Due to the marginalization of certain groups they are likely to be underrepresented in digital research, leaving them from receiving any of the benefits that may come from participating (Eynon et al., 2018). While using digital methods are convenient, have lower costs, less time constraints, and ability to connect around the world, it is also important to "take account of the context and circumstances in which the data are gathered" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 302). During some interviews technological glitches occurred where the sound would go off or there would be connectivity issues through the interview. There were times when the camera would freeze and the sound would be cut off, causing me to ask participants to repeat themselves. Acknowledging these issues within a study that discusses the limitations of the digital realm is important as these are some of the digital shortcomings that FGLI students faced when transitioning into online education.

The gender aspect of participants was pertinent to this study. The majority of the respondents to this study were women. While several men were contacted to participate in an interview there was a low response rate amongst men. Even when having men confirm that they would partake in the study, several stopped responding to emails and when continuous follow up occurred they mentioned not having the availability to do the study or no longer having interest in being a part of the study. Most women participants went through with it except for one, who was not available during the day. Even when trying to accommodate for her time, it was difficult to find a day that worked with her availability as work kept her busy.

Future studies would also benefit in having multiple universities in the study to compare and contrast how students amongst different universities felt. This case study focused exclusively on Columbia University in the City of New York, research on other elite institutions would be beneficial. Research on FGLI populations at elite institutions would be valuable in order to find better ways to support students. The inclusion of a larger population from multiple universities would allow to see how FGLI students across different universities were affected by Covid. This would help universities understand what they need to do in order to help future students in case there is ever the urgent need to transition into online education. It is important to remember that somethings may look similar, but participants distinctive experiences and values often make generalization impossible (Pring, 2015).

Finally, greater diversity amongst the sample population would be beneficial for future studies. While research has been done on FGLI students, a small proportion is of those in elite institutions. There is even less research on the effects that the Covid pandemic had on this population of students. By including this lens, research can benefit on looking at how to best serve at risk communities when quick changes in education need to occur. Due to the limitations of time and resources this research would benefit from a larger sample size that is more diverse. A large part of participants were women of Latin and mixed backgrounds so it would be beneficial for a diverse cohort to be interviewed. Because the sample was collected through snowball sampling it would be beneficial to further locate interest groups who would have possible connections with this community. While there were numerous emails sent to the multicultural affairs office they often went without a response.

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Appendix A: Thematic Analysis and Codes

Theme	Code	Definition	Words Discussed
FGLI Students Elite Institutional Experience	Disparities / Stressors	Some of the obstacles that students face pertaining to experiences or feelings stemming from being FGLI. The acknowledgement of FGLI student's status and inequality in an elite institution. Additionally, it pertains to the financial and Economic burden that FGLI students must face. Students also discuss questioning belonging to the University and its practices	Inequality; Class differentiation; Status; Economic disparity; Isolating Experience; Self- Advocacy; Trauma; Exploitation; Not belonging; Trauma; Imposter syndrome
	Livelihood	FGLI students spoke about needing to gain employment in order to survive living in NYC and at Columbia. Spoke about financial responsibilities and lack of monetary funds for college experiences.	Jobs; working; financial needs; fiscal responsibilities
	Social and Cultural Capital / Prestige	Students discussed the inability to receive forms of social and cultural capital when not on campus. Being at Columbia adds prestigious value to a person's life but it is very different when it is online.	Relationship Formation; Networks; Social Mobility; Name Recognition; Life in NYC; Attainment
Impacts of the Covid 19 Pandemic	Housing	Loss of on campus housing and having to find new homes or moving in with family during the pandemic. Going back home to spaces that may not be equipped to attend online classes.	Changing spaces; loss of study space; No library; Family Home; Moving
	Mental Health	Transitioning to online classes, having deadlines, and the additional stressors of the pandemic caused mental health issues for students. Lacking resources did not allow students to deal with these issues properly.	Discomfort; Mental distress; Overwhelming; Unstable; Emotions
	Loss	Many students had family members pass away due to Covid. Loss also pertained to a loss of any sense of normalcy as well as a loss of jobs and income.	Death of family members; Loss of normalcy; Job loss

Thematic Analysis and Codes (Continued)

Theme	Code	Definition	Words Discussed
Transition to Online	Academic Policies / Institutional Support	During the Covid Pandemic the university rolled out several policies that students found helpful, but there were still some policies that needed to be worked on. The University supported student's in different ways by creating digital programs and setting up additional funds for students.	Programs; Policies; Communication; Helpful Professors; Student support; Financial support
	Digital inequality	FGLI students discussed the transition to online education and not having the right equipment to connect and conduct classes in the digital sphere.	Lack of Wi-Fi; Lack of Technology; Digital equipment; digital resources
	Interior Spaces	In moving to the digital space there was recognition of what personal spaces looked like which caused FGLI students to be conscious of their interior spaces. Discussions of background and how their spaces were viewed on camera were brought up.	Personal spaces; Backgrounds; Lack of desks; Space inequality
Self-Formation	Independent Conscious Action	Even through all of the difficulties that FGLI students faced to gain admittance at the university they made their decisions on their own. FGLI students are often autonomous high achieving individuals	Self-advocacy; Personal achievement; Independence; Autonomy
	Growth & Moral Responsibility	Through the Covid pandemic these students often found a sense of self. Through reflexive agency their motivations often shifted to help not only themselves but others	Gratitude; Sympathy; Evolution; Grow; Reflexivity
	Motivation & Drive	These students found a willingness to set goals and continue to push through the difficulties in order to achieve their goals. Often it was about obtaining their degree and being able to overcome their FGLI identity.	Goals; Motivation; Mobility; Support; Willingness
	Shaping Transformation	These student's immersed themselves in online learning, often searching for resources available in order to learn as much as possible through the pandemic. Even with the obstacles that these students faced they all overcame difficulties in order to graduate and obtained careers in a difficult job market.	Identity formation; Transformation; Capabilities; Outcomes

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

1. What is your gender and race?
2. What institution you attended and from what year to what year?
3. What was you major, and did you graduate?
4. What has the outcome been after graduating?
5. Can you explain why you consider yourself First-generation and/or Low-income?
6. What was your experience like as FGLI student at an elite institution such as Columbia?
    a. Why did you choose to attend an Ivy League University?
    b. Was there anybody who inspired you or helped you in applying?
7. Can you tell me about your experience with the pandemic?
    a. What helped you through the difficult moments?
    b. What kept you motivated?
8. Who did you live with and how many people were there during quarantine?
9. How was your experience with transitioning from in person classes to online learning?
    a. Was there anything in particular that kept you immersed in your studies?
10. Do you prefer in-person classes or online classes? Why?
11. How do you think your university handled the pandemic?
12. Was there anything they could have done to handle it better?
13. Was there anything you felt they did better than other universities?
14. In transitioning to online classes how did your professors handle online teaching?
15. Did you notice a difference in how your professors taught and behaved?
    a. Were they easier or harder? Better or worse teachers?
16. Did any of them talk about the difficulties in online learning?
17. Was the communication with your professors easier or more difficult in an online environment?
18. Did you experience any difficulties that you talked to your professor about, and if so, how did they react?

19. In thinking about the social aspect of online learning were you able to form any new friendships online?
20. Did you attend any online social events, if so, what were involved in these events?
21. How did you feel looking into others spaces?
22. Were you ever aware of your space and those of the other students?
23. Did you ever think about the differences in your spaces to other students? How did that make you feel?
24. Did you ever feel any inequality with other students?
25. Were there any situations that ever made you feel uncomfortable in the online space?
    a. Did you ever have uncomfortable situations in person?
26. What have you done since graduating?
27. How did going through the pandemic affect your educational outcome?
    a. Are you happy or discontent with where you are now?
28. How has this educational journey helped with your personal growth?
29. Do you feel there has been a transformation in who you were before attending your institutions?
30. Is there anything you would like to discuss about your experience as a FGLI student in a digital elite institution?

Appendix C: Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Major	Graduated	Working/Grad
Participant 1	Female	Latin	Economics	Yes	Working
Participant 2	Female	Latinx	Applied Mathematics	Yes	Working
Participant 3	Woman	Caribbean Black/Hispanic	Political Theory	Yes	Working
Participant 4	Woman	Latino	English & Political Science	Yes	Grad School & Working
Participant 5	Woman	Indigenous Quechua Peruvian and Taino Boricua	Political Science	Yes	Working
Participant 6	Female	South Asian/Sinhalese	Psychology	Yes	Working
Participant 7	Woman	Hispanic	Political Science	Yes	Working
Participant 8	Woman	Guatemalan/Mexican	Sociology	Yes	Working
Participant 9	Male	Palestinian	Political Science	Yes	Grad School & Working
Participant 10	Female	Afro-Latina	Earth Sciences	Yes	PhD in Earth and Planetary Sciences

Appendix D: Research Information for Participants



Oxford University telephone number: 01865 274024

Explorative Study of the Online Higher Education Experience for First-Generation and/or Low- Income Students During the Covid-19 Pandemic

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: CIA-22HT-038

1. Introductory paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research project that focuses on the experience of First-generation and/or Low-income students in elite institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

2. Why is this research being conducted?

By investigating the digital spaces of elite universities and the experiences of FGLI students we can analyze whether digital spaces can recreate inequality and disproportionate power hierarchies by looking at their experiences in online personal spaces, instead of classrooms. This research seeks to examine how students felt being in an online environment and whether the digital realm can create inequalities for FGLI students. In also analyzing accessibility to the internet and technology in the US, we can investigate if FGLI students have the same access throughout the US. This research will hopefully help educators in looking at different ways to provide marginalized students with support for online learning and help them understand how even through digital spaces inequality can come to exist.

3. Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been chosen due to your recognition as a First-generation and/or Low-Income student in an Elite institution during the Covid-19 pandemic.

4. Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the study, without giving a reason, by advising me of this decision until two weeks after your interview. [Please explain what will happen to any data that has already been collected if they

decide to withdraw.] If you decide to withdraw all personal data will be removed and destroyed in accordance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation and Data Protection Act.

5. What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

- This research will take place online using Google, Teams, Zoom or FaceTime during a schedule day and time.
- A consent form will be sent to you and you will sign off on it through email. You will also be asked for verbal confirmation before starting the interview.
- The interview It will take approximately 30 minutes to an hour.
- During the interview you will be asked questions regarding your identity as a First-generation and /or Low-income student and your experience in education during Covid-19.
- With your consent, I would like to audio record you so I can have an accurate record of our conversation.
- It may be possible for me to follow up on certain questions after the interview and may request to schedule additional time for follow ups.
- If at any time you do not feel comfortable asking question, participants can ask to pause or stop the research activities at any time.

6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

While I will try my best to make sure you are comfortable some questions regarding your background and the pandemic may be difficult. You may request to stop at any point and not answer any questions. Your name will be a pseudonym, but your institution will be named.

7. Are there any benefits in taking part?

While there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this research will lead to helping future First-generation and/or Low-income students understand how others felt.

8. What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

Your educational institution and a pseudonym will be collected. The interview over zoom will be recorded on a voice recorder and then transcribed for coding purposes. This data will be located in a secure Nexus 365 location which only the Supervisor and principal investigator will have access. This data will stay on file for 3 years after completion and then all personal data will be removed and destroyed in accordance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation and Data Protection Act

9. Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

The findings from the research will/may be written up in a thesis, dissertation, academic publications, conference presentations, a report commissioned by an external organisation, websites, videos etc.

10. Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the study. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available at https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

11. Who has reviewed this study?

This study has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: CIA-22HT-038).

12. Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact me at [redacted] or [redacted] and we will do our best to answer your query. I/we will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

The Chair, Social Sciences & Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee;
Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk; Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Boundary Brook House, Churchill Drive, Headington, Oxford OX3 7GB

13. Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

[redacted]
Education Department
University email: [redacted]education.ox.ac.uk

Appendix E: CUREC Ethics Approval

CUREC Ref: CIA-22HT-038

HC [redacted]

To: [redacted]

Tuesday, March 29, 2022 at 2:27 PM

[redacted]

Title: Explorative Study of the Online Higher Education Experience for First-Generation and/or Low-Income Students During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Ref: CIA-22HT-038

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethics approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to DREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly, approval has been granted.

If your research involves participants whose ability to give free and informed consent is in question (this includes those under 18 and vulnerable adults), then it is advisable to read the following NSPCC professional reporting requirements for cases of suspected abuse
http://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/information-service/factsheet-child-abuse-reporting-requirements-professionals.pdf

Should there be any subsequent changes to the project which raise ethical issues not covered in the original application you should submit details to research.office@education.ox.ac.uk for consideration.

Good luck with your research study.

Best wishes
[redacted]
Member of the DREC

Appendix F: CUREC Study Request Form

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC)

CUREC 1A Form for Application form for research projects in the social sciences and humanities with less complex ethical issues

The University of Oxford places a high value on the knowledge, expertise, and integrity of its members and their ability to conduct research to high standards of scholarship and ethics. The research ethics review process has been established to ensure that research involving human participants is conducted in a way that respects the dignity, rights, and welfare of participants, and minimises risk to participants, researchers, third parties, and to the University itself. It is assumed that all members of the University will take their responsibilities and obligations seriously, and will ensure that their research involving human participants is conducted according to established principles and good practice in their field and in accordance, where appropriate, with legal requirements.

Before completing this form, please refer to the guidance and flowchart on the Research Support website. Only type-written forms form will be accepted. Completed application forms should be emailed, along with relevant supporting documents, to your Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) or to ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk from your ox.ac.uk email address.

Please contact your DREC or the SSH IDREC if you have any questions about completing this form or the review process.

SECTION A: Filter for CUREC 2 application		
This section determines whether the application for ethics review should be made using this form (CUREC 1A) or the CUREC 2 form (for research with more complex ethical issues).		
Please indicate with an 'X'.	**Yes**	**No**
Does the research involve the deception of participants?	☐	☒
Are the research participants vulnerable in the context of the research, or classed as people whose ability to give free and informed consent is in question? For example, Participants aged 16 or under (also answer question A5); Participants aged 16 – 18 (refer to competent youths for guidance); adults at risk; Note the University's Safeguarding Guidance and Code of Practice and its implications for researchers involving young people or adults at risk.	☐	☒
By taking part in the research, will participants be at risk of criminal prosecution or significant harm?	☐	☒
Does your research raise issues relevant to the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (the Prevent Duty), which seeks to prevent people from being drawn into	☐	☒

terrorism? Best Practice Guidance 07 on the Prevent Duty provides further guidance.		
If you answered **'No'** to all the questions above, go to Section B. If you answered **'Yes'** to any question above, continue to question 5 below.		
Is your project covered by a CUREC Approved Procedure?	☐	☐
If yes, list the CUREC Approved Procedure(s) you will follow		
If you answered '**Yes**' to ANY of questions 1-4, and answered '**No**' to question 5, **stop** completing this form and do not submit it for ethical review. You will instead need to submit a CUREC 2 application form. If you answered '**Yes**' to **any** of questions 1-4, and your project is covered by an Approved Procedure, **go on to Section B**. If more than one Approved Procedure applies, contact the SSH IDREC or your DREC for advice on whether a CUREC 2 form should be submitted instead.		

SECTION B: Researchers		
Name of Principal Investigator or student's supervisor	[redacted]	
Department or Institute	Department of Higher Education	
University of Oxford email address	[redacted]@education.ox.ac.uk	
Copy and paste the following six rows as necessary to complete for each additional researcher who will be involved in this study, including student(s) and those external to the University.		
Name of researcher or student	[redacted]	
Department or Institute	Higher Education	
University of Oxford email address	[redacted]education.ox.ac.uk	
Role in research	Student	
Degree programme, if student research	MSc	
The whole research team		
Have the researchers undertaken research ethics and integrity training?	**Yes** ☒	**No** ☐
Please provide details of any research ethics and integrity training undertaken, including the dates of the training. Alternatively, state relevant research experience.	Methods for Social Research – Spring 2019 Foundations of Educational Research I – MT 2021 Foundations of Educational Research II – HT 2022	
State any conflicts of interest and explain how these will be addressed.	No conflicts of interest	

SECTION C: The research project	
Title of the research project	
Explorative Study of the Online Higher Education Experience for First-Generation and/or Low-Income Students During the Covid-19 Pandemic	
Anticipated start date of the aspect of the research project involving human participants and/ or personal data (**dd/mm/yy**).	Will start once ethics approval is obtained.
Anticipated research end date (**dd/mm/yy**).	September 2022
Provide a brief lay summary of the aims and objectives of the research. This should cover the questions it will answer and any potential benefits. (max 300 words)	
This research will focus on the experiences of First-generation and/or Low-Income during a global pandemic. By investigating the digital spaces of Columbia University and the experiences of FGLI students we can examine whether digital spaces can recreate inequality and disproportionate power hierarchies by looking at their experiences in online personal spaces, instead of classrooms. From my previous work with the FGLI community many students felt that being in an online environment was not conducive to their learning and often found it difficult to participate. In also analysing accessibility to the internet and technology in the US, we can investigate if FGLI students have the same access throughout the US. This research will hopefully help educators in looking at different ways to provide marginalized students with support for online learning and help them understand how even through digital spaces inequalities can come to exist.	
Please indicate the methods to be used (indicate with an '**X**'):	
Analysis of existing records	☐
Snowball sampling (recruiting through contacts of existing participants)	☒
Use of casual or local workers e.g. interpreters (refer to guidance in BPG 01: Researcher safety)	☐
Participant observation	☐
Covert observation	☐
Observation of specific organisational practices	☐
Participant completes questionnaire in hard copy	☐
Participant completes online questionnaire or other online task (refer to guidance in BPG 06: Internet-mediated research)	☐
Using social media to recruit or interact with participants (refer to guidance in BPG 06: Internet-mediated research)	☒
Participant performs paper and pencil task	☐
Participant performs verbal or aural task (e.g. for linguistic study)	☐
Focus group	☐

Interview (refer to guidance in BPG 10: Conducting research interviews)	☒
Audio recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	☒
Video recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	☐
Photography of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	☐
Others (please specify below)	☐

Provide a brief summary of the research design and methods. What will research participants be asked to do? (max 300 words) Please also submit a copy of the questions participants will be asked, if applicable, or some information about the sorts of topics that will be covered.
This study will be a qualitative study of approximately 15-20 Interviews with students from First-Generation and/or Low-Income backgrounds. These students will be from Columbia University in the City of New York. New York City was chosen as it was one of the first cities in the US to have experienced a large amount of fatalities in Covid cases. From within the city, Columbia University was chosen for its status as an elite Ivy League institution. In this study students will be asked to answer a set of questions about their transition to online teaching and their experience with online higher education during the Covid pandemic. It will seek to understand how FGLI students felt in transitioning to digital spaces. Since this study seeks to find if digital classrooms can create inequality for FGLI students it will consider a range of questions for this matter. The questions are attached on a separate file.

List the location(s) where the research will be conducted, including any other countries.	New York City, NY
Clarify which parts of the research will be conducted in-person and which will take place remotely, e.g. online.	All will be done remotely

If your research involves fieldwork or travel and your department requires a travel risk assessment, will you have completed and returned a risk assessment form beforehand? Please indicate with an '**X**'. (This must be approved by your department before you travel. If you are travelling overseas, you are advised to take out University travel insurance.) Refer to guidance available from your Department, the Safety Office, the Social Sciences Division, and the Humanities Division, and on travel for University business.	Yes	☐
	No	☐
	Not required in this instance	☒

In the case of international or collaborative research, explain how you will address any ethical issues specific to the local context. Please provide details of the local review, approval or permission obtained or required. Refer to the BPG 16: Social science research conducted outside the UK. If there will be no local review, explain why not. Please mention any stakeholder or community engagement that has been/ will be undertaken in relation to the research

Please also address any physical or psychological risks for Oxford researchers and local fieldworkers in Section G.	
All interviews will be conducted with prior consent and are not subject to local review or approval, and permission from institutions will not be required.	
Name of departmental/ peer reviewer (if applicable)	N/A
External organisation funding the research and grant reference (if applicable)	N/A
Please refer to the CUREC Best Practice Guidance and list any that have been used to develop your research.	BPG 10 Conducting research interviews, BPG 16 Social science research conducted outside the UK

SECTION D: Recruitment of research participants		
Number of participants	15-20	
How was the number of participants decided?	Due to the length of the project, I wanted to select 15-20 different students from Columbia University to see how they have felt in the digital classrooms.	
Age range of participants	18 and over	
Inclusion criteria	First-generation and/or Low-income, minority students	
Exclusion criteria	Anyone not considered First-generation and/or Low-income	
Indicate with an '**X**' all intended recruitment methods **Please submit copies of the recruitment material that will be used, e.g. advertisement text, introductory email text.**	Poster advert	☐
	Flyer	☐
	Email circulation	☒
	Social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook)	☒
	Website	☐
	In-person approach	☐
	Snowball sampling	☒
	Recruitment sites (e.g. Mechanical Turk)	☐
	Existing contacts or volunteer database	☒
	Other (please specify):	

	☐
How will potential participants be identified and approached?	I will reach out to Columbia University's multicultural office to advertise information to students in their weekly newsletters.
Will informed consent be obtained from the research participants or their parents/ guardians? If not, please explain why not.	Yes, informed consent will be obtained
For each activity or group of participants, explain how informed consent will be obtained from the participants themselves and/ or their parents/ guardians, if applicable. How will their consent be recorded? **Please submit copies of all participant-facing materials for review.** E.g.: Recruitment material (e.g. emails, posters) Information for participants to read (or hear) before they agree to take part (e.g. written information or, if applicable, an outline oral information script). A document to record informed consent. Further guidance and templates.	An email consent form will be sent to participants which asks that they send me an email stating their consent. I will also be recording the interviews and will ask if they have consented to the forms to receive verbal confirmation.
Provide details of any payments and incentives and the rationale for providing these. Further guidance in Best Practice Guidance: 05 Payments and incentives in research.	None
Describe how participants may withdraw from the study may withdraw any personal information they have provided from the study State any limits to withdrawal, for example once the data has been anonymised or at some other specified stage prior to publication. Make sure participants are aware of any withdrawal limits.	Participants may withdraw up to two weeks after their interview. Aliases will be used to cover their names, but their institution will be shown.

SECTION E: Research data
All information provided by participants is considered research data for the purpose of this form. Any research data from which participants can be identified is known as personal data; any personal data which is sensitive is considered special category data. Management of personal data, either directly or via a third party, must comply with the requirements of the UK

General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018, as set out in the University's Guidance on Data Protection and Research.

In answering the questions below, please also consider the points raised in the Data Protection Checklist and Data Protection Screening Assessment and whether, for higher-risk data processing, a separate Data Protection Impact Assessment may also be required for the research. Advice on research data management and security is available from Research Data Oxford and your local IT department. Advice on data protection is available from the Information Compliance team.

For guidance on conducting internet-mediated research, refer to CUREC's Best Practice Guidance 06: Internet-mediated research.

What data will be collected? (Indicate with an '**X**')

Screening documents	☐	Task results (e.g. questionnaires, diaries)	☐
Consent records (e.g., written consent forms, audio-recorded consent, assent forms)	☒	IP addresses (refer to Best Practice Guidance 09: Data collection, protection and management for guidance)	☐
Contact details for the purpose of this research only	☒	Field notes	☐
Contact details for future use (guidance)	☐	Photographs	☐
Opt-out forms	☐	Information about the health of the participant (including mental health)	☐
Audio recordings	☒	Previously collected (secondary) data	☐
Video recordings	☐	Data already in the public domain. Specify the source of the data:	☒
Transcript of audio/ video recordings	☒	Other, please specify:	☐

During the course of the research, where will **each type of** research data be stored?	Records and Information will be stored on Nexus 365 One Drive. Interviews will be held digitally in teams and will be voice recorded on iPhone voice memos. The voice memos will be transcribed and transferred to Nexus 365 One Drive immediately. Voice memos will be deleted upon project completion.

Who will have access to the research data during the project?	The researcher and project supervisor will be the only ones with access to the data		
Please complete this section if your research involves the use of secondary (i.e. previously collected) data.	**Please indicated with an 'X'.**	**Yes**	**No**
	Are data access agreements in place for access to and use of this secondary data? (If so, please attach these.)	☐	☒
	Did the individuals agree that their data could be used for this purpose?	☐	☒
	Could anyone (including members of the research team) link the data back to an individual or individuals? If this is a possibility, please explain how the associated ethical issues will be addressed:	☐	☒
How do you intend to share the research data at the end of the project?	Depositing in a specialist data centre or archive	☐	
	Submitting to a journal to support a publication	☒	
	Depositing in an institutional repository	☐	
	Dissemination via a project or institutional website	☒	
	No plans to share the data	☐	
	Other (please specify):	☐	
How do you intend to report and disseminate the results of the research? (Indicate with an 'X')	Thesis publication	☐	
	Publication in a peer reviewed journal	☐	
	Publicly available report	☒	
	Conference presentation	☐	
	Publication on a website	☒	
	Pre-registration	☐	
	Report to a research funder	☐	
	Providing participants with a lay summary of the results	☐	
	Submission for academic assessment	☒	
	Other (please specify):	☐	

Explain what will happen to the data at the end of the research project. This question must be answered for each type of data, including completed consent forms.
Data will be stored on Nexus 365 for 3 years after final publication. Upon leaving the university Principal investigator James Robson will have access to the information stored. No consent for further research will be requested. All personal data will be removed and destroyed in accordance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation and Data Protection Act.

SECTION F: Protection of research participants and their personal data		
How identifiable will the participants be from the **research outputs**? (Indicate with an 'X')	Directly identifiable from the information included	☐
	Pseudonymised/ indirectly identifiable	☒
	Not identifiable – data is anonymous	☐
	Other, please specify:	☐
To what extent will the **data** be de-identified? How identifiable will any individuals be from the research data? Describe any measures you will take towards assuring confidentiality, potential risks to confidentiality.	Participants real names will not be used, but their educational institutions will be named.	
How will you ensure that third parties (e.g., interpreters and transcribers) are aware of and adhere to the measures described in this form?	Third Parties will not be involved in this research.	

SECTION G: Risks and benefits of the research
Will the research involve topics that could be considered sensitive? If so: Please provide more detail or supporting information (such as the interview questions) to show the range of questions; Explain what steps will be taken to reduce risk of distress;

Consider seeking advice from within your Department or from the ethics committee including whether the application might benefit from additional ethics review (e.g., via a CUREC 2 application).
No sensitive topics will be involved, but emotional topics may be discussed. If students feel emotional or mental distress due to describing certain situations and ask to stop the interview I will not continue with the participant. I will also inform them at the beginning of the interview that if they do not want to answer or continue with the interview they can just state so.
Describe any additional burden or risks to the participants and the steps you will take to address these.
There may be potential risk in being critical of Columbia University and critiquing in-person and online experiences which could jeopardize educational outcomes. This is why rigorous anonymity is an important part of the study and no real names will be used.
Describe any physical or psychological risks to the researcher(s) (including local fieldworkers or research assistants) and the steps you will take to address these.
No physical or psychological risks to the researcher have been found.
Describe any benefits of the research, both to participants and to others.
This research will allow students to discuss certain situations that they may not have discussed previously or thought of and allow them to divulge their feelings and emotions. It will help students that have been in similar situations find solace in that they are not alone.
Give details of any other ethical issues or relevant information.
No other ethical issues have been found.

SECTION H: Professional guidelines		
Please indicate with an '**X**' at least one set of professional guidelines you will follow.		
Research specialism/ methodology	**Association and guidance**	
Anthropology	Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK	☐
Computer Science	ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct	☐
Criminology	British Society of Criminology Statement of Ethics	☐

Education	British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research	☒
Geography	American Association of Geographers Statement on Professional Ethics	☐
History	Oral History Society of the UK Ethical Guidelines	☐
Internet-mediated research	Association of Internet Researchers Ethical Guidelines British Psychological Society: Ethics Guidelines for internet-mediated research Association for Computing Machinery Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct	☐
Management	Academy of Management Code of Ethics	☐
Political Science	American Political Science Association (APSA) Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science	☐
Politics	Political Studies Association. Guidelines for Good Professional Conduct	☐
Psychology	British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct	☐
Social research	Social Research Association: Ethical Guidelines	☐
Socio-legal studies	Socio-Legal Studies Association: Statement of Principles of Ethical Research Practice	☐
Sociology	The British Sociological Association: Statement of Ethical Practice	☐
Visual research	ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper: Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research	☐
Other professional guidelines	N/A	☐

SECTION I: Endorsements and signatures
Please ensure this form is endorsed by the Principal Investigator (or student's supervisor), the Head of Department (or nominee) and, if student research, by the student themselves. **The SSH IDREC Secretariat accepts either option below. If you have a DREC, check which signature option it prefers.** **Option 1: direct email endorsements** Each of the signatories should submit an email from a University of Oxford email address, indicating their acceptance of the responsibilities listed below. **Option 2: signatures** Please scan the signed form and email it to us as a PDF. Pasted images of signatures cannot be accepted.
Endorsement by the Principal Investigator/ student supervisor and student, if applicable
I/ we the researchers understand my/ our responsibilities as Principal Investigator (and student, if applicable) as outlined in the guidance on the CUREC website. I/ we declare that the answers

above accurately describe the research as presently designed, and that the ethics committee will be informed of any changes to the project which affect the answers to this form. I/ we will inform the relevant IDREC if the Principal Investigator changes.	
Name of Principal Investigator	[redacted]
Principal Investigator's signature	
Date	25/2/2022
Name of student (if applicable)	[redacted]
Student's signature	[redacted]@education.ox.ac.uk
Date	02/02/2022

Departmental endorsement – from the Head of Department or nominee (Another senior member of the department may sign where the head of department is the Principal Investigator, or where the Head of Department has appointed a nominee. Example nominees include Deputy Head of Department, Director of Research, or Director of Graduate/ Undergraduate Studies.)	
On the basis of the information available to me, I confirm that: I am aware of the research proposed and have read this application; To the best of my knowledge, the proposed design and scientific methodology do not raise ethical concerns; I support this research in principle, subject to ethical and other necessary reviews.	
Signature	Instead of a signature, endorsement may be provided by an email confirming the points above.
Name	
Role	
Date	