You're Not a Guest, You Belong Here: Transforming First-Year Seminars to Center Social Justice and First-Generation, Low-Income Students of Color

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There is extensive research that speaks to first-year seminars as an effective high impact practice. However, this inquiry utilized qualitative research to understand the steps needed to make first-year seminars more effective and inclusive with the integration of a social justice curriculum. Specifically, this inquiry consisted of 12 semi structured interviews with current first-year, second term students at the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt) in the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences. The student participants identified as either first-generation, low-income, or a student of color. The additional five interview participants were higher education professionals from the Pittsburgh region who had instructed a course with a social justice focus for undergraduate students. The instructor participants also identified as either first-generation, low-income or individuals of color. These 12 participants shared their recommendations and lived experiences to assist with answering the two inquiry questions: (1) What are the experiences of first-generation low-income students of color in the first-year seminar course at Pitt? and (2) What is the process of syllabus recreation with a focus on social justice? The results of this inquiry indicate resources embedded in the curriculum promote early exposure, racial representation matters, and the role of pedagogy is critical in a first-year seminar with a social justice focus as the key findings. While the recommendations are specific to the first year seminar in the Dietrich School at Pitt, there are elements that may prove helpful and applicable to other institutions striving to create more inclusive first year seminars.

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Preface

I could not have completed this journey without my faith and belief in God. On my hardest days, my faith is what sustained me. To my advisor, Dr. Gina A. Garcia, thank you for pushing me to be a better scholar, social justice advocate, and writer. I will forever be grateful for your support and commitment to me throughout this process. To my dissertation committee, Dr. Angela Campbell and Dr. Max Schuster, thank you both for going on this journey with me. I appreciate you pushing me to expand my thinking about my professional work and research. As I move forward, I take great pearls of wisdom from each of you.

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1.0 Chapter 1

1.1 Problem Statement and Inquiry Purpose

The United States has seen a significant increase in the population of people of color including Black, Latinx/Hispanic, and multiracial people (Misra et al., 2021). This increase is reflected in the population of students entering U.S. colleges and universities. From 1996 to 2016, there has been an increase in the undergraduate enrollment of traditional age (18-22) Black and Latinx/Hispanic students. As of 2017, Latinx/Hispanic enrollment rates hover around 19% of the total undergraduate population, and Black students represent approximately 15% of the total undergraduate population (United States Census Bureau, 2018). The research shows that there is a critical mass of Black and Latinx/Hispanic students who are entering higher education institutions, yet these increases are marred by the inequitable persistence and noncompletion rates for these students (American Council on Education, 2019). These data suggest that students of color are pursing higher education at a steady rate, but there may be a myriad of circumstances and experiences on a college campus that negatively impact the successful completion of students of color.

There is also an increase in the number of first-generation and low-income students entering higher education, many of whom are also students of color (Adams & McBrayer, 2020). Data show similar inequities for first-generation and low-income students; 70% of all students identified as first-generation college students enrolled in higher education in the fall of 2004, but only 50% earned a degree over six years (Reuter, 2020). Furthermore, Goldrick et al. (2016) concluded that only half of Pell Grant-eligible students at four-year universities graduated within

six years. Pell Grant eligibility is often used in higher education to identify students with the greatest financial need. In 2019-2020, 33% of undergraduate students received a Pell Grant (NCES, 2020). Taken together, there is a need to examine how race, class, and college generational status intersect and affect the success of college students in all three categories.

Scholars have noted that college classrooms do not provide opportunities to discuss and demystify the systems of oppression that affect all students but overwhelmingly affect the transition, persistence, and graduation of these minoritized populations (Morwenna, 2003; Yosso, 2002). The lack of conversation on the impact of racism, classism, and white supremacy in classrooms allows systems of oppression and their accompanying ideals to continue to be the standard by which all knowledge is conveyed (Patton, 2016). To be clear, the existing and thriving systems of oppression are the hardship and barriers faced by first-generation, low-income students of color.

More specifically, whiteness continues to be the reference point for postsecondary education, and, although more first-generation, low-income college students of color are enrolling steadily, they continue to face hardship and modest success due to this stark reality. The experiences of first-generation, low-income students on college campuses are couched in and scrutinized against "white terrain" (Patton, 2016, p. 320). Scholars (Cabrera, 2019; Garcia, 2019; Patton, 2016) continue to write extensively about the permeation and insidiousness of whiteness, white supremacy, racism, and classism in higher education, yet this conversation often does not permeate into conversation with faculty and administrators in practice. Patton (2016) reminds us that higher education was birthed out of "racism, property and oppression" (p. 320), and this legacy remains ever present in curriculum, campus policies and spaces, and most significantly in the affinity for white dominant students. Yet white supremacy is intertwined with other systems of

oppression, thus affecting the experiences of first-generation, low-income college students of color at multiple intersections. Stephens et al. (2012) state the culture of US higher education tends to lean towards that of the middle class and undermines the academic performance of first-generation college students. Classism has also been identified as a barrier for first-generation college students of color at higher education institutions (Allan et al., 2016).

Higher education scholars have been arguing unremittingly that the bigger issue is the systems of oppression that disproportionately affect first-generation, low-income students of color in pursuit of post-secondary education and baccalaureate degree attainment (Cabrera, 2019; Garcia, 2019; Harper et.al., 2009). Colleges and universities are not immune from these social systems but rather incubators. The institution of higher education reinforces behaviors in an insidious manner and perpetuates existing systems (Adams & Love, 2009). Although we are in the 21st century, the skillset and experiences of first-generation, low-income students of color continue to be invalidated and unacknowledged (Checkoway, 2018). The root of this dissonance is due in large part to the historical context of higher education that often goes undiscussed in classrooms, among peers, and among administrators.

1.1.1 Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this inquiry, the term, "racially minoritized" refers to Black and Latinx/Hispanic students (students of color) with the term referencing those racial and ethnic groups who have been historically subjugated by larger systems of oppression. I will focus solely on Black and Latinx/Hispanic students, because the culture of higher education continues to impact their success considerably (Garcia, 2019). McFarland et al. (2017) define a first-generation college student as an individual whose parents do not have education higher than a high school diploma

or equivalent. Although there are many regional variations of this definition, this one captures the essence of the first-generation identity and is used by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). First-generation college students have a fluid definition that is often molded to each institution, which, on some level, further complicates how to serve this population (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). The marker, "first generation," is often used interchangeably with "first in family" (O'Shea, 2016), but, for the purposes of this inquiry, "first-generation" will be used.

The categorization of low-income is assigned based on the taxable income of a particular family unit, which, for a family of four in the contiguous United States, is designated as a household income of $23,850 or less (US Department of Education, 2020). Pell Grant status is a proxy used by universities to indicate family income and need. The Pell Grant is awarded based on financial need, which is comprised of an assessment based on income, assets, and family size to name a few of the variables (Rosinger & Ford, 2019). Although not always accurately reflective of income, Pell Grant receipt is a primary indicator of low-income status due to the accessibility of federal data (Delisle, 2017).

Similar to first-generation, low-income is not a static term. Income can often be used interchangeably with social class when it is truly all encompassing of economic background, values, and a set of assumptions (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). This fluid language shows the evolution of this population and the need for universities to remain current with the transitional needs of low-income students. For the purpose of this inquiry, the terms, "low-income" and "Pell eligible," will be used interchangeably.

Although the terms, first-generation, low-income, and students of color are not interchangeable and not always mutually exclusive, these identities are often intertwined. The vast

majority of literature related to first-generation, low-income, and students of color focuses on concepts such as "difficult transitional phases" and the "inability to persist" as barriers to the successful completion of college for these students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Transition and persistence are merely two symptoms of the larger problem. The larger problem is that minoritized students demanded access to postsecondary education, but the culture of higher education is historically oppressive and exists to indoctrinate whiteness (Garcia, 2019). Subsequently, the transition and campus experiences of minoritized students are riddled with hostility and isolation that ultimately affect students' academic completion and social success (McBrayer & Adams, 2020). The hurdles first-generation, low-income students of color must overcome include a curriculum centered around whiteness, predominantly white classrooms, whiteness as the standard for campus culture, and the affinity for white voices (Cabrera, 2019; Garcia, 2019; Gusa, 2010).

1.2 **Problem of Practice**

The First-Year Programs curriculum within the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences (Dietrich School) at the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt) invalidates first-generation, low-income students of color who are first-year students as there is no content that addresses their experiences nor opportunities for all students to discuss the role of identity or systems of oppression in their real time college experience. As the Director of First-Year Programs at Pitt, I have the opportunity to craft and assess the content that is covered by instructors through the credit-bearing academic foundations course called Academic Foundations that we craft to assist first-year students with their transition. We offer four different categorizations of Academic Foundations. FP0001 is

Academic Foundations, the sole primary course that holds the largest percentage of first-year students. FP0002 is Academic Foundations in a themed community with two other courses. FP0003 is Academic Foundations with an English seminar and composition focus, and FP0004 is Academic Foundations for BRIDGES who are primarily students of color with intersecting identities and are scholarship recipients. In fall 2021, we facilitated 105 sections of FP0001, FP0002, FP0003, and FP0004 Academic Foundations. The creation of the content and sample syllabus are sanctioned by me but created in consultation with numerous stakeholders, most notably the First-Year Programs team, which I supervise in my role.

Throughout my onboarding into this role, it was shared numerous times that the current curriculum was in desperate need of change as it had not significantly been assessed or changed for over 15 years. While there are many foundational items in the curriculum worth keeping, there is a need for revitalization and an infusion of social justice content to match modern student demographics and to reflect the larger sociopolitical climate. This antiquated curriculum does not adequately address or allow space for instructors to address identity, systems of oppression, cultural difference, or anything similar that would encourage students to holistically engage with the course and draw societal correlations to their experience. The Dietrich School does not have a first-year seminar curriculum that embodies cultural competency, social justice, or antiracism, and it is not inclusive of the needs of minoritized students, specifically first-generation, low income students of color. I aim to change this to assist with the transition and persistence of this population and because diversity, equity, and inclusion appear to be top priorities for the senior level administration. This priority is reflected in the 2025 strategic plan for the university and the new initiatives that are backed by university funding (e.g., Pitt Success Pell Match program).

As I learned about the antiquated curriculum within first-year programs, I was reminded of my experience as a low-income, first-generation student of color at a small, predominantly white institution. The classroom experience was most triggering for me as I would experience microaggressions and alienation but did not have the resources, support, or understanding to make sense of what I was feeling. The students within the Dietrich School deserve better, and, as the university desires to recruit more diverse student populations, we must prepare our infrastructure to help these students thrive holistically and cultivate culturally responsive citizens. The charge to redo the curriculum was made immediately clear by my supervisor and the associate dean. This new charge aligns with my passion to create inclusive spaces for our most vulnerable students and reduce barriers to graduation. I am excited and hopeful that I can leverage my position, my lived experiences, and the data from this inquiry to create the inclusive academic foundations course needed to help these students through to graduation.

1.2.1 Pedagogy

Academic Foundations courses are instructed by faculty, staff, and undergraduate teaching assistants (UTAs) throughout the university. There are no documented guidelines presented to instructors on how to manage each course pedagogically. Historically, academic foundations instructors have had access to a bank of resources that they can use or introduce to their students to build out their syllabus and ultimately craft the twelve weeks. While there have been orientations for instructors, they did not include content or resources related to pedagogy. In addition to an antiquated curriculum, I would also say the training is antiquated and a new curriculum may necessitate a reformatted training. The current teacher-centered approach that reinforces rote

memorization is no longer serving students nor preparing them to dissect complex and anomalous problems (Macdonald & Hursch, 2006).

1.3 **Purpose of the Inquiry**

The purpose of this inquiry was to design a new curriculum within Academic Foundations that uplifts the experiences of minoritized students and gives privileged students the opportunity to discuss systems of oppression through a social justice lens. This redesign was guided by the following inquiry questions: a) What are the experiences of first-generation, low-income students of color in the first-year experience course at Pitt? and b) What is the process of syllabus recreation with a focus on social justice? I believed it was important to craft courses and syllabi that validated the experiences of this population, decentered whiteness, deconstructed classism, and demystified college status (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Perna, 2015). A new social justice curriculum is one way to create a more inclusive and equitable academic space for first-generation, low-income college students of color in the Dietrich School. Higher education is still working to identify the most effective practices and interventions to engage and retain first-generation, low-income students of color (Conley & Hamlin, 2009). Concurrently, the Dietrich School was also striving to craft better practices and interventions that serve students, and I posited that the most immediate need was a new curriculum for first-year students in Academic Foundations with a social justice focus.

The curriculum of Academic Foundations should be the entry point for all first-year students to discuss systems of oppression and the impact on them and their peers, but historically it has not been. Social justice education is most effective and comprehended when instituted early for students (Adams & Love, 2009; Kuh, 2014). Furthermore, it is appropriate in this first-year

course because social justice education at its core includes attention to the micro levels of peer relationships and the macro level of institutional and systemic policy (Adams & Love, 2009). The purpose of this inquiry, therefore, was to create a curriculum that encouraged critical inquiry and discussion about the root causes of these barriers: racism, classism, and a cultural expectation that assume intimate knowledge of higher education.

Intervention for this problem was critical to the university. I imagined tailored curricula with a social justice lens would act as an improved retention tool but, specifically for my purposes, a persistence tool. The first-year programs seminar was one of the first high impact practices that students encounter at the University and within the School. Each school at Pitt has their own variation of first-year programs, but first-year programs within the Dietrich School are often looked at as the benchmark given that it admitted the largest first-year class.

1.4 **Context for the Problem**

The University of Pittsburgh is a large public research university comprised of five satellite campuses and the flagship campus in the Oakland neighborhood of Pittsburgh, PA. Although it is a large university with roughly 30,000 students, university leadership aim to create more intimate academic experiences for students within the five undergraduate degree conferring schools and the nine professional schools. As of fall 2021, the estimated cost of attendance for an in-state residential student in the Dietrich School is $32,182 and $47,214 for an out-of-state residential student (Institutional Fact Book, 2021). The strategic plan for the university and the Dietrich School aimed to recruit, matriculate, and graduate greater percentages of historically minoritized students, specifically students of color, low-income, and first-generation college students. While

the goals of the university are noble and ambitious, we, as a School, must make changes to ensure the social, academic, emotional and financial success of these student populations. There has been attention given to access programs and funding to build capacity for university-affiliated members, but we must continue to build on this momentum. The Dietrich School speaks proudly about interdisciplinary pedagogy and graduating scholars who are prepared to engage in global work. This indelible commitment coupled with the encouragement that all first-year students participate in an Academic Foundations course made the Dietrich School ripe for content that elevates and centers first-generation, low-income students of color.

Chancellor Gallagher, a key stakeholder, has emphasized to the community that the 2025 strategic plan for Pitt will address issues of race and equity and emphasize accountability. Per a mandate by the Chancellor, first-year students were automatically enrolled in Anti-black Racism: History, Ideology and Resistance (Pitt 0210) in fall 2020, which in many ways acted as the precursor to the first-year seminar offered by my office. This course had to be completed before students could enroll in courses. The creation of Pitt 0210 shows progress, but I do not have access to the data to explicitly state its overall effectiveness or outcomes. The mandate for this course was lifted and changed to "strongly encouraged" for fall 2021 and fall 2022.

The incoming first-year class in Dietrich is typically around 3,000 students. Academic first-year programs, of which I have oversight, includes roughly 107 Academic Foundations courses, which is the official name for the seminar. In a pre-pandemic year, there were roughly 19-25 first-year students per section with credit-bearing content areas that range from sustainability to the ethics of science to dissecting Pittsburgh. These courses are also some of the smallest students will take as many students enroll in large lectures and recitations while these courses are intentionally intimate. Once a student submits a financial deposit to Pitt to confirm

their admission, they are eligible to select a first-year academic foundations course that complements their academic program and their interests. The content is designed by my office based on national data and research related to the first-year experience. The courses are facilitated by paid faculty and staff throughout the university. The chancellor, provost, and dean care greatly about first-year programs, because this is a primary retention tool (Fuentes et al., 2020).

1.4.1 Stakeholders

Stakeholders take on many forms and must be tapped into strategically and consistently to implement change. First-generation, low-income students of color are the most important stakeholders in this problem as they are the direct recipients. The redesign of this curriculum was to better serve our most vulnerable populations and create communities that are equitable and culturally competent. The first-year courses are open for all students to take, and the research shows that diversity and equity are beneficial to the collective (Thayer, 2000). As I work against this common norm, it is important to foster an academic space where we discuss real world trials and utilize critical thinking skills to address matters of privilege, discrimination, and marginality that they will undoubtedly face (Conley & Hamlin, 2009).

Advisors are the primary vehicle by which students, especially new students, navigate the university. When changes are made to the curriculum or enrollment requirements, they are communicated to the students from the advisors. On a more granular level, many advisors have taught sections of academic foundations first-year courses and can identify gaps in the first-year curriculum/experience that could assist in the curriculum redesign. They will also need to be comfortable and informed to speak about the new curriculum to incoming Dietrich students and field their questions.

I report to the Senior Executive Director but also have this dotted line to the Associate Dean, who works closely with all the directors within Dietrich Undergraduate Studies. Upper-level and mid-level management are invested in a curriculum change, because students are demanding more of universities including creating significant space for conversations around identity, oppression, and privilege. If students do not think that a university is helping them learn how to exist in and navigate our evolving diverse society, they may take their dollars elsewhere, which will be felt by the universities and the schools therein. The associate dean and senior executive director have institutional knowledge needed to execute a successful curriculum design and to help me build social capital. Both individuals sit on the dean's council, and the associate dean also serves on the provost's advisory council. Both individuals desired a more robust and modern first-year programs curriculum that aligned with the university's vision. There is no implementing a new curriculum without the buy-in of these two individuals, and, luckily, I have had their support since day one. I plan to leverage their connections, because I fully understand that a curriculum that centers student needs and is backed by administration has a greater chance at a positive reception and success (Coney & Hamlin, 2009).

I supervise an assistant director and a program coordinator; together we are the first-year programs team. A course rooted in social justice that reflects the demographics of incoming students is job security for the assistant director and program coordinator as programs and units that do not align with student needs are cut often and/or reorganized throughout the university. Their input, guidance, and support are crucial for several reasons. I would be remiss as a new director to not lean on their institutional knowledge, assessment overview, and reimagined thoughts for the program. We are the brain and people-power behind this redesign and must be prepared to communicate these changes across the university through every phase.

The largest hinderance in relation to access to stakeholders is the decentralized nature of the university. Another interesting yet equally cumbersome hindrance has been the campus' participation in a remote work format due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. I began my position in January 2021 amid the Covid-19 pandemic, which has greatly impacted my access and ability to connect with key stakeholders such as students and faculty. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Dietrich School allowed for alternative work arrangements in academic year 2021-2022, which include significant remote work. Due to the nature of remote work, I have not met or been in the room with many individuals connected to Academic Foundations. The few stakeholders with whom I have interacted with great frequency include my direct supervisor, the associate dean, and my team. These stakeholders are invested and in alignment with the belief that we must be more inclusive of and equitable regarding our first-generation, low-income first-year students of color. Chancellor Gallagher is also a pivotal stakeholder, but I did not have the access to engage him privately but rather relied on the correspondence he shared with the campus. As I engaged with stakeholders and began the improvement journey, I was reminded of the societal implications that have allowed for a culturally nonresponsive curriculum to persist over time. First-year courses with a social justice focus have proven to be an effective high-impact practice in that they allow students to dissect societal structures that directly impact their identity and work to build their own agency to navigate higher education (Coney & Hamlin, 2009).

1.5 **Conclusion**

The Dietrich School prides itself on providing a world-class education with a liberal arts core, so students are well equipped to engage globally, nationally, and regionally. The University

of Pittsburgh is making strides in diversifying the student body, but there is much more work to be done to help students understand the social systems that impact the transition and persistence of our minoritized student populations. I argue that one of the most significant changes needed is a social justice curriculum that educates first-year students on the systems of oppression that affect all but most notably affect the postsecondary experiences of first-generation, low-income college students of color. As the Director of First-Year Programs, I have access to key players needed to craft a social justice curriculum for first-year students. I argue that the onus is on us as a global university, as administrators and educators to concurrently uplift the experiences of minoritized students and educate our students of privilege about contemporary social justice issues.

2.0 Chapter 2

2.1 Review of Relevant Scholarship

As I work to create a curriculum for Academic Foundations that is more social justice oriented for our first-generation, low-income students of color, it is important to frame where and how this problem manifests in the current national landscape. The current curriculum for Academic Foundations needs a social justice foundation that will ultimately raise the collective consciousness of the majority and create inclusive spaces for our minoritized students. This review of scholarly knowledge introduces three pervasive themes that tie intimately to the success of my proposed intervention. The themes that I highlight within the literature include: (a) transition to college and experiences for first-generation, low-income students of color; (b) first-year seminars; and (c) social justice curriculum. While these themes paint a collective picture of the problem, the goal is of this chapter is to illuminate the inquiry questions guiding this study.

2.2 Transition to College for First-Generation, Low-Income Students of Color

The number of first-generation college students has grown considerably and is projected to steadily grow moving forward (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Roughly, 40% of annual incoming college first-year students would be the first in their family to earn a bachelor's degree (Davis, 2012). Upon entering post-secondary education, "first-generation college students face anxiety and difficulty (as do many college students) in addition to substantial cultural, social, and

academic transitions" (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 280). First-generation college students are more inclined to experience a "culture shock" upon transitioning to college, which has often led to the demand for safe spaces to process these complex feelings (Adams & McBrayer, 2020). First-generation college students cannot readily turn to family members who understand the magnitude of this transition, and this bleeds into how comfortable they feel with the resources of a university (Stuber, 2011). When faced with obstacles and questions, students who are not first-generation often turn to family members to assist with questions related to transitioning to college (Adams & McBrayer, 2020).

The transition to college for low-income students is inherently tied to finances. Low-income students feel most secure and connected to the university when their needs have been met through substantive aid in the form of scholarships and grants (Means & Pyne, 2017). This aid is paramount as low-income students often must reconcile or negotiate how to fully participate socially and academically on campus with limited financial means (Kezar & Kitchen, 2020). This transition to college for low-income students can feel uniquely isolating, because they are wrestling with the fact that their unmet financial need is typically three times higher than that of their middle/upper-income peers (King, 2002).

The transition for students of color often involves more difficulties than that of white students (Hurtado et al., 2007; Locks et al., 2008). The difficulty is rooted in students of color having to adjust to a new culture rooted in whiteness (Cabrera, 2019; Hurtado et al., 2017). Students of color themselves have shared that when embarking on this new transition, racial/ethnic identity and community involvement are key, which affirms that social connections in a first-year seminar matter greatly (Hurtado et al., 2007; Locks et al, 2008). Hurtado and Carter (1997) facilitated a study where their findings stated that students' connectedness to the campus was

measured by how much they were a part of that given community. Although dated, the findings of this study remain true today and were a catalyst for more research on the transitional needs of minoritized students (Hurtado et al., 2007).

The literature also underscores that students of color need connection and asserts that those without a sense of connection to a larger group or community will likely experience increased stress and emotional distress (Pittman & Richmond, 2008), which could lead to greater departure from the institution (Munoz, 2011). This larger connection to the campus and community is often referred to as sense of belonging (Duranczyk et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2008). Sense of belonging is an integral concept in looking at first-year students because it often measures how connected and loyal a student is to that given institution therefore surmising how likely they are to be retained (Strayhorn, 2008). This connection to a larger community is immensely important during college especially in that first year when students of color are seeking normalcy (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Starting college is stressful while a lack of community adds stress that could greatly affect the transition of first-generation, low-income students of color.

An often-forgotten part of this transition and transformation is the presence of community. Researchers posit that validation is integral to the transition process, and this happens when students feel they are welcome and valued in this new context (Locks et al., 2008; Rendon & Munoz, 2011; Terenzini et al., 1994). Rendon and Munoz (2011) remind us that faculty, staff and peers are key to cultivating a welcoming atmosphere of validation for this population of students. They elaborate to say the identities of these students should be validated in the classroom and their experiences and accumulated life knowledge should be represented in the curriculum (Rendon & Munoz, 2011).

The literature that addresses the intersections of first-generation, low-income students of color is limited but continues to evolve to address the intersectional needs of this population. Scholars have noted for certain that the transition to campus has different social, emotional, and financial implications for first-generation, low-income students of color as compared to their counterparts (O'Shea, 2016). These implications are far more extensive than the research has yet to acknowledge and manifest in a multitude of ways. First-generation, low-income students of color often do not have the same professional and personal networks to draw upon (O'Shea, 2016). Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2007) stated that first-generation, low-income students of color perceive a distance from faculty at the onset of college, which drastically affects how they interact with them moving forward.

To assuage some of these anxieties, first-generation, low-income students of color must see themselves reflected and incorporated into the fabric of the university. This reflection can be in faculty and staff with shared identities as the students and content that highlights their lived experiences (Dulabaum, 2016). It has been proven that early meaningful connection with faculty and staff throughout the six-week initial transitional period helps to strengthen student connection to the campus overall (Yosso, 2005). The process of transitioning to college is a mental, physical, emotional, financial, and spiritual undertaking. First-generation, low-income college students of color often report a sense of perplexity associated with the transition of college attributed to the preliminary institutional processes involving class enrollment, financial aid, and time management (O'Shea, 2016).

2.2.1 College Campus Experience for First-Generation, Low-Income Students of Color

On campus, first-generation college students report feeling marginalized due to being academically ill-equipped (Adams & McBrayer, 2020). Unfortunately, this marginalization extends into the social sphere as well. First-generation college students have also reported a disconnect that has been coined as a "mismatch" due to balancing their home culture and the new overwhelming culture of college (Adams & McBrayer, 2020, p. 734). The home culture plays an integral role in the lived experiences of first-generation college students and is not left at the door once they begin college.

Low-income students experience the college campus in a very different manner and have needs that differ from higher income students. Even though they are students, the campus can be foreign to them at times, because they are juggling numerous priorities, including the need to work, that may curtail their full involvement in academic and extracurricular activities (Soria et al., 2013). Low-income students must balance the cost of college but also balance the assumption that they can afford the hidden costs of college that are often folded into academia and high-impact practices (e.g., textbooks and materials, study abroad, and application fees) (Means & Pyne, 2017). Conversely, research found a positive correlation between students from a higher socioeconomic status and their academic and social integration (King, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Perna, 2015). The desire for financial stability is in pursuit of normalcy as overt and covert forms of racism and classism can be found in the academic classrooms as well as in their interpersonal relationships (Means & Pyne, 2017).

At predominantly white institutions, students of color report experiencing overt and covert forms of racism from their peers, faculty, and within the enactment of policy (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Means & Pyne, 2017; Yosso, 2005). Racism and the tension therein stem from the fact that students

of color, especially Black students, are expected to assimilate into white-centered campus environments (Means & Pyne, 2017). Support for students of color in dealing with this culture often comes from affinity-based student groups, faculty of color, and cultural centers (Patton, 2006). Although extremely essential, these centers and student spaces are simply not enough to combat a hostile and unwelcoming environment (Means & Pyne, 2017; Turner, 1994). Undoubtedly, racial identity heavily influences how students of color transition to and navigate a college campus (Adams & McBrayer, 2020). Students of color have also felt insidious beliefs by the institution that they will not be successful (Adams & McBrayer, 2020).

In addition to struggling with the logistical processes of beginning college, students reported struggling academically as well. Many minoritized students felt ill-equipped for college level rigor as it relates to writing, study skills, computer literacy, and time management (Dulabaum, 2016). Unfortunately, universities continue to burden and alienate this population as students are often left to navigate this new institution and processes on their own (Buck, 2001). The idea of students of color as guests is recurring in the literature and attributes extensively to the hardships of this population (Means & Pyne, 2017; Patton, 2016; Turner, 1994). They are guests in the homes of white folks, which is a telling metaphor to describe their experience of higher education. Turner (1994) asserted that a "level of comfort on campus is integral to the academic success of students of color" (p. 356). Students of color are not afforded the same grace or opportunity to relax and focus solely on coursework (Turner, 1994). The research is clear and asserts academic preparation and fulfillment can and often does look very different by race (Patton, 2016).

Buck (2001) elaborated to say that a student of color who is low-income and from a first-generation background has a compounded experience that often feels like they are negotiating

between two worlds. One world is the culture and community that they come from and where their identities form, and the other is academia, which inherently aligns with whiteness, capitalism, and privilege (Yosso, 2005). Although campuses are attracting more diverse student populations, a large disconnect persists. Often this disconnect is a superficially diverse and inclusive culture that attracted the students but was not prepared to retain them through to graduation (Duranczyk et al., 2014). Overwhelmingly, the research shows the transition and overall campus experience for first-generation, low-income students of color is drastically different and more arduous than their majority counterparts (Sarcedo et al., 2015). Perhaps the most poignant and insidious of these differences is the pervasive undertone of estrangement. Specifically, the greatest implication that universities must work against is the covert, pervasive, and ill-informed microaggression that first-generation, low-income college students of color do not belong in college (Sarcedo et al., 2015).

One of the other points to consider as these students aim to integrate into this new world is that college is not their sole priority. For example, first-generation, low-income students of color are continually thinking about the finances associated with the campus experience that prevent full immersion into this new world. If there are finances outstanding, it is not uncommon for a sense of anxiety and distance to remain for these students. Low-income students, many of whom identify as students of color and first-generation, are far more likely to be enrolled in extra, often remedial classes and work a job (Bohanon, 2018). This does not leave much leisure time to socialize with other students or to fully maximize the programming on campus.

2.3 **First-Year Seminars**

First-year seminars are a creative, high-impact practice that often facilitate capacity building and social networking to produce a positive change in first-year students (AACU, 2017). The content, approach, and outcomes have changed over time, but the first ever reported first-year seminar was in 1882 at a small institution in Kentucky (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). First-year seminars today look very different than in 1882 in terms of students enrolled as Black and Latinx/Hispanic students are enrolling in them in higher numbers as they enter higher education where they historically catered to white students (Cook & Cordova, 2007). In the 1880s, Boston University was the first institution to introduce first-year seminars as a vehicle to integrate first-year students (Gordon, 1989). At this time, education was only afforded to white men, many from a lineage of slave traders, to hoard resources, power, and prestige (Patton, 2016). In the 1880s and well into the 1900s, whiteness was the norm concretized in a myriad of ways but most notably in education. After Boston University, many other universities crafted and administered first-year seminars for their students (Tobolowsky, 2008). First-year seminars became the primary vehicle for colleges and universities to cement whiteness in the curriculum and orient students early to this ideology. After a brief hiatus, there was a resurgence of first-year seminars on college campuses in the 1980s (Tobolowsky, 2008). At the time of this resurgence, the primary goals of these seminars were to offer formal support for the rigor of higher education and assist students with the logistical and formal processes associated with higher education (Tobowlosky, 2008). Largely, these goals have remained the same throughout the years although student demographics have changed.

An in-depth national analysis conducted by Tobolowsky (2008) found numerous overlapping characteristics of first-year seminars at public universities. Public universities were

far more likely to have first-year seminars as optional, separate sections for underserved students and small class sizes (Tobolowsky, 2008). In this same national study, critical thinking, study skills, time management, academic advising, and campus resources were the most prominent themes among first-year seminars at public and private universities with mild variation (Tobolowsky, 2008). These themes are spot on as this course was initially created as a retention tool meant to cultivate academic skill and build confidence (Guarneri & Connolly, 2019). Most universities across the nation have some variation of this high-impact practice because of its effectiveness and ability to mold to each university's specific focus. Guarneri and Connolly (2019) estimated that roughly 80% of college and universities offer a first-year course.

2.3.1 Efficacy of First-Year Seminars

Barefoot and Sadler (1994) state:

> freshman seminars, in order to be most effective as tools for enhanced student success, need to be designed to bring about a sense of community, student involvement, and social interaction between all participants about academic topics and other issues of concern to students. (p.14)

I argue the greatest current topic of concern for students and universities is social justice. Barefoot and Sadler (1994) conducted a study of 723 institutions that indicated they offer some variation of a first-year seminar. They highlighted the work of Union College as innovative, unique, and a sincere desire for change. In 1994, Union College, like a few other campuses in the study, reconceptualized their course readings to include materials that "(a) are believed by faculty and students to be enjoyable, (b) are thought provoking and stimulate class discussion, (c) are well-written, and (d) expose students to a variety of cultural perspectives" (Barefoot & Sadler, 1994, p.

61). In 1994, this was a groundbreaking decision, but it has now become the standard for modern first-year seminars across all university types that wish to be effective and relevant.

Pittman and Richmond (2008) expanded on these transitions to include changes in living and academic environment and new friendship circles all while adjusting to new independence and responsibility. First-year seminars like Academic Foundations are intended to serve as a bridge for first-year students to all the resources of the university that can assist them in their college journey. Tinto's (2010) research asserts that first-year seminars encourage engagement, because they serve as educational spaces that maintain an even playing field where all students can be actively involved. Active and collaborative learning (Kuh et al., 2006) and instructors challenging students to think critically about the world and their identity (Kuh, 2009) are two pedagogical tools that have proven to encourage first-year students to engage more deeply with the university. These seminars are a high impact practice that aid in persistence and can be found at over 94% of college and universities (Porter & Swing, 2006).

2.3.2 Pedagogy in First Year Seminars

The content, format and pedagogy of first year seminars are all evenly instrumental. The pedagogy within modern day first year seminars debunk the banking system of education and lean more towards active learning (Freire, 1993; Fuentes et. al, 2020). The pedagogical lecture approach of conventional courses makes assumptions about the knowledge and skillsets students enter college with which often does not align with the knowledge and skillset of minoritized students (Lang, 2016; Fuentes et.al., 2020). Active learning involves working together in small groups and an emphasis on discussion (Johnson & Johnson, 2008). Effective pedagogy assists students in developing their critical thinking skills, exploratory writing and communication (Permzadian &

Credé, 2016). Macdonald and Hursch (2006) elaborate and say that student-centered pedagogy should encourage thought-provoking activities, critical dialogues, and problem-solving skills and collaboration.

2.3.3 First-Year Seminars with Social Justice Focus

This increase in student diversity precipitated a need for more conversations related to diversity and difference. First-year seminars were the initial homes for these conversations as they are inherently flexible and adaptable to meet the evolving needs and trends in enrollment (Gahagan, 2002). There are numerous opportunities within first-year seminars that allow students to debunk societal norms and participate in a social justice curriculum. Although a technological shift has diminished a sense of social responsibility, the future of democracy relies on socially engaged citizenry and individuals working to de-privilege institutions (Conley & Hamlin, 2009). As noted by Conley and Hamlin (2009), "The primary goal of a social justice-oriented curriculum is to confront and destabilize students' initial views of power, privilege and difference" (p. 47). The growing diversity on college campuses mirrors the national landscape and demands we build on these topics that are already being discussed at home, with friends, and in K-12 grade levels.

First-year programs with a social justice lens build agency in students as they reanalyze themselves in relation to powerful social concepts such as privilege, power, and difference (Conley & Hamlin, 2009). These critical conversations give minoritized students the words, understanding, and outlet to discuss many of the complex situations that will be occurring in real time on campus. While some of these social concepts may be new for the majority, first-generation, low-income students of color are intimately familiar with these real-world challenges, and, therefore, they must

be deeply and authentically engaged for success to occur (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Jones et al., 2005).

2.4 **Social Justice Education for Students in Dominant Groups**

In addition to gaining knowledge about contemporary social justice issues, white students should have the space to interrogate what it means to be white and hold other privileged identities (Applebaum, 2005). White students are often told and internalize the beliefs of social responsibility and meritocracy that completely absolve them and the systems of oppression from wrongdoing (Applebaum, 2005; Patton 2016). These beliefs are riddled with racist and classist undertones that allow white students to blame the "deficiencies" of their first-generation, low-income, racially minoritized peers rather than larger institutional policy from which they benefit (Patton, 2016). A course rooted in social justice may allow students to collectively reflect on identity, process the content through questions, and study the impact of these systems on their peers.

It is not uncommon to hear white students state that they are color-neutral in an effort to appear inclusive and relatable, but they lack the understanding that these very concepts are the pillars of white privilege and white supremacy (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Color-neutral racism builds on the work of Edward Bonilla (2003) around colorblind racism but has expanded to evade ableist language (Garcia et al., 2020). Social justice discourse completely debunks color-neutrality and demands we critically examine race, class, and privilege to understand how it manifests historically throughout social institutions (Applebaum, 2005). Additionally, social justice education will force white students to interrogate the ease they feel within postsecondary education given that 79% of faculty members are white and most curricula is Eurocentric (Patton, 2016). The failure of

academia to push white students "to examine their racist biases and racist attitudes results in racist college graduates" who become further immersed in white supremacy as they venture into the professional world (Patton, 2016, p. 324). Gusa (2010) asserts that when white cultural ideology goes unchallenged to be embedded in language, cultural practices, traditions, and perceptions of knowledge this allows the university to remain racialized. The failure to denounce and dissect the insidious nature of white ideology curates racialized spaces that diminish, marginalize, and encumber the full participation of Black students (Gusa, 2010). Administrators must understand that these narratives reflect a deep historical legacy of upholding whiteness in higher education that is well documented (Garcia, 2019; Gusa, 2010). In other words, the call to disrupt whiteness in the curriculum and teaching faculty is loud and necessary (Adams & McBrayer, 2020; Patton, 2016).

Classrooms often mirror the institutional and societal dynamics on a smaller scale (Stephens et al., 2012). Students with dominant identities likely have never had to investigate their role in the systems of oppression and without social justice education this can likely continue throughout their college journey (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). The foundational belief of social justice education is that students must learn to interrogate their identities in a socially just learning environment that challenges them to disrupt systems of power (Adams & Love, 2009; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Listening and discussion are crucial to social justice education. The active listening and dialogues allow for "constructive engagement and the interrogation of positionality" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 166).

2.5 **Conclusion**

If a deficit narrative around first-generation, low-income students of color continues to saturate academia, we will continue to see overt and covert forms of inequity that further prevent the overall successful transition and college campus integration. The narrative around first-generation, low-income college students of color and early departure is often attributed to a lack of resources rather than a history of whiteness that stifles the potentiality of this population (Gusa, 2010; Yosso, 2005). Several studies exemplify why there is a pressing need to divert research, time, and resources to ensuring colleges and universities address the social concepts that create a radically different experience for minoritized students.

3.0 Chapter 3

3.1 Theory of Improvement

In order to design a new curriculum within Academic Foundations that uplifts the experiences of minoritized students and gives privileged students the opportunity to discuss systems of oppression through a social justice lens, I took a multi-step approach to this intervention (Locks et al., 2008). This approach encompassed: (1) interviews with current first-year students at Pitt who successfully completed Academic Foundations in fall 2022 and (2) interviews with instructors who have taught diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and social justice first-year courses. These data will culminate in the recreation of a new syllabus for FP0001, FP0002, FP0003, FP0004: Academic Foundations for the fall 2022 semester. The intervention was to design a new syllabus that is social justice focused and informed by the findings from this inquiry.

The current syllabus for the course has never had a focus on social justice. The new syllabus will incorporate more activities based on self-identity, dialogue that centers lived experience, and objectives around social justice (Fuentes et al., 2020). The syllabus is a key document that lives inside a 100+ page manual that we distribute to all our instructors. We will build out a social justice curriculum that will live in the new syllabus that instructors will then utilize and bring to life in their classrooms. The creation of this syllabus will be a collective effort developed within the Department of First-Year Programs, informed by the data from student and instructor participants, and will align with the mission and vision of the university.

Ninety-two percent of Pitt students who participate in one of our Academic Foundations courses persist to the following fall (Dietrich School data team). In fall 2019, there were 2,837 first

year students enrolled with 1,326 (47%) identified as first-generation students, 1,972 (69%) as low-income and/or Pell eligible, 683 (24%) identified as Black or African American students, and 680 (24%) as Latinx/Hispanic students. The Dietrich School has an overall 93% retention rate, and the first-year persistence rate was 92% for fall 2019 although I am sure there would be significant variation if I disaggregated out the data by identity groups. The six-year graduation rate was 85% for the university and also the six-year graduation rate for white students. The graduation rate of Black (Non-Hispanic) students is 65% and the rate of Hispanic students was 76%. I did have the graduation data from the data team for Pell eligible and first-generation college students at the time of the study. White students clearly were coming to Pitt and graduating at the highest rate while there was a significant gap in the percentages for Black and Latino students.

However, we needed to gain a better sense of how this course helped or did not help first-generation, low-income students of color as they moved through their academic journey to ensure we were crafting the inclusive environment that we claim in the Dietrich School. The Dietrich School has a strategic plan and mission that states we graduate intellectual and transformative leaders. Global scholars and intellectual leaders must understand the impact of social systems, equity, privilege, and oppression (Patton, 2016). Patton (2016) reminds us that so many leaders have entered postsecondary education and graduated without discourse of race and racism is a failure of the college system that will manifest in their professional roles. Academic Foundations is intended to introduce resources early in an intimate setting to alleviate some of the complexities of starting college.

3.1.1 Aim Statement

By fall 2022, the first-year programs curriculum within the Dietrich School will integrate diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice dialogues, activities, and articles into 53 of the 107 courses to uplift the experiences of historically minoritized students while also helping students from privileged backgrounds understand contemporary social justice issues.

3.2 **Context for Change**

The Dietrich School is the largest undergraduate degree-granting school at the Oakland campus. The Department of First-Year Programs is housed within the Dietrich School and has had oversight over the one credit Academic Foundations course since its creation in the late 1990s. Academic Foundations has gone through many iterations with the different leadership of the Dietrich School but has existed for over 20 years in some capacity as a retention tool for the university. First-Year Programs sits within undergraduate studies and consists of a program coordinator, assistant director, and me, the director. We hire current Pitt-affiliated faculty and staff from across the schools and divisions to teach the sections of Academic Foundations. For fall 2021, we had a significant representation of instructors from the Division of Student Affairs. We have few instructors who are tenured or tenure track faculty, but the few we do have provide great insight on how this course fits within the larger university landscape. First-Year Programs creates the content of Academic Foundations based on national trends, advisement of leadership, and university assessment. Instructors have the autonomy to implement the content when and how they feel comfortable as long as they address the learning outcomes, which focus on learning the city

of Pittsburgh, the university, and the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences. Students can enroll in an Academic Foundations course in the summer prior to the start of their first term, and my office will either confirm or deny the request based on availability.

3.3 **Theory of Change**

While I cannot alter the entire culture of the university in a short timeframe, I can change the culture within First-Year Programs. As part of the process of building a curriculum rooted in social justice, it was imperative to gain insight from first-term, first-year students who are also first-generation, low-income students of color, specifically Black/African American or Latinx/Hispanic. To ensure that the changes were connected to the student experience, semi-structured interviews with first-generation, low-income students of color and local instructors who have taught a DEI/social justice undergraduate course were conducted to inform the social justice content that will be added to the curriculum. They also advised on best practices for DEI that should be added to the syllabus and offered their thoughts on the new inclusive activities that will be added.

3.3.1 Intervention

As I redesigned the syllabus for all Academic Foundations courses in pursuit of inclusion and social justice, it was important to keep in mind what denotes progress. Solorzano et al., (2000) stated that progress toward inclusion can be identified by many elements, but the two that were most applicable to my intervention were: (1) curriculum that reflects the contemporary and

historical experiences of minoritized populations and (2) programs to support the recruitment, retention, and graduation of minoritized students. When I create and disseminate the new syllabus, it will be key to ensure social justice is the common thread through all discussions, activities, and supplemental content. The research affirmed my intervention in stating that a justice-based approach and pedagogy enhances the academic and co-curricular life of first-generation, low-income students of color (Conley & Hamlin, 2009).

3.4 **Inquiry Approach**

As I worked towards a social justice-based curriculum for First-Year Programs, there were several questions that guided my inquiry grounded in an improvement science approach, which emphasizes an iterative method in which incremental change can be best for systemic change (Perry et al., 2020). The nuanced approach of improvement science is one I truly appreciated, because you can see progress along the way even if it is not always obvious within the larger system. This inquiry approach allowed me to see which parts of the intervention required more emphasis and perhaps where there was misalignment or error (Perry et al., 2020). The inquiry questions were as follows:

1. What are the experiences of first-generation, low-income students of color in the first-year experience course at Pitt?
2. What is the process of syllabus recreation with a focus on social justice?

In spring 2022, I conducted seven interviews with undergraduate students who identified as first-generation, low-income and/or students of color and five interviews with higher education professionals who had taught courses with a justice and DEI lens to undergraduate students. The

students successfully completed one of our Academic Foundations courses during their first term and planned to continue in the Dietrich School for their major. The instructors had taught and/or were currently teaching a social justice course to first-year students within higher education in Pittsburgh. These twelve interviews informed the social justice lens that will undergird our new curriculum. While it is not yet complete, this inquiry is deeply informing the next step of the intervention, which is the creation of the syllabus.

3.4.1 Data Collection

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. A qualitative approach served me in understanding what minoritized students need from our first-year course. While generalizability, reliability, and validity all arise as potential limitations from qualitative research, this approach still reigned most appropriate for my problem and for my ethos as a student-centered practitioner (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative methods account for the difference, humanity, and lived experiences of my participants, which may not always be deduced from statistics (Merriam, 2009; Shields, 2007). The interviews were an opportunity for this select cohort of students and professionals to share a portion of their experiences and background with me to help smooth the transition for future incoming cohorts of minoritized backgrounds. My goal from the student interviews was to listen, observe, and learn how their backgrounds as first-generation, low-income students of color were validated or omitted from their experience with FP0001 Academic Foundations.

My goal for the interviews with instructors was to hear about the breadth and depth of their respective courses and to hear their suggestions on implementation for this type of course within higher education. The ultimate overall goal with these interviews was to draw out similarities that

illustrated the best path forward (Kreuger, 2002). The collective repository of narratives highlighted where the current curriculum was lacking. It was key that I analyzed the data in a way that spoke accurately to the experiences of these students and instructors yet emphasized to administrators the reality of existing as a student at Pitt with various minoritized identities (Krueger, 2002).

The Dietrich data management team provided a query of first-term, first-year students who participated in our course(s) and identified in any of the categories of first-generation, low-income, Black/African American, or Latinx/Hispanic. Given that students take our course before they declare a major, I narrowed the list above to encompass the students who declared as Dietrich Arts and Sciences students. After we had a significant sample size, I invited the select students via email to partake in 30-minute virtual interviews via Zoom (Appendix A). For the instructor interviews, I utilized my network to identify potential participants as well as asked my dissertation committee for suggestions of colleagues who have taught such a course. The five instructors were then invited to partake in a 60-minute semi-structured interview via Zoom (Appendix G). Ideal participants were individuals who could provide clarity and specific examples that dissected the complexity of the case at hand (e.g., curriculum around equity and social justice) (Polkinghome, 2005). I sent out a pre-interview questionnaire to students and instructors via email (Appendix D; Appendix F).

The pre-interview surveys were created on the Qualtrics platform, because it allowed me to collect substantial data, was accessible, and had been vetted for security purposes by university IT. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured protocol (Appendix C and E). Many of the interview questions for students focused on their individualized student experience with the first-year course. Many of the questions for instructors focused on their experience facilitating a course with the DEI/social justice focus and its impact on their students. The interview protocol and

questions went through the University of Pittsburgh's Internal Review Board (IRB) process to ensure that all participants were protected. It was imperative that the interview questions were open-ended and allowed each participant to share in a conversational fashion (Perry et al., 2020). The questions acted as a guide, but the stories illuminated trends and gaps that ultimately became the data. These data were then used to vet what content was viable for use in the new curriculum and syllabus and how I advocated for social justice within Dietrich.

3.4.2 Sample

Twelve individuals (Table 1) accepted the invitation to participate. Seven of the participants were Pitt students while the remaining five were faculty and staff at local colleges and universities. All the participants identified as first-generation students/graduates, low-income, or individuals of color. The students were all in the second semester of their first year at Pitt and studying in the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences. All the instructor participants were seasoned professionals within my professional network with terminal degrees and many years in the field of higher education. Leo and Thomas were full time faculty at a private, midsize research I university in the Pittsburgh region. Monica and Jerome were both staff at Pitt, a large, public research I university. Laura was a staff administrator at a local community college. All interviews, which ranged from 30-60 minutes, occurred over the Zoom platform and were transcribed using Transcribe by Wreally. I kept the recordings, transcriptions, and coded data privately filed and confidential.

Table 1 Participant Demographic Data #1

Participant	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Affiliation	Institution	Low-Income	First Gen
Simone	Latina	Female	Student	Pitt	Yes	Yes
Jenna	Biracial/Latina	Female	Student	Pitt	-	Yes
Mike	Biracial/Latino	Male	Student	Pitt	-	-
Nikki	Latina	Female	Student	Pitt	-	Yes
John	Black	Male	Student	Pitt	-	-
Alana	Black	Female	Student	Pitt		
Mercedes	Black	Female	Student	Pitt	Yes	Yes

Table 2 Participant Demographic Data #2

Participant	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Affiliation	Institution	Low-Income	First Gen
Laura	Latina	Female	Staff	Local Community College	-	Yes
Monica	Black	Female	Staff	Pitt	-	-
Leo	White	Male	Faculty	Local private university	Yes	Yes
Thomas	Black	Male	Faculty	Local private university	-	Yes
Jerome	Black	Male	Staff	Pitt	Yes	-

3.4.3 Analysis

Merriam (2009) describes data analysis as the process of consolidating data in an effort to make meaning of the information collected**.** The clarity for this inquiry came from identifying the responses that tied back to my inquiry questions and overlapped throughout the interviews. Coding was the tool used to identify recurring themes and nuances in the interviews. The coding process is iterative and highlights themes and patterns in qualitative research on the most granular level

(Saldana, 2016). Specifically, I used a combination of open and descriptive coding, which aims to dissect the qualitative data into one summarizing word and/or brief phrase (Saldana, 2016). Saldana (2016) states that descriptive coding is the most appropriate for those who are new to coding, and I found this to be the case as well. The first iteration of open coding revealed common themes that seemed to be a thread across the interviews (Saldana, 2016). Open coding initially allowed me to really hear the depth of the narratives and account for high level similarities and divergence. The next iteration of coding allowed me to go deeper to pull out specific words and themes. To uphold neutrality, I did not begin the analysis process until all the interviews concluded. I tried to solicit more student participants but was unsuccessful due to time constraints with the study.

Semi-structured interviews allowed me to manage the collection of narratives in a seamless fashion while still giving each participant ample time and attention. One of the limitations of all of the interviews is the time that had elapsed since the class was either taken or instructed. Many of the participants could not easily recall details due to the time away from the given course. The interview narratives were transcribed and edited for accuracy against my shorthand written notes. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect their identity. I uploaded the Zoom audio files into Transcribe by Wreally, a software that manages data. This software allowed me to quickly see overlapping themes within the student responses. I housed this evolving data in Microsoft Excel. Descriptive coding helped to identify themes that assisted in answering my inquiry questions about the process to create a syllabus rooted in social justice. These themes illuminated which sections of the curriculum resonate and benefit first year students and which portions could be substituted for the social justice content.

3.5 **Epistemology and Reflexivity**

This inquiry occurred through my lens as the primary researcher and as the Director of First-Year Programs. I engaged with this problem of practice through a social constructivist lens. As a sociologist and educator, I firmly believe a substantive portion of our learning and behaviors are linked to society and the institutions therein. Social constructivism theory adds the texture and context to life's everyday experiences (Darlaston-Jones, 2007). Darlaston-Jones (2007) stated that qualitative research and social constructivist theory are beautiful complements to one another and enhance the meaning-making process. Students often do not have the language to fully express how socialization has impacted them, but with this intervention the goal was to create opportunities for them to process and understand these topics. Through a social constructivist lens, I wanted students to understand the implications of societal, cultural, and historical norms that impact individuals in a myriad of ways based on context and identity (Darlaston-Jones, 2007).

In attempting to shift academic culture starting within first-year programs, I have sought to understand the role and impact of race in our society and more specifically in our classrooms. Social constructivist theory in education challenges paradigms and theories that do not fully account for the experiences of young scholars of color striving to excel in a system not created with them in mind (Solorzano et al., 2000; Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2009) urges us to bring the experiences of our most marginalized students into the classrooms so that we can support them holistically and utilize their gifts to help them persist through to graduation. I firmly believe in Yosso's stance and want to ensure the experiences of these students are valued, reflected, and understood as we aim to build an equitable and just campus community.

I am more than a practitioner and researcher. I came to this place of practice with my own lived experiences, beliefs, biases, and values. I am a cisgender woman and first-generation college

graduate of color from a low-income community in New York City. While my identity fuels me to do this work and enact this change, it is also important to remain objective and understand that my college experience was a singular experience. There is a rich diversity within the cohorts I have identified and that should be encouraged to surface organically in my methods and analysis. The onus is on me to ensure objective and ethical behavior in pursuit of cultural change. Darlaston-Jones' (2007) beautiful constructivist summary repeats consistently in my head reminding me that "the 'same' students sitting in the same classroom for the same lessons does not make their experience of university identical" (p. 21).

As a researcher and a university staff member, there were many things I had to consider as I gathered and analyzed data. It is important to note that my professional role may have been a potential barrier to receiving critical feedback from students and colleagues. This specifically was addressed verbally at the start of the interviews and in writing, but it still may have impacted the degree to which participants provided viable and honest feedback. To best recall the stories, I recorded the sessions and listened to the conversations in whole and in isolated parts to ascertain meaning.

3.6 **Conclusion**

As I work to craft this curriculum rooted in social justice, I reflect often on my positionality as a first-generation college graduate of color from a low-income neighborhood in New York City. While I cannot generalize from my experience, this sense of awareness propels me to craft academic space where both our minoritized and majority students can engage early in critical dialogue about the current systems of oppression. Through my role as a researcher, I was

committed to answering two questions: (1) What are first-generation, low-income students of color experiencing in this course? and (2) What is needed to create a syllabus for Academic Foundations reflective of a social justice curriculum? My primary data collection method was interviews with current first-year students who completed FP0001: Academic Foundations and instructors who have taught first-year courses with a DEI/social justice focus. These interviews yielded insight and themes to inform the development of a new syllabus with a social justice focus.

4.0 Chapter 4

4.1 Findings

With this inquiry, I set out to design a new curriculum within Academic Foundations that uplifts the experiences of minoritized students and gives privileged students the opportunity to discuss systems of oppression through a social justice lens. I was hopeful that these data would support the development of a new first-year seminar syllabus with a focus on social justice and equity. I also explored how educators who currently teach first-year experience courses that have a social justice and equity focus described the development of their courses. In this chapter, I discuss the findings from 12 interviews with students and educators. The narratives revealed three prominent themes including: (1) resources embedded in the curriculum promote early exposure; (2) racial representation matters; and (3) the role of pedagogy in a first-year seminar with a social justice focus is critical.

4.2 Resources Embedded in the Curriculum Promote Early Exposure

First-year students are often overwhelmed when navigating their first semester, but participants suggested that when resources are embedded into the Academic Foundations curriculum it promotes early exposure. When speaking with students about the resources that assisted in their transition to campus and the larger city, Simone, a first-generation Latina, stated, "I was a little scared of Pittsburgh, but the 'Exploring Pittsburgh' activity introduced me to new

places that I could enjoy." The "Exploring Pittsburgh" activity is a required component of Academic Foundations in which students are broken up into small groups and asked to spend time in one of the neighboring communities to the university. Several students positively referenced the Exploring Pittsburgh activity. Mike, a biracial/Latino man, stated, "This may be odd to say, but it [Exploring Pittsburgh activity] was a nice opportunity to use Port Authority buses and now I visit Squirrel Hill about every two weeks just to get away from campus." He also said, "I think it's such an important activity, because even if you do not necessarily care for the community you can form relationships with the other people in your group."

Mercedes, a first-generation young black woman, shared, "I didn't know Pittsburgh had so many cool neighborhoods and all the things you could do in them" in reference to the Exploring Pittsburgh activity. Later in the conversation, Mercedes also stated, "We had someone from financial aid come to class, which was helpful because I'm not financially literate and neither are my parents." Alana, a first-generation, young black woman referenced a visit her class took to the Career Center in the William Pitt Union when she said, "That visit was super helpful because now I know where to go for help with jobs and resumes."

Simone also appreciated the extensive time dedicated to exposing students to resources throughout the course. She stated that Academic Foundations was an opportunity to soak up as many resources as possible and use them as needed throughout her time. She shared her thoughts on a specific resource:

> No one in my family went to college, so I was a little nervous. I was nervous about resources like where to study and how to study. We did a library activity that actually helped a lot because I didn't want to go alone at first, but I actually go a lot now, so it helped me.

Mercedes was excited to learn more about the comprehensive academic offerings of the Dietrich School through her Academic Foundations course. She expressed, "I loved learning about the majors, minors and certificates in the Dietrich School from my instructor because I was set on studying OT [occupational therapy] but now I'm looking into adding additional majors."

Jenna, a first-generation Latina, expressed gratitude for all the resources the course provided that in her words, "may be basic for others." Jenna went on to share:

> In my head, fraternities, sororities, internships, etc. were all things I had no idea of and only saw in the movies, but now that I am here, I realize these are for me too. I want to apply to these now and I never thought I would have….The vision I had of college was from the movies, so I wasn't fully sure of what all is available to me and/or what I should be doing to set myself up for success.

The faculty and staff also spoke about the importance of embedding resources in this type of course. Laura, a Latina diversity practitioner within higher education, stated that she used the curriculum content in her own program as a vehicle to promote exposure and build a sense of agency with students in the summer bridge program she crafted and facilitated for her former university. Laura said:

> The goal was to create a ready-made college student in a limited time and provide them the ABC's to college. What a non-first-generation college student may come into college knowing became the foundation for our course. For example, academic writing was fundamental in the class. They had to prepare a final paper that was academic in nature and could be used for future courses or applications.

Laura proudly shared the outcome of this summer bridge program which affirmed for her that the content fostered student agency, introduced to new resources early, and ultimately

contributed to their success. Laura gleefully shared, “The program began with 19 students and after the first semester 15 persisted. I am proud to share that eleven of these students are graduating this semester [spring 2022].” This theme reinforced that early exposure to resources is important for first-generation, low-income students of color.

4.3 **Racial Representation Matters**

There has been longstanding demand for greater representation of people of color on college campuses. In the wake of the Civil Rights movement, Black students used their voice and demanded representation that included Black professors, Black affinity spaces, and academic programs that teach Black history (Harper, 2013). Although, the initial Civil Rights movement was decades ago, the demand for greater representation in many forms persists and this was evident throughout conversations with the students. Notably, students mentioned the importance of compositional diversity within the faculty and among their peers. They also stressed the need for diverse academic content that centers and uplifts the experiences of people of color.

4.3.1 Racial Representation within Faculty Matters

John, a Black man, said with conviction, “Seeing people who look like me and have probably experienced similar things to me makes me feel more at ease.” John spoke extensively about navigating the campus and his courses as a Black man. Our conversation was very rich and raw with John sharing, “Going into my classes and seeing no Black people feels a little awkward.” There was only one student participant who had an Academic Foundations instructor who was not

white. Mercedes, who had the non-white instructor, shared, "I liked in my class that we did not shy away from discussing race. We are at a PWI after all, and I liked that my instructor shared resources for attending a PWI." John was one of the students who had a white instructor and, although he would have liked an instructor of color, he did not have that expectation, because he stated he only had one teacher throughout his entire life who was not white. Mike also had a white instructor, and he suggested hiring more instructors of color. He conceded by saying, "If they are not of color, they at least need to be open to discussing identity." He made this statement because he believed an instructor of color would be more inclined to discuss the experiences of students/people of color and be able to assist students of color.

Representation of faculty was referenced in the conversations with the instructors as well. Laura remarked, "You can give them [course instructors] the best roadmap, and an instructor can still crash…real recognizes real. When I walk into the classroom and share my background as a Latina/Chicana, that's what draws students in." Throughout the interview, Laura further shared findings from her own dissertation which concluded that:

> Regardless of academic profile, college status and socioeconomic status, relationship building was the greatest tool for persistence and retention. If they [students] have at least one person in a leadership role at their institution that made them feel comfortable and confident they were more likely to persist at a higher rate.

Jerome, a Black male admissions officer, shared that he feels university faculty and staff of color are often isolated to one portion of a campus stating, "it is important that they see us in many roles throughout the university." Specifically, he shared the distribution of professionals of color is not authentic but rather strategic for the university, so he argued that the university does

not understand the weight of representation. He drilled down to a granular level regarding representation stating:

> Diversity, equity, and inclusion is a mindset. It's a spiritual and mental mindset. One does not need these terms in their role to do the work. We [POC] should not all be shoved into only certain roles but rather dispersed and seen at all levels of the university.

Jerome went on to discuss how he was able to leverage his identity as a Black man in the classroom to assist students. Jerome, who taught a class that served predominantly students of color also shared,

> Sure, we can talk about theory in the class, but I want them to know what it is like to look a white professor in the face and claim their space. Let's discuss what that looks like and feels like. It's important to discuss that.

According to the students, there was a sense of calm bestowed upon them when they meet and see faculty of color in academic spaces. Alana and Mercedes were the two students who illuminated this point for me. Alana shared that her biology teacher was a Black woman, and when she first saw her, she exclaimed, "Oh yay," which was not the reaction she had to her Academic Foundations instructor, who was white. Mercedes offered that she would love to see Academic Foundations incorporate a panel of faculty of color from different disciplines into the course. She elaborated, "It would be nice to hear their route into higher academia, and seeing their presence is a nice reminder that they are out there. That we are out here."

For the purposes of the Academic Foundations course and this inquiry, UTAs are also viewed as faculty as they co-instruct the class. John shared that his instructor was white, which led him to rely on his UTA more who was a woman of color. He stated that she was a great complement to the instructor who offered different perspectives that did not always align with his thoughts.

Jenna expressed gratitude for her UTA as well as they shared a similar major, so her UTA served as a familiar face in other courses. Her admiration was captured in this quote, "I think talking to older students is such a valuable resource. It is nice to talk to someone who is doing college but is just a little ahead."

4.3.2 Racial Representation within the Student Body Matters

The responses from the students helped me to understand how they navigate their classes and the campus with their identity especially upon first transitioning to Pitt. Jenna spoke positively about being able to walk onto campus and see visible racial diversity in her Academic Foundations course. There is a section of Academic Foundations that is for first-year students in our BRIDGES program, which is for students who receive university aid and scholarship due to low-income status. These sections tend to enroll more students of color. Jenna was in one of the BRIDGES sections of Academic Foundations. She was excited about the opportunity to engage in life discussions with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Jenna acknowledged that the compositional diversity of the course caught her attention quickly, because she was coming from a rural area in New Jersey with little to no racial diversity. Nikki, a Latina, shared that it was nice to know there were other people like her at this university. Specifically, she shared, "At a PWI, you try to find people who aren't white and more similar to you and these things [TRIO and Academic Foundations] helped me to make friends." Alana shared similar sentiments to Jenna by saying, "It was nice to be in a class with other students of color because I can probably count on my hands the number of Black kids in my chem and bio lectures."

The conversations with Jenna and John were very different but enlightening, because they showed the spectrum that exists within the student body experience and exposed how much growth

is needed for Academic Foundations to be fully inclusive and uplifting of these experiences. Jenna was coming from a small, predominantly white town in New Jersey, so she was pleasantly surprised and pleased with the compositional diversity she witnessed and the level of diversity in the content. However, John, a native of Cleveland, Ohio, was more critical and expected more from this large university with many resources, this first-year seminar, and from the Dietrich School as the largest first-year admitting school at Pitt. Jenna was appreciative of her Academic Foundations course because it set the tone for her non-FP courses as a budding sociology major. Jenna said, "Having a familiar face is very comforting to me as someone who lives seven hours away and needs to make friends here." These familiar faces were her Academic Foundations peers, who she would attend classes with. Jenna was struck by the fact that, "There are numerous people in here who may or may not know what we're talking about, but they chose to be here [in Academic Foundations]." It was evident that the students found solace in knowing they were not the only "one" on this campus experiencing this overwhelming transition.

4.3.3 Racial Representation within the Content Matters

Students said that the exclusion of identity and diversity conversations in their Academic Foundations course was evident and subsequently made them uncomfortable. They visibly struggled to respond to the question about how the Academic Foundations content validated their identity. When asked about his thoughts on the content in the Academic Foundations course, John shared a stark revelation. He offered:

> This obviously isn't a Black history course but there were a lot of details and cool tips about the city of Pittsburgh, but there was no mention of how African-Americans or anyone who is non-white contributed to the city.

Academic Foundations intends to introduce students to Pitt and the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences. It sets the tone for what students can expect as they progress throughout the Dietrich School and the exclusion of contributions of people of color sets a very bleak and misguided tone. The exclusion of this content may be an unintentional oversight from instructors and administrators, but I learned through these interviews that it has a significant impact on the transition of our first-year students of color. Jenna and Nikki had diverging experiences related to the content. Nikki was apathetic while discussing how the content related and/or reflected her identity. She shared, "I feel like the content in our course was pretty general. It was information that would be available to most people and did not cater to the needs of the specific identity groups." Jenna, however, was very pleased with the representation and attention to inclusion in her specific course. She disclosed,

> My teacher walked us through the university DEI website and talked to us about campus resources which validated my identity. I appreciate that we had conversations around identity and experiences because this would never happen in the small town where I'm from of mostly white people."

Leo was particularly adamant about the need for representation in the courses he instructs. He asserted,

> We have to be able to move beyond our own experiences, and that is why scholarship is critical. Our experience is not the whole understanding of the world. It is hard to not just teach about Black and white America. While it is important, American context it is insufficient. We have to address other groups like Native Americans and other concepts like intersectionality. For example, gender operates independently of race, but it doesn't really. Content is critical to validating the experiences of some while broadening the

minds of others.

4.4 **The Role of Pedagogy is Critical in a First-year Seminar with a Social Justice Focus**

Academic Foundations is well poised to serve as one of the first places where students can begin to interpret their experiences and their understanding of DEI consciously and subconsciously. Pedagogical efforts that align with social justice can only amplify students' ability to interpret and reflect in the Academic Foundations course. Furthermore, this course can serve as a physical space where students can verbalize their experiences and challenge systems that drastically impact diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus and in the larger society, which is fundamental to social justice. Leo, a white, male assistant professor, reflected on the magnitude and density of this subject matter. He asserted,

> People like to say this [E&SJ] isn't rocket science, but as near as I can remember we put a man on the moon in 1969, and yet racial inequality is getting worse so perhaps we should change the saying to, "It isn't racism."

He suggests that we honor and dissect the complexity that exists with explaining and understanding authentic equity and social justice. While Leo may have been the most explicit, the necessity and intertwined complexity of demystifying justice, equity, and inclusion work for first-year students was a thread throughout the student and instructor interviews. He was able to speak specifically about this complexity and his pedagogical approach given that each fall he instructs this course rooted in social justice and equity for incoming first-year students.

Monica, a senior level Black woman diversity practitioner, and Laura attempted to describe the delicacy of instructing a course of this nature for first-year students and how it differs from

other courses. Monica asserted that "a course of this nature is fundamentally and pedagogically different from other disciplines where the instructor is there to disseminate information as the expert." She expanded to say, "An instructor should be able to move humbly from the role of student to teacher when discussing this topic as students have a lot of wisdom to impart." Laura offered that our instructors should be able to provide a high level of support for first-year students and should be skilled in empathy, facilitation, and listening, which may not be a prerequisite of faculty in conventional disciplines.

From the student vantage point, Jenna acknowledged the importance of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion work. She stated, "I know students have a diversity general education requirement, and I think that's really good because the bare minimum I can do is listen to stories I cannot relate to." Jenna also referenced the Anti-Black Racism PITT 0210, and shared:

> The Anti-racism course was an amazing step by the university, but I wish it could occur in person with a facilitator because it would be much more powerful. I'm not sure how to do that for the entire first-year class or if it can be done, but nothing replaces having this discussion in person with your peers.

Jenna suggested Academic Foundations as a space to build on Anti-Black Racism PITT 0210 and have the deep dialogues that she feels are missing from the fully virtual course. While she was not sure how feasible it would be to pull this off, she felt deeply that the intimate, in-person follow-up dialogues would be a value add for Academic Foundations and for her fellow first-year peers.

Jenna also noted the difficulty in helping headstrong first-year students to see how this DEI conversation/content could benefit them and their academic goals overall. Similarly, Nikki verbally wrestled with instructors not forcing students to share their identity and experiences but

also helping them to see that sharing their experiences aloud can be a catalyst for change. She stated, "I appreciate everyone may not want to talk about it [identity], but it is who we are and a large factor for how we're experiencing college." While Jenna stressed the need for space in the classroom to dialogue about diversity, equity and social justice, Leo stressed that we [administrators] must be intentional in who we select to teach these courses and in how it is positioned in the greater landscape of the university.

Succinctly, Leo said, "Just because you have a PhD in English does not mean you understand this stuff [E&SJ] even a little bit." He said this to double down on the belief that equity and social justice content is not one-dimensional or interchangeable with other disciplines and requires a sophisticated pedagogical approach. In this comment, Leo urged administration to recruit faculty who have studied and researched diversity, equity, and social justice, because it is complex, nuanced, and contentious at times. Leo concluded the interview with, "They [administration] treat this content like an afterthought, and we would never do that with coding or with physics." Jerome spoke at length about what can make this work [justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion] complex as an instructor and the level of understanding instructors need by stating:

> A student coming into college as an orthodox Muslim is not going to jump on LGBTQAI issues. However, it does not mean that this student is an enemy of this social issue by default. One of the things a justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion course will do immediately is expose them [students] to something that is going to challenge, affirm, or educate them before they transition to the upper schools.

He expanded to elaborate on the complexity of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion from a macro level. Jerome declared, "Higher education is the institution that upholds the system [of oppression] and the conundrum is we [faculty and administrators] are trying to challenge an

institution whereby the injustices flow from and rely upon." Jerome left me with an intricate question to ponder at the end of the interview, "The role of the academy is to gatekeep and stratify people. That is a role that is anti-justice. So, Bianca, how can you work in anti-justice constructs and claim DEI?" Jerome's question caused me to think heavily and strategically about my inquiry question, which aims to highlight the steps needed to recreate a syllabus with a focus on social justice. I share my reflections on this complex question further in the document.

Thomas, a Black, first-generation faculty member, and Leo are both men who were full time faculty. They both emphasized the need for intentionality when developing and teaching a first-year seminar course, which they taught together. Leo spoke passionately about this required first-year seminar course for first-year students, which was so aptly named, "Grand Challenges." The course was solely dedicated to equity, racism, and social justice, and he was fully aware of the necessity to equip students with the dialogic tools and historical information to prep them for their time in college and as a member of society. Leo stated the primary objective of this course was:

> Helping students think through and critically analyze their beliefs and experiences of the world. People can't talk about race in the world because it's not comfortable or mutually respected, but we can do that in a classroom and it is a privilege.

Thomas echoed Leo's sentiments by stating, "Discussion is critical to this course, because we are trying to help students learn that what they are experiencing in their transition is connected to larger social implications and societal structures." To summarize the importance of this content within the first year, Thomas stated, "It's never too late to learn this stuff, but it's also never too early.

4.5 **Conclusion**

Three important themes emerged from the data that I will use to inform the recreation of the Academic Foundations curriculum. Even amid transition, students were astute enough to notice and verbalize the lack of racial representation in faculty and in content. Comparatively, instructors spoke extensively about the importance of racial representation, resources in the curriculum for students, and the role of pedagogy within justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion work in academic spaces. Racial representation and social justice are concepts that transcend the classroom and the confines of college yet are deemed necessary to the college experience. These participants shared their personal and professional experiences in pursuit of a first-year seminar infused with social justice and equity that will ultimately uplift students with minoritized identities and educate majority students on the role they play within the systems of oppression.

5.0 Chapter 5

5.1 **Learning and Action**

The purpose of this inquiry was to identify the steps needed to develop a new curriculum rooted in social justice and equity for Academic Foundations, a first-year seminar course housed in the Dietrich School at Pitt. This new curriculum will uplift the experiences of first-generation, low-income students of color and allow students with privileged identities to learn about contemporary social justice issues. In order to explore potential additions to the course and steps needed to make these changes, I engaged in interviews with seven current first-generation, low-income students of color at Pitt and five instructors in the western Pittsburgh region who have taught courses within colleges and universities with a diversity, equity, and justice focus. In this chapter, I discuss key take-aways and provide recommendations for practice based on the findings.

5.2 **Key Take-Aways**

The need for racial representation in the first-year seminar, pedagogy as a critical component of a First-Year Seminar, and justice & EDI topics as essential in First-Year Seminars that necessitate intention and a multifaceted approach was emphasized most consistently among the students and instructors. These next few sections address considerations for practice at Pitt and connect with current research that aligns with the data gathered through this inquiry.

5.2.1 Key Take-Away #1: Racial Representation of Instructors and Course Content Matters

The literature is extensive and clear when talking about the importance of increasing racial representation to assist students of color in their college journey (Means & Pyne, 2017; Patton, 2006). The lack of faculty of color, missing content that reflects the contributions of people of color, and a student body that is not reflective of the world are not merely oversights and have grave implications. Whiteness is reflected in academia as the status quo by which all other worldviews and identities are compared to, which allows whiteness to thrive in higher education (Cabrera, 2019; Garcia, 2019; Gusa, 2010). The omission of people of color and the erasure of the contributions of people of color cultivate an atmosphere of discomfort and communicate inferiority to students of color (Gusa, 2010; Yosso, 2005). Some students in this inquiry stated that when they saw instructors and students of color it gave them a sense of relief to know they were not the only one. One of the key demands from students that has persisted is increased need for racial diversity within the faculty and racial literacy within the white faculty (Chessman & Wayt, 2016). Faculty of color are a tool in the fight to disentangle whiteness and decolonize academic spaces (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Specifically, "If there are no people of color present, race remans unnamed and is not presumed to be an organizing institutional factor" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 560).

Not only did students share their views on the compositional diversity throughout the course of this study, but they also often struggled to find examples of when the Academic Foundations curriculum validated their identity as a minoritized student. Representation is critical within Academic Foundations, because students who do not see themselves as members of their community or feel validated are far less likely to persist (Gusa, 2010; Munoz, 2011). In summary, the literature affirms the narratives of the participants in this inquiry as they expressed a desire for

content specifically related to the experiences of people of color. Additionally, they expressed a desire to be surrounded by people with their racial identity and noted that this was rare in this course taught at Pitt. Tate et al. (2015) assert that students who are racially minoritized, first in their family to attend college, and/or from a low-income background are far more likely to face barriers to transition and persistence. Perhaps the most significant of these barriers is whiteness and its impact on representation, because it operates as the gatekeeping tool for entry into the academy.

5.2.2 Key Take-Away #2: Pedagogy is a Critical Component of a First-Year Seminar

College is often an overwhelming experience in which many transitions are occurring simultaneously (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). The influx of information and newness can overwhelm any student but especially those with intersecting minoritized identities. Therefore, it was not a shock when participants mentioned the criticality of pedagogy in the Academic Foundations course. First-year seminars are intended to demystify this "novel experience," increase knowledge, and offer reflective time for their beliefs, needs, and values (Permzadian & Credé, 2016, p. 281). A large part of the reflection and demystification is the pedagogy. This is demonstrated in Mike's comment encouraging a push for more instructors of color in the hopes that they would be comfortable having conversations related to DEI, social justice, and identity. Mike's statement is affirmed in the research. It was also evident in Mercedes' experience with her non-white instructor who encouraged conversations around race. Effective instructors should first analyze and address how their own identity and sociocultural background influence how they foster or hinder the actualization of DEI in the classroom (Fuentes et al., 2020). This public

reflection and analyzation of positionality and identity is certainly encouraged by the First-Year Programs team but not mandated.

This idea of candid discussion from an instructor was present in my conversations with Mercedes and Laura as well. Mercedes, who had a non-white Academic Foundations instructor, made mention of having other faculty of color present to students consistently throughout the course to supplement her instructor's pedagogical efforts. Laura specifically stated that instructors can be given a roadmap, which is the model of Academic Foundations, and still fail. She went on to share data based on her professional and doctoral studies that conclude students who feel connected, heard, and valued from someone in institutional leadership (i.e., faculty, administration) are far more likely to persist. She was compelled by her data and her identity to facilitate a meaningful five-week summer bridge program intentionally and deliberately. Active listening and discussion are critical pedagogical tools when attempting to build rapport and community with all students but especially with "those who self-identify as black or first generation" (Fuentes et al., 2020, p. 72). While the Department of First-Year programs provides resources for each instructor to utilize, a great deal is left up to the instructor in terms of which resource, where it fits in the semester, and how much time they allot for the resource at hand. For example, Simone was extremely pleased with the extensive time her instructor carved out to introduce them to campus resources, which likely was not a uniform experience. Monica also spoke beautifully about the pedagogical skillset needed to instruct a first-year seminar that may not be the same for conventional disciplines.

5.2.3 Key Take-Away #3: Justice & EDI Topics are Essential in First-Year Seminars but Necessitate Intention and a Multifaceted Approach

Lastly, there was a considerable amount of time in the interviews dedicated to the inherent complexity of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. At its core the complexity lies in the fact that even with a social justice lens, Academic Foundations will occur in a system that historically upholds oppression and is anti-justice (Cabrera, 2019). All participants expressed the importance of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in Academic Foundations but also provided the disclaimer that it requires a certain level of delicacy due to the diverse composition of every incoming first-year class. The interviews exposed the depth of the complexity. Leo was very vocal and attributed a great deal of the complexity to the lack of understanding by administration on diversity, equity, and inclusion as a standalone discipline. One of the students also shared that there would be a lot of logistical planning and circumventing of faculty but insisted all first-year students should have to take the Pitt 0210: Anti-Black Racism course and engage in small group peer discussions. She felt as though the module without the discussion was an incomplete introduction to social justice. Fink et al. (2013) explain the complexity lies in "including the specific context of the teaching/learning situation, the general context of the learning situation, the nature of the subject, the characteristics of the learners, and the characteristics of the teacher" (p. 6).

In addition to identifying the most significant content within diversity, equity, and inclusion, there must also be a mindset change and commitment to introspection, reflection and an active commitment to work against the historical legacy of higher education (Brayboy, 2003). The research suggests that administrators at PWIs should not embark on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives without first thinking critically about their own privileged identities and how that may impact the roles they occupy (Brayboy, 2003; Fuentes et al., 2020).

An added layer of complexity, perhaps the gravest, is that we often see the push for implementation of diversity, equity and inclusion in academia without the thorough examination of institutional culture, policy, and legacy (Fuentes et al., 2020; Vaccaro, 2019). We see occasional programs and events that seemingly celebrate difference but do not address why a subset of students experience college in a very different manner. For example, devoting insufficient time to diversity and equity or introducing it in siloed fashion can adversely communicate unimportance and reinforce tokenism (Vaccaro, 2019). One of the instructor participants affirmed Vaccaro's (2019) stance and stated she was given five weeks, which was the duration of the summer bridge program, to prepare minoritized students mentally and academically for the impact of this new socio-cultural experience. She was the sole administrator working with these 19 students and left to discern which content was most pertinent and teachable in five short weeks. Instead, administrators must adopt an intersectional lens and think of diversity, equity, and inclusion as a foundational piece that should be present in every aspect of university business (Fuentes et al., 2020). I have seen institutions engage in DEI and social justice prematurely while skipping the necessary steps to evoke true institutional change because they do not respect the beautiful complexity at hand. Vaccaro has already warned of the effects of this type of organizational behavior. I argue that institutions must adopt an equity framework that first acknowledges the structures of oppression and examine how these structures and the administrators therein "disenfranchise certain students" (Fuentes et al., 2020, p. 71).

5.3 **Recommendations for Practice**

There are numerous recommendations for the Department of First-Year Programs to implement a new curriculum for Academic Foundations that focuses on social justice and equity. These key recommendations include: (a) hire instructors who are people of color and demonstrate a professional competence around diversity, equity, and inclusion, (b) introduce a new syllabus in fall 2022 that emphasizes diversity, equity, and inclusion, and (c) implement a mandatory justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion training for the instructors of Academic Foundations.

5.3.1 Recommendation #1: Hire Instructors of Color Who Demonstrate a Professional Competence around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

My office, First-Year Programs, hires the faculty, staff, and undergraduate teaching assistants that ultimately become the co-instructors of Academic Foundations. As the director, I recommend we utilize targeted recruitment to ensure greater representation among the instructors and UTAs we select. Currently, there is no recruitment or hiring plan in place for our instructors, but there is an immediate need for one. Additionally, there are no organized data on the demographic makeup or educational background of our instructors. In other words, we do not even know how many instructors identify as people of color. Therefore, we must also collect demographic information moving forward.

Our outreach will entail an application given to prospective instructors and the solicitation of demographic information to gauge their background in working with and embedding DEI into academic spaces. In addition to soliciting racial demographic information, this information will ask instructors to include a letter of interest and responses to short answer questions. These

complete applications will help us discern whose pedagogical approaches could best espouse the outcomes of the new syllabus. We typically solicit new instructors through word of mouth. However, I recommend that we are more intentional in outreach efforts to potential instructors of color, which would include tailored outreach to Pitt faculty and staff affinity spaces such as Hispanic and Latino Professional Association (HLPA) and Equipoise. We already have an extensive UTA application and interview process, but we can certainly add demographic questions to our application and questions about knowledge of DEI issues. Additionally, we can add targeted outreach to student affinity organizations to our recruitment plan to find qualified UTAs.

5.3.2 Recommendation #2: Introduce a New Syllabus that Emphasizes Social Justice

First-Year programs has done well with equipping instructors with a myriad of resources at their disposal for the duration of the fall semester. Based on the data from this inquiry, I recommend that we introduce a new syllabus that introduces justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion and is specifically tailored to assisting minoritized students during their first year. The syllabus is an often underestimated, powerful tool (Sulik & Keys, 2014). The syllabus is the first impression of the course and sets an initial tone but also provides information about the instructor's pedagogical style and beliefs (Sulik & Keys, 2014). Leonard and Moore (2014) share, "teaching is in and of itself a political attack therefore the syllabus acts as a manifestation of that 'politic' (p. 27). The syllabus is an opportunity to concretely outline the social justice beliefs and pedagogy that will undergird the class. In addition to uplifting the experiences of minoritized identities, a syllabus that embodies a social justice curriculum educates white students and others with dominant identities about the systems of oppression in which we all operate. The new resources

that will exist in the syllabus include active listening activities, more class dialogues, and reimagined learning outcomes that insist on the incorporation of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Learning outcomes are an opportunity to express to students what they can expect to gain from the class and Fuentes et al. (2020) offer those objectives should have DEI undertones, or there should be an explicit objective dedicated to the DEI goals of the course. Specifically, as part of this inquiry project, I am in the process of creating a new syllabus for fall 2022 that has set learning outcomes for all the Academic Foundations courses and introduces new resources that are nationally proven to be effective ways to implement DEI into first-year seminars. I will keep the activities that are impactful such as the Exploring Pittsburgh activity and add the Community Engagement Centers in Homewood and the Hill as great resources to visit while completing the activity. Additionally, I will add Pittsburgh specific history to this activity that reference pivotal Pittsburgh influencers like Roberto Clemente, August Wilson, and Teenie Harris to name a few. These activities will then be complemented in the class with use of reflection and dialogue (Brayboy, 2003; Permzadian & Credé, 2016). These changes are important so students can have a holistic view of their new community.

Academic Foundations serves as a primary long-standing retention and persistence tool for Pitt and for the Dietrich School. The administration fully back a revitalization of the syllabus of Academic Foundations that they believe will yield higher retention rates, specifically with populations that are historically minoritized. If implemented correctly, the Academic Foundations syllabus with a social justice and equity focus will better align with the strategic plan of the university and the Dietrich School. The plan for Pitt, which launched in fall 2021, states we will create an inclusive and equitable campus environment—one that welcomes, values and embraces the diverse perspectives of every member of our community. The new syllabus will intentionally

align with the Plan for Pitt, because "the syllabus also has to attend to the tricky balance between meeting the needs of the students and the institution" (Taylor et al., 2019, p. 142)."

5.3.3 Recommendation #3: Implement a Mandatory Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Training for the Instructors of Academic Foundations.

I recommend that we build capacity for all instructors who teach Academic Foundations in fall 2022 by mandating a justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion training. First-Year seminar instructors who have received a specialized training are more effective in their role (Permzadian & Credé, 2016). Consistent specialized training for instructors related to justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion is especially imperative, because of the evolving and reflective nature of the content (Fuentes et al., 2020). The training will address the skills and knowledge needed to engage with the new equity centered learning outcomes. Our hope is that a new syllabus with an inclusive curriculum will help first-generation, low-income students feel a greater sense of connectedness to Pitt, because they see themselves reflected in the curriculum and feel their voices are sincerely valued.

The DEI training will occur in the summer of 2022 prior to the start of the fall semester. The training will be led by Maureen Lazar, director of workforce effectiveness, who leads the DEI efforts for the Dietrich School. She currently creates, facilitates, and assesses trainings for faculty and staff in the Dietrich School and serves as an instructor for one section of Academic Foundations. Given the Dietrich School's hybrid work arrangement, the training will occur over the zoom platform for two hours. I will consult with Maureen regarding the assessment data gathered from this training and to identify the best times during the year for workshops that build on the training.

5.4 **Implications for Research**

The literature is quite clear in that first-year seminars as a high impact practice are quite effective and have been linked to student success (Barefoot, 2000; Porter & Swing, 2006). This inquiry can add to the extensive body of literature and speak precisely to the efficacy of first-year seminars with a social justice and equity focus. Specifically, I truly hope that this inquiry will underscore the importance of justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion in academic spaces and the significance it plays in the first-year transition. Although, the data revealed several resources from the Academic Foundations course that were useful, there is certainly a need for a deeper dive into what resources best espouse justice, diversity, equity and inclusion in the first-year academic space. This inquiry will build on the work of Conley and Hamlin (2009), which emphasizes that first-year programs with a social justice lens build agency in students as they reanalyze themselves in relation to powerful social concepts such as privilege, power, and difference.

While the need for a specialized training was clear, there is a need for more research on this training for instruction of a first-year seminar. Future research can address what the first-year instructor DEI training should consist of, how frequently an instructor should partake in this training, and how to operationalize this new knowledge in the classroom for first-year students. There is modest research on first-year seminars with a social justice foundation and the impact on first-generation, low-income Black and Latinx/o students specifically, so this is certainly an area that could benefit from more attention as well. The next step in the process is to study the implementation of these recommendations, and I believe the best way to do this is to start small with a subset of our classes that we can carefully monitor. The last step to complete this inquiry would be to use the data we learned from starting small to refine the process and scale up.

5.5 **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the key findings and recommendations for this inquiry. Additionally, this chapter contextualized how this inquiry fits in the larger national landscape. The key findings for this inquiry were (a)Pedagogy is a critical component of a first-year seminar, (b) racial representation matters, and (c) justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion topics are necessary in academic foundations yet inherently complex, so it necessitates intention and a multifaceted approach. The steps that I identified to address these key findings include: (a) hire instructors who hold minoritized identities and demonstrate a professional competence around justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion, (b) introduce a new syllabus that emphasizes justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and (c) implement a mandatory justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion training for the instructors of Academic Foundations. These changes are all ultimately intended to uplift the experiences of first-generation, low-income college students of color to inform the steps needed for a new curriculum rooted in social justice.

6.0 Chapter 6

6.1 **Reflections**

This entire inquiry has been simultaneously complex and affirming. The purpose of this inquiry was to re-design a first-year seminar course, FP0001: Academic Foundations, to have a social justice and equity lens. Ideally, this social justice and equity lens in the course would uplift the experiences of first-generation, low-income students of color and help students from privileged backgrounds understand contemporary social justice issues. I was affirmed through these interviews as all the participants shared the importance of diversity, equity, and social justice. The student participants were very astute and aware of what the course was lacking in and of itself in relation to their other classes and in relation to their needs. This shocked me, because I thought students would be so overwhelmed or excited about their college journey that they perhaps would be distracted from these types of concerns or observations. I was not shocked to hear from the instructor interviews that implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion was a challenge in their work, one that required the utmost finesse and intentionality.

As an improver, I learned the importance of neutrality and listening. I had to allow the participants to share with me their authentic feelings and not aim to defend the course or remedy their problem in that instant. Neutrality is a hard concept when you care greatly about the concept at hand, but when paired with active listening it is a sign of deep reverence, which I only hope I communicated to the participants. I wanted to hear their suggestions and experiences (for better or worse) and use those narratives as a catalyst for change. As both a staff person and student at Pitt, I have my own experiences and beliefs about the university, but I had to remember that this inquiry

was not for me or about me. As a leader and improver, I had to check in with myself often. In this multi-step process, I was forced to reflect on the problems in my place of practice that necessitated change, examine my sphere of influence, and identify what was feasible for this inquiry within the specific timeframe. That is a lot to juggle as is while also considering what data collection methods would be most appropriate to reveal the steps needed for a new curriculum rooted in social justice and equity.

As a leader, I learned the importance and value of iterative change. Iterative change is at the core of improvement science, which I did not fully understand until I started with this inquiry. Too often, I have seen professionals aggressively implement substantial changes to cut a problem at the root, but that would not have been appropriate or effective for this inquiry. Reimaging a curriculum and implementing that curriculum are two large feats that require immense planning, studying, and stakeholder participation to be done well. Furthermore, I learned the versatility needed to be an effective and efficient leader. As the leader, I wanted to identify a problem of practice that was relevant to my team as a department, could be rectified, and addressed the goals of many stakeholders. I also learned the value of strategy, because when constituents buy into the change you are trying to make it can make the process smoother. I was given encouragement and autonomy from administration for this inquiry, because I was aiming to enhance a high impact tool that greatly aides with retention.

Patience is also key as a leader, improver, and practitioner. Inevitably, I want to have social justice be at the core of all sections of Academic Foundations, but with over 100 sections I realized it may be best to start with a manageable number of sections and continually assess the changes. Continual assessment is key because student demographics change consistently and with that so do student needs. Through this process, I gained an even larger appreciation for qualitative

research. It truly is a science. I had to actively listen to people's personal thoughts without inputting my own thoughts and then capture these stories in a manner that was authentic and cohesive for a diverse audience. Through my interviews, I learned that I have peers to rely on for guidance and that social justice, diversity, and equity work is challenging (for a myriad of reasons), but when executed well it is very rewarding.

I am eager and better prepared to enter the study and act phases of this inquiry. My hope is that all students will have a better understanding of contemporary social justice issues and the roles they play within the systems connected to social justice. Moreover, I hope they will select courses within their academic discipline that build on the historical context, critical thinking, communication skills, and call to action they were introduced to in Academic Foundations. As I move forward with this inquiry with the trust of my participants, I frequently repeat the words of Darlaston Jones (2007), "the 'same' students sitting in the same classroom for the same lessons does not make their experience of university identical" (p. 21).

Appendix A Student Interview Email Invitation

Subject Line: The First Year Programs Experience within the Dietrich School at Pitt: Seeking interview participants

Hello all,

My name is Bianca DeJesus and I am a current doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh within the School of Education, with a concentration in Social and Comparative Analysis in Education. I also serve as the Director of First Year Programs within the Dietrich School here at Pitt. My team and I craft, hire, and assess the Academic Foundations courses you all took this first term. I'm currently seeking first term first year students who identify as first-generation, low-income, or Black/African American or Latinx/Hispanic to participant in interviews to understand your experience in the academic foundations course.

The purpose of these interviews is to better understand the experiences the first-generation, low-income undergraduate students of color have within their first-year experience course (i.e., FP 0001,0002, 0003, 0004 Academic Foundations) within the Dietrich School. I am conducting these interviews to investigate themes and experiences within the academic and social experience of first-generation, low-income students of color within the context of the first-year experience course. The goal is also to collect information about how to change the course in order to have a greater equity, antiracist, and social justice focus. Participation in these interviews is voluntary and you can disclose to your comfort.

A 60-minute interview will occur remotely via the Zoom platform. Interviews will be recorded via Zoom and transcribed later to accurately reflect the experiences of the participants

and to increase the accuracy of the data analysis process. I, Bianca DeJesus, will be the sole staff person in attendance and to have access to the recording.

Participants must be at least 18 years of age, have a current affiliation as an undergraduate student at Pitt within the Dietrich School. Participants must have just completed an FP 0001,0002, 0003, 0004 Academic Foundations course and identify as first-generation, low-income or Latinx/Hispanic or Black/African American to participate in this interview. If you have an interest in participating in my study, and meet the requirements above, please reply directly to bid15@pitt.edu. If you have any questions regarding your participation, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Appendix B Student Consent to Participate

Overview: The purpose of this interview is to better understand the experiences the first-generation low-income undergraduate students of color have within their first-year experience course (i.e., FP 0001,0002, 0003, 0004 Academic Foundations) within the Dietrich School. I am conducting these interviews to investigate themes and experiences within the academic and social experience of first-generation low-income students of color within the context of the first-year experience course. Participation in these interviews is voluntary and you can disclose to your comfort.

Protocol: A 60 minute interview will occur remotely via the Zoom platform. Interviews will be recorded via Zoom and transcribed later to accurately reflect the experiences of the participants and to increase the accuracy of the data analysis process. I, Bianca DeJesus, will be the sole staff person in attendance and to have access to the recording.

Participant Requirements: Participants must be at least 18 years of age, have a current affiliation as an undergraduate student at Pitt within the Dietrich School. Participants must have completed the first term of their first year in Fall 2021 with a grade of "S" for satisfactory. They must also identify as first-generation low-income or a student of color to participate in an interview.

Risks: Recordings will be transcribed through Zoom and therefore there is an increased risk of breach of confidentiality. Participation in this study could subject participants to mental and

emotional triggers through the sharing of their academic experience and first year transition based on their identity.

Compensation & Costs: There is no compensation for participation in this study. However, lunch will be provided to participants. There will be no cost to you if you participate in this interview. We may use the data for our future research studies, or we may distribute the data for additional research studies. We would do this without getting additional informed consent from you. Sharing of data with other researchers will only be done in such a manner that you will not be identified.

Confidentiality: By participating in an interview, you understand and agree that the data and information gathered during this study may be used by Pitt and published and/or disclosed by Pitt for academic purposes. However, your name, address, contact information and other direct personal identifiers will not be mentioned in any such publication or dissemination of the research data and/or results by Pitt. Note that per regulation and in collaborations with the University of Pittsburgh, all research data must be kept for a minimum of 7 years. No participant names or information will ever appear in reports or any analysis of data collected throughout this interview.

Appendix C Chemicals

1. Introduce yourself: your name, pronouns, and major.
2. What resources were most useful to you in your transition to Pitt? (examples: Study lab, Office hours, Advising, Undergraduate teaching assistants, Library tours)
3. What activities/ content/ and dialogues within Academic Foundations helped you the most as you navigated the Dietrich School at Pitt and the city of Pittsburgh (since it is an objective of the course)?
4. In what ways did the Academic Foundations validate your experiences as a first generation, low-income, and/or student of color?
    a. In what ways were your various needs as a first generation, low-income, and/or student of color addressed through the materials in the Foundations course?
5. In what ways did the Academic Foundations ignore your experiences as a first generation, low-income, and/or student of color?
    a. In what ways were your various needs as a first generation, low-income, and/or student of color not addressed through the materials in the Foundations course?
6. What experiences, classes, or programs at Pitt have validated your existence as a first generation, low-income, and/or student of color?
7. What experiences, classes, or programs at Pitt engage students in conversations about social justice, equity and identity?
8. What resources does Academic Foundations need to enhance or create a better experience for first generation, low-income, and/or student of color students?

Appendix D Pre-Student Interview Protocol

1. Please state your undergraduate major: _____

2. Did you receive a grade of "S" for satisfactory in your FP course?
    a. Yes
    b. No
3. How do you identify racial/ethnically?

4. Are you a first-generation college student?
    a. Yes
    b. No

5. Are you a recipient of the Pell grant?
    a. Yes
    b. No

Appendix E Instructor Interview Protocol

1. What was the most fundamental piece of instructing a course/seminar with a social justice focus?
2. What were your learning outcomes for this course/seminar?
3. How do you believe this course fits in your department and at your institution?
4. How do you believe first year students could benefit from a first-year seminar with a social justice focus?

Appendix F Pre-interview Instructor Survey Protocol

1. Please state your institution: _____

2. Please state your affiliation/role at your university: _____

3. Please provide a brief description of the course you instructed with social justice components.

4. Was/Is the course for first year students?
    a. Yes
    b. No

Appendix G Instructor Interview Invitation

Subject Line: Instructors who've taught first year courses with DEI focus needed for research study

Hello all,

The purpose of this research study is to determine the curriculum changes needed to craft a first-year seminar course rooted in social justice for the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences at Pitt. For that reason, I am seeking faculty or staff, for 60-minute semi structured interviews, who have instructed classes, seminars or extensive modules with a social justice focus. If you are willing to participate, a questionnaire will ask about background (e.g., institution, classes taught, university affiliation) to ensure you match the criteria of the study. Interviews will occur remotely via the Zoom platform. Interviews will be recorded via Zoom and transcribed later to accurately reflect the experiences of the participants and to increase the accuracy of the data analysis process. Although unlikely, due to the use of zoom and collection of responses, there is a potential risk of breach of confidentiality. All responses are confidential. The results will be kept behind a firewall on a password protected device. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from this study at any time. This research study is being conducted by Bianca DeJesus, who can be reached at bid15@pitt.edu, if you have any questions.

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