

“Where do we fit in?": Exploring a Sense of Belonging Among Fat College Students

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Education

College of Education

April 2022

## Thesis Approval Form



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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my friend, confidant, and muse, Jenna Weatherwax.

“Μνάσεσθαι τινά φαμι καὶ ὕστερον ἀμμέων”

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis committee chair, Dr. Karyn Rabourn. Thank you for your continuous support, guidance, and words of encouragement throughout my graduate studies. I am so grateful to have worked with you on this thesis, and I will forever appreciate your mentorship and belief in me throughout my future scholarly endeavors.

I am also sincerely grateful for the work and guidance of my thesis committee members, Dr. Jennifer Stewart and Dr. Jonathan Bartels. Dr. Stewart, we started this journey as strangers, but I am so grateful that you took a leap of faith with me. Your expertise and insightful comments were invaluable. Plus, your excitement over the research topic and its potential for future research invigorated me to push harder. Dr. Bartels, I am so appreciative to have you in my corner over the past two years. Your initial receptiveness to the research topic motivated me to pursue further research, resulting in me electing to write a thesis in the first place. Your knowledge of methodology was vital to the success of this study.

Finally, I would like to thank the research participants, Ashley, Elizabeth, Jennifer, Michael, and Shawna for volunteering their time, energy, and vulnerability, as well as sharing with me their experiences and insights. I am so grateful to have this opportunity to capture your voice to help future generations of fat college students.

## **Abstract**

Fat college students are an understudied demographic of students in student affairs research. This qualitative study interviews student affairs professionals about their experiences as fat undergraduate students to help student affairs professionals better understand specific challenges and experiences fat students face concerning finding a sense of belonging at their university and to further expand the literature where fat students' voices are at the center of the research. Five participants shared their experiences with co-curricular and academic engagement on campus. These participants were successful in social incorporation, however unique challenges faced this population of students. Participants expressed finding academic settings uncomfortable and certain aspects of young adulthood inaccessible, such as dating. The lack of awareness of the hurdles fat people have from administration meant little was done to help these participants, resulting in some staying silent about their experiences until post-graduation.

*Keywords:* Social stigmatization, sense of belonging, anticipated stigmatization and prejudice, classroom seating, social and academic engagement, fat students

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Problem Statement**

Providing many opportunities for college students to find their sense of belonging is often a major selling point for higher education institutions. From elaborate student life programs, robust student organizations, identity resource centers, engaging classrooms, and team sports, university faculty and staff take great care in organizing and spearheading opportunities for students to build strong connections and to find community on campus.

Student affairs scholars and practitioners recognize that some demographics of students need additional support and have pointed to the impact of racism, sexism, and sexual prejudice on college students' attitudes and feelings of belonging at universities (Clarke, 1994; Nunn 2021). Although there is a growing number of affinity resource centers and diversity groups for minoritized students on college campuses across the United States, such as LGBT and multicultural centers, one such marginalized identity stands out as often being absent from these sorts of dedicated resources. Resources such as these help to generate research and data around their populations, which influences practice and can help their students find community, friends, and resources. Despite their population growing in numbers every year, fat people are underrepresented in the literature on student affairs (Brown, 2016). While fat bodies come in a range of sizes, and the terminology to describe them is often in flux (Zoller, 2021), as of 2020, more than one-third of college students viewed themselves as at least slightly “overweight” (Elflein, 2021). This does not mean that one-third of college students would be considered fat, but fat students are a sizable demographic on campus who are becoming more common and are rarely seen as deserving the level of attention in research and practice other marginalized

populations receive, however many scholars outside of student affairs have started to speak up about the impact of sizeism on fat people in our society broadly (Gordon, 2020; Harjunen, 2009; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). What is known about fat students' experiences in higher education and how they find a sense of belonging on campus is limited. Studying this demographic might help practitioners better understand and address the unique needs of this student population.

### **Rationale**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gather information to help student affairs professionals better understand specific challenges and experiences fat students face concerning finding a sense of belonging at their university and to further expand the literature where fat students' voices are at the center of the research. Student affairs scholars and practitioners recognize the impact a sense of belonging has on students from all identities and backgrounds because a strong sense of belonging leads to greater retention rates and aids in the achievement of academic goals (Tinto, 1993).

Marginalized demographics of students who face bias from peers, faculty, and staff have difficulties incorporating themselves into the campus environment (Nunn, 2021). This study is important because the Center for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that 42.2% of American adults are considered “obese” as of 2018, up from 11.9% in 2000 (“Adult Obesity Facts,” 2021). It is well documented that fat people experience challenges unique to them in part due to anti-fat bias and weight-related stigmas (Brewis et al., 2016; Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019; Gordon, 2020; Harjunen, 2009; Owens, 2008; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009; Wann, 2009). Yet, existing student affairs literature does little to investigate how students of size navigate creating relationships in an environment like academia where they could encounter common obstacles

like harassment, othering, or isolation. An additional goal of this thesis is to include the voice of fat people in the literature around inclusivity on college campuses.

## **Background of the Problem**

### **Sense of Belonging**

Student affairs practitioners and scholars recognize the importance of students finding a sense of belonging at their university. Co-curricular activities and academic settings play a part in fostering a campus climate where students can make social connections (Nunn, 2021; Tinto, 1993). Universities strive to offer many opportunities for students to engage with one another, sometimes setting aside hundreds of thousands of dollars annually to fund student events, organizations, and sports. These opportunities are valuable to practitioners because students who find a sense of belonging have a stronger resistance to departure from their university than students without (Tinto, 1993). Researchers describe this sense of belonging for college students as being “integrated” academically or socially into their campus community. Students who have found a sense of belonging on campus describe increased confidence and an ability to let their guard down, resulting in stronger connections among peers and university employees, higher GPAs, and stronger resistance to departure compared to students without (Nunn, 2021). Many high-impact practices on college campuses have been developed to help students connect to their peers, faculty, and the college as a whole.

### **The Study of Fat Students**

In comparison with other identity-based fields of study, such as gender, sexuality, and race or ethnicity studies, there are far fewer studies of fat people. This absence may be, in part,

because fatness is rarely considered an identity designation, instead, fatness is often reduced to a medical condition. Fat activists have begun challenging this notion in the past few decades claiming that fatness is more than a physical byproduct of lifestyle, but also can be a significant part of someone's identity, often carrying social stigmatization and prejudice (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009; Wann, 2009). The negative ramifications caused by anti-fat prejudice have prompted education researchers to study fat students from new angles to better support this population of students.

### ***K-12 education research***

Researchers focused on K-12 educational practice and students have contributed significantly to fat studies literature. Their studies often examine the influence of fat students in academic settings, including academic performance bias from teachers (Dian & Triventi, 2021), mental health challenges (Sjöberg et al., 2005), and bullying and harassment (Craig & Pepler, 2003). Life outside of the classroom is seldom present in their discussions. What is evident within the current studies is that these students face discrimination from both peers and teachers that negatively impact their experiences in elementary, middle, and high school, and it is likely, albeit not explicitly shown in research, that this creates similar challenges for those students who pursue post-secondary education.

### ***Higher education research***

Student affairs scholars have begun chronicling the experiences of fat students on campus and have found patterns in the challenges they face, such as finding physical comfort in academic spaces (Hetrick & Attig, 2009; Stevens, 2011; Stewart, 2018), social stigmatization,

and marginalization (Brewis et al., 2016; Brown, 2016; Crepezzi, 2007; Hetrick & Attig, 2009; Levitt, 2004; Stevens, 2011; Stewart, 2018), and body image issues (Brewis et al., 2016; Levitt, 2004). Some studies have pointed to other challenges fat students face such as having a difficult time with post-graduation job placement (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019), and how campus environments impact students' relationship with their weight and diet (Bailey et al., 2020). Sense of belonging does not often explicitly come up in this area of study, however much of the research that centers on fat student voices and their experience in higher education often point to feelings of isolation, or anticipated stigmatization, suggesting that these students face challenges building peer to peer relationships (Stevens, 2011; Stewart, 2018).

### **Scope**

The scope of this study was limited to college student affairs associates who self-identify themselves as fat during their time in their undergraduate studies. The decision to study alumni comes from the desire to have participants who experienced a more traditional undergraduate experience than the recent modifications to engagement inside and outside of the classroom as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Study participants were student affairs pre-professionals and professionals who have earned their bachelor's degree or equivalent in the past 15 years. One benefit of this participant group is that these professionals have reflected upon their undergraduate experience and can relate these to student affairs theory and practice. Participants were over the age of 18 and partook in an interview to collect codable data.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will be used to guide this study:

1. How does participation in academic and co-curricular activities impact the way fat students find their sense of belonging on campus?
2. What are some of the factors fat students face that impact participation in campus life?
3. How does their identity as fat inform the students' relationships with peers, faculty, and staff on campus?

### **Significance**

Although the field of fat studies is relatively new, there are intersecting studies with student affairs research (e.g., Brewis et al., 2016; Creppezzi, 2007; Hetrick & Attig, 2009; Stevens, 2011; Stewart, 2018), but the currently available literature falls short of capturing fat students' experiences with relationship building. When scholars have tried to make sense of the challenges students of size face, they often utilize quantitative research that investigates measurable outcomes such as GPA, or the frequency of mental illness (Monzonís-Carda et al., 2021). As a result, most studies tend to focus on fat students' experiences in academic contexts, failing to investigate other important components of student life in higher education. To understand any subcategory of students, it is vital scholars consider what takes place outside of academic performance as well. For instance, scholars understand that in K-12 education, fat students struggle with loneliness and isolation, leading to academic challenges (Sjöberg, et al., 2005). In higher education, theorists have recognized that social isolation can lead to early departure from their institution (Nunn, 2021; Tinto, 1993). Yet little is understood about how fat students, specifically, feel about their incorporation into social and academic life on campus and how this may impact their departure from the university or their perception of campus life. This

study aims to contribute literature on fat students by exploring fat students' perceptions of their belonging on campus through academic and co-curricular engagement.

### **Definitions**

**Incorporation:** Incorporation, sometimes referred to as “membership,” is the association of students with others in various campus contexts. These associations lead to strong bonds that can be temporary or long-lasting. These bonds stem from a student's sense of belonging which takes the shape of social or academic belonging (Tinto, 1993).

**Student Departure:** Departure is defined as leaving one's institution before finishing their academic goal, the most common example being degree-seeking students who leave before receiving their degree. This exodus from their institution does not always mean they leave higher education entirely, they may transfer to another university, or return at a later point (Tinto, 1993).

**Social Belonging:** Belonging can be described as a sense of feeling accepted as you are and feeling valued by your community. Social belonging is distinct from academic belonging, as social belonging comes from institutions providing spaces for students to organize themselves into smaller groups. These groups often come with a sense of community around “niche” interests or affinities (Nunn, 2021).

**Academic Belonging:** Academics are often prized over other facets of student life at public institutions. As a result, opportunities for academic belonging, which refers to relationships between faculty and their classroom peers, foster academic success in their students (Nunn, 2021).

**Fat:** Fat studies encourage the usage of the word fat as a descriptor to dispel prejudice. Although the label “fat” can be used discriminatorily, fat is the preferred neutral adjective and is considered

the opposite of thin, like short and tall, or young and old in these circumstances. There are other well-meaning euphemisms often used when describing fat bodies, such as “heavy,” “husky,” or “plump” but their usage, when utilized to avoid the term fat, implies a negative view of fatness (Wann, 2009).

**“Obesity”/ “Overweight”:** The literature surrounding fat students is not all written with fat studies theories in mind, as a result, terms like “obesity,” and “overweight” are often used by researchers. These terms are common, in part, because in the U.S these words are seen as more acceptable or polite than the word fat as a descriptor. Many Fat Studies scholars point out the harm these terms covertly harbor. For instance, “overweight” normalizes weight prejudice because it implies a definitive and extreme goal instead of a more realistic bell curve distribution of human weight. Meanwhile, the history of the word “obese” medicalizes human diversity and is often used to justify anti-fat prejudice because it is seen as failing on the fat individual's part (Wann, 2009). Because much of the literature on this topic is riddled with this language, I have chosen to use quotation marks around these terms to draw attention to their usage and to note when it is unclear if the literature intended to use them as a synonym for fat as opposed to their literal meanings.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This literature review begins with the theoretical framework guiding the study, beginning with Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure, an established framework that underscores the impact of college students' sense of belonging on retention and academic success. This theory recognizes incorporation, the process of building social connections with peers and faculty, as beneficial for student outcomes. The current study will also integrate concepts from a developing framework specifically designed for fat students in academia first proposed by Brown (2016) to inform the discussion of fat student needs in higher education.

Following theoretical framing, this literature review will explore existing literature related to fat student experiences in K-12 and higher education such as challenges of anti-fat discrimination and bias. It will then explore avenues towards a sense of belonging for college students and how incorporation through academic and co-curricular engagement can lead to positive outcomes for university students. The synthesis of this literature will provide a deeper understanding of the current findings of fat studies scholarship as they relate to the college student experience and how fat students may interpret and navigate academic and co-curricular activities and social incorporation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Tinto's (1993) Institutional Departure Model places responsibility for collegiate success on the student, through relationship building between themselves and the institution. This theory holds retention as one of its ultimate goals and suggests that students who are socially engaged are more invested in their experience at college, thus improving their academic performance and

reducing the likelihood of the student dropping out (Tinto, 1993). The Institutional Departure Model is the theoretical framework guiding this study because it recognizes the importance of students' social engagement and its positive or negative impacts on other aspects of their college experience such as academic performance and retention. A theoretical framework that understands the importance of co-curricular and academic activities on student outcomes is crucial.

Tinto's (1993) model outlined steps students take towards incorporation, which first starts with separation and transition from past settings and bonds, such as the relationships between the college student and their high school and peers from their hometown. These steps typically take place early on in a student's college career and are then followed by the incorporation step. Tinto explains that a strong connection with one's community through incorporation creates resilience against departure. In this model, incorporation refers to a student's ability to navigate and create social or academic connections and bonds to their environment, and departure refers to leaving or transferring from the institution (Tinto, 1993). Incorporation or membership in one area of belonging does not completely safeguard from departure, however. For example, a student who is successful in finding community and creating strong bonds with peers through sports may still depart from their institution because they are unable to establish membership in the academic domains of college. For some, the motivators for departure are monetarily driven, fueled by external employment opportunities, or due to a lack of incorporation at their university. Students can form strong bonds with their institutions through academic and career goals, relationships with faculty, staff, and social bonds with peers and the university environment. Tinto does not

suggest that academic or social connections are more necessary than the other therefore this study examines both forms of belonging.

Tinto's (1993) framework noted that forming relationships between other students is a form of incorporation that leads to positive results, he further explained that social clubs (i.e., social or academic fraternities and sororities, intramural sports, etc.) work because they can create opportunities to establish repetitive contact with other students that might lead to strong social bonds. These co-curricular activities lead to incorporation and aid in other developmental goals such as academic success, which can also improve retention and graduation rates for students. A feeling of belonging is a marker of successful incorporation (Tinto, 1993). Ultimately, this theoretical framework serves as a guide to the importance of student belongingness and how it may impact the student in other developmental areas.

Fat students, like many other social-cultural groups of students, have unique characteristics that make their experiences different from the general population, from physical barriers of entry to discrimination from peers, faculty, staff, and more (Brown, 2016; Hetrick and Attig, 2009; Wann 2009). Because of their uniqueness, Tinto's (1993) Institutional Departure Model alone might fail to account for the specific needs of fat students and should be used in partnership with the perspectives of fat scholars and their theoretical frameworks. Brown (2016) recognized the absence of a student affairs theoretical framework that acknowledges the unique needs of students of size. She defined four key components of fat studies pedagogy to make recommendations for the creation of a framework that could be used by student affairs scholars that addressed the specific needs of these students: the *importance of activism, attentiveness to*

*issues of language, (avoiding) problematizing fatness as a medical issue, and placing the individual at the center of research* (Brown, 2016).

The key component *importance of activism* comes from the history of activism within fat studies. Many fat studies scholars have noted an innate politicalness of the issue grounding their studies in social justice. Much like other cultural fields of studies such as feminist studies, and African American studies social justice is a cornerstone of fat studies (Brown, 2016; Owens, 2008; Strings, 2019; Wann, 2009). Fat activism recognizes that almost everyone has internalized fatphobia (Brown, 2016), which means fat scholars should challenge their assumptions and stereotypes of fatness.

With *issues of language*, scholars have recognized the importance of word choice because fat people are still in the process of defining their community and because of this some terms like “obese” and “overweight” have been recognized as harmful and retired from general usage by fat scholars (Brown 2016; Wann 2009). People who identify as fat are reclaiming and determining which words best describe their experience. Fat Studies scholars avoid using terms like “overweight” and “obese”, without the use of quotation marks for this reason (Wann, 2009).

Brown (2016) noted that when conducting fat studies, scholars should avoid the common pitfall of *problematizing fatness as a medical issue*. It is important to avoid reducing fatness to a medical issue as it can lead to conflating issues of health with morality. This means that scholars need to also recognize fatness outside of the context of physical and medical health (Brown, 2016). And finally, it is important to *center the experiences of fat individuals* because fat studies scholars have discovered that their experiences do not match that of dominant “obesity” research conducted by mainstream paradigms (Brown, 2016).

Based on her observations and the key concepts, Brown suggests four considerations for student affairs professionals to consider when engaging with fat studies in higher education. They are to use appropriate language, challenge discrimination in educational practices and research, be skeptical of weight as a medical or developmental challenge, and, again, center fat students' experience in research (Brown, 2016).

Most of these concepts and considerations were directly considered for this study. With Brown's recommendations in mind, it was most appropriate to use her ideas in combination with Tinto's (1993) theoretical framework. Incorporating these ideas with Tinto's theory was challenging but required attentiveness to fat learners' needs and experience, and an understanding that incorporation may not happen as smoothly for this demographic as it would for the general population of students because of their unique experiences.

## **Background**

Before discussing the literature that relates to students, it is important to understand existing hurdles for fat people in broader society and where anti-fat bias comes from. Fat people face hatred, discrimination, and bias daily because anti-fat stigma is present in almost all aspects of life, from employment to travel, healthcare to education, fat people navigate a world that has deeply sewn roots of anti-fat prejudice (Gordon, 2020; Strings, 2019; Wann, 2009). In Europe and much of the West, these sentiments stem from a history of xenophobic ideologies that distinguished white 'thin' bodies from black 'fat' bodies as part of their racist mythos (Strings, 2019). By the early twentieth century in the United States, fatness was associated with blackness and sin, while slenderness was promoted by white society (Strings, 2019). Only after this message had been widely disseminated and accepted by the American public did the medical

establishment of the early 1900s begin making a concerted effort to combat fatness as a major public health initiative (Strings, 2019). Subsequently, in 2013, fatness was classified as a disease by the American Medical Association (Rosen, 2014). This sequence of events indicates that anti-fat bias has not historically been about health in the United States, but rather a result of using the body to legitimize race, sex, and class hierarchies (Stings, 2019).

The abundance of fatphobia in aspects of life in the United States is a relic of our history of racism and will likely be used to harm both black and fat people for some time, unbeknown to most. Today negative perceptions and stereotypes, such as fat folk being lazy, lacking self-control, ill, or socially and morally impoverished have created justifications for anti-fat bias in various places of our society (Ulian et al., 2020). By extension, unchecked fatphobia in university settings needs to be investigated and scrutinized to eliminate its normalization and the harm it continues to have. This study could help researchers and student affairs practitioners better understand the impact fatphobia can have on their campus community.

In part due to these stereotypes, there are indications that fatphobia in workplaces in the United States is increasing (Charlesworth and Banaji, 2019). Charlesworth and Banaji (2019) studied how different groups of people fair with implicit or explicit hiring bias and found that implicit bodyweight bias has moved away from neutrality over time. Moving towards neutrality in this study means that the demographic in question is seeing less implicit or explicit bias in hiring trends compared to majority demographics (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019). This study indicates that fat folks are seen less favorably as employee candidates and that attitudes towards fat workers are worsening.

Along with statistical research, on the lifestyle and fashion blog *Nylon*, Russo (2020) collected anecdotal stories of fatphobia in the workplace. These experiences highlight the importance of presenting as thin to be recruited or maintain employment in a competitive work environment. One story of note from an assistant professor shows that anti-fat bias is present in academia's hiring practices when one of his colleagues "advised him to slim down before submitting applications," because "In a challenging job market, the opportunities largely are handed to those who fit the thin ideal and society's definition of conventional beauty" (Russo, 2020, para. 5-6). Student reviews are also used in professors' career advancements and tenure. The attractiveness of a professor often influences student evaluation, and because fat is considered less attractive in the United States, a professor's size will likely impact their scoring from students (Escalera, 2009). As hiring, recruitment, and assessment trends move further away from accepting and normalizing fat workers, college students may see less body diversity of faculty and staff on campus.

While it is unclear how fat students are affected by having mentors or advisors who look like themselves, or how the absence of this diversity might impact feelings of belonging and relationship building, it is reasonable to assume that lack of representation may impact students who identify as fat. These trends within hiring may be like other forms of recruitment, such as within student groups like fraternities and sororities. Perhaps a potential element of belonging for fat students is seeing themselves represented in the faculty and staff around them. This study could better understand how relationships with fat professionals might impact students' success of belonging.

## **Fat student experiences**

### **Student experiences in K-12 education**

Although little research has been conducted explicitly concerning fat students' sense of belonging in college, the experience of students of size in K-12 education has been examined in a few studies. These studies do not often center on the student's voice through qualitative methods, rather, most studies tend to work with quantitative data. One of these studies found an association linked between "obese" high school adolescents and depression (Sjöberg et al., 2005). Sjöberg et al. (2005) noted that students who were "obese" had worse and more frequent symptoms of depression. The discussion that followed suggested that the size of the student, however, was not the cause, but rather the regular torment, humiliation, and shame from peers and teachers brought on by their weight increased cases of depression (Sjöberg et al., 2005).

Peers are a common source of harassment and bullying for fat students. Forty-nine percent of educational staff have reported witnessing weight-based harassment amongst their students (Puhl et al., 2016). Research on K-12 bullying has found that not only are the perpetrators and victims impacted by this behavior but so too are student bystanders who watch bullying occur; this may be because they internalize the motive of the bully (Craig & Pepler, 2003). Weight-based bullying can also lead to disordered eating among student populations (Puhl et al., 2016). Fatphobic bullying may create an environment where fat and non-fat students alike are at an increased risk of mental health issues that can impact their academic development.

Depression can lead to harmful effects on academic performance. Monzonís-Carda et al. (2021) examined the risk of depression and academic performance based on a student's weight-speculated habits that often lead to "obesity." These habits included a sedentary lifestyle,

high-caloric intake, and reduced hours of sleep, and are also common indicators of depression. This same study revealed that academic performance is inversely related to a student's risk of depression (Monzonís-Carda et al., 2021) suggesting that fat students are at an increased risk of depression and may perform worse academically as a result. The existing challenges for fat students with academic performance can stem from bullying and/or lifestyle, which can result in mental health difficulties. It is possible that these challenges negatively impact other areas of education. For this study, it is important to recognize that a fat student could be impacted by other pre-existing mental health conditions that could impede their academic and social belonging.

While depression can be a contributing factor to a student's K-12 academic performance, so can anti-fat bias in the classroom. A German study by Dian and Triventi (2021) that evaluated grade discrepancies between "average weight" students with "overweight" and "obese" students found that, with other variables controlled, "obese" students were subject to harsher forms of penalty in evaluation from their teachers. They concluded that being fat rather than "average weight" has a larger effect on the bias from teachers than being male or female, a bias that has garnered significantly more attention from scholars (Dian & Triventi, 2021). This study indicates that there are several reasons fat students may struggle academically, even when depression is not involved. Anti-fat bias may also play a role in college classrooms as well, based on findings from Dian and Triventi's study, fatphobia and discrimination from faculty members may exist and could impede a student's sense of belonging on campus.

## **Student experiences in postsecondary education**

Studies that have focused on fat students in higher education have illuminated the social stigmatization of fat students from peers and university professionals across most areas of student life (Brewis et al., 2016; Brown, 2016; Crepezzi, 2007; Hetrick & Attig, 2009; Levitt, 2004; Stevens, 2011; Stewart, 2018). This anti-fat stigmatization leads to many issues for this demographic including challenges with body image and disordered eating (Bailey et al., 2020; Brewis et al., 2016; Levitt, 2004). Being a part of a heavily stigmatized group or internalizing society's anti-fat message can create low self-esteem issues for some students (Crepezzi, 2007). Students with low self-esteem can become their own worst critics and may count themselves out of social and academic opportunities for fear of rejection (Crepezzi, 2007). One study described anticipated stigmatization as a hindering factor for fat students as they presume others will not include them, based on either past experiences or anxieties, resulting in not taking chances on social inclusion (Stevens, 2011). Social hang-ups can be an obstacle for fat students, but so too are layouts of physical campuses.

College classroom seating comes in many forms, but many institutions have chairs that are difficult for students of size, such as desks with metal chairs and an attached writing surface or lecture hall seating with hinged desks (Hetrick & Attig, 2009). Fat scholars do not see the physical discomfort caused by the desks' construction as an unfortunate side effect, but rather they see the pain as a symptom of an intentional effort from universities to shape students' minds and bodies (Hetrick & Attig, 2009). While this view may be critical of the institution, it is apparent to fat scholars how un-inclusively classroom spaces are designed. Students of size are also aware of how seating and spacing impact their ability to navigate through campus. Fat

students have noted that thin students avoid sitting near them in both the classroom and on public transit such as school buses (Hetrick & Attig, 2009; Stevens, 2011; Stewart, 2018). Some students would rather stand on buses to avoid sitting next to a fat student because they are uncomfortable with making a few inches of sacrifice and would rather not deal with them (Stevens, 2011). These challenges related to their physical environment can also bring along shame and embarrassment which has the potential to create a cycle of increased self-esteem issues and anxieties concerning social settings on campus (Crepezzi, 2007; Levitt, 2004; Stevens, 2011; Stewart, 2018). Physical space is important to consider for this study because it is likely challenging for fat students to find a sense of belonging in an environment that many fat scholars have determined to be hostile to large bodies.

### **Sense of belonging**

Social belonging through co-curricular activities may improve academic performance and encourage academic belonging. Nunn (2021) identified a distinct difference between social belonging and academic belonging, although both contribute to the retention and development of the student. Student connections with peers and faculty can be cultivated in both of these settings through regular interactions anchored around certain interests or topics. High-impact practices also give students unique opportunities to become socially and academically involved with communities of peers on their campus and to stay invested in their academics (Dumford et al., 2019; Ribera et al., 2017; Ryan, 2020) Social belonging tends to have a focus on a mutual “niche” amongst members of a campus community. Regular meetings of these communities allow for strong connections to be made. Similarly, in the classroom, students congregate and work together regularly around subjects of study which give students an easy way to become

integrated with peers (Nunn, 2021). Both academic and social belonging is important, missing one can result in an early departure from the institution, therefore it would be beneficial to offer these opportunities in and outside of the classroom (Nunn, 2021; Tinto, 1993).

### **High-impact practices**

Various student affairs scholars have investigated the contribution of high-impact practices on students and how they might improve students' sense of belonging on college campuses. In one study concerning first-year students, Ribera et al. (2017) discovered that students from underrepresented demographics, such as Black and Latinx students, had concerning gaps in their sense of belonging amongst peers and their institution. However, if they participated in high-impact practices (such as learning communities, service-learning, research with faculty, and campus leadership) students felt more connected to their peer community (Ribera et al., 2017). Student involvement in high-impact practices is relevant for this study because it recognizes that other underrepresented populations of students historically struggle to find a sense of belonging. Implying that through high-impact practices, most populations of students can buffer against isolation and departure from their campus community in some way (Ribera et al., 2017).

Many different high-impact practices can help students to integrate with peers, faculty and staff, and their campuses. For example, one study found that living on campus helps many first-year students build strong relationships with roommates or their learning community and combats isolation and loneliness (Dumford et al., 2019). For senior students in this study, data suggested that living off-campus, but within walking distance, also improved their sense of belonging as they were more likely to be living with peers in shared apartments (Dumford et al.,

2019). Accessibility to conducive environments for students to build relationships such as housing is an opportunity for students to build connections with peers.

Another high-impact practice for student incorporation is Greek life. Ryan (2020) studied the impact Greek life can have on the transitional success of first-generation students, notably, he recognized that these students often find great success in building relationships with peers, helping to improve confidence, build resistance to departure, and strengthen their leadership abilities. A strong sense of belonging can also be fostered through participation in study abroad opportunities (Clarke et al., 2020). The shared experiences and support gained between members of study abroad programs often lead students to strong relationships that were continuously maintained after returning home (Clarke et al., 2020). High-impact practices and favorable living environments contribute to a sense of belonging and are important to recognize in this study because first-generation students are just as likely to be impacted negatively or positively by their participation or lack of participation in these opportunities.

### **Academic belonging**

Academic engagement can be very handy for students to become incorporated. Scholars have described many components of academic belonging that students have some control over, such as competence in coursework, and selecting a major that appeals to their interests and academic abilities (Nunn, 2021). Some challenges to academic belonging are competition amongst peers in their department or background experiences that do not properly prepare the student for college life (i.e., poorly resourced K-12 settings) (Nunn, 2021). Some contributing factors of academic belonging seen as outside of the student's control include classroom population, their professor's willingness to engage with students, and the method of instruction

(Nunn, 2021). High-impact practices such as in-class group assignments challenge students to collaborate with peers they may otherwise not have interacted with, from different backgrounds than their own, which can help foster a starting point for relationships to form (Kuh & Schneider, 2008).

Academic engagement could be very important for fat students because a sense of belonging might come more easily in the learning environment rather than a sought-out co-curricular experience that could otherwise be avoided due to personal insecurities or fear of rejection. It is necessary to recognize various avenues of incorporation so that the study does not miss areas of campus belonging.

### **Co-curricular and social belonging**

Co-curricular activities refer to organizations, clubs, and other activities facilitated by the university that sits outside the realm of academic course work and are typically designed by the university but can be student-operated (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). The outcomes of student engagement with co-curricular activities have been the subject of many studies, a topic that may pique student affairs researchers' interest because of their potential to help colleges and universities meet institutional goals (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; Rathore et al., 2018; Tahir et al., 2021). Engagement in these activities has been found to increase academic performance, reduce dropout rates, marginally lower rates of substance abuse, and reduce antisocial behavior (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Gains from engagement in co-curricular activities align with Tinto's (1997) framework which suggests that these efforts should reduce dropout rates and increase the incorporation of college students into their universities. Literature suggests that co-curricular activities lead to increased academic

gains as well. For example, Marsh and Kleitman (2002) indicated that students who participated in clubs and student organizations had a more positive perception of their university and attitude towards schoolwork and were considered more disciplined in their work than students who did not.

Despite abundant studies that point to a positive correlation between academic success and co-curricular activities, some scholars disagree with how critical co-curricular activities are to academic success. One such study claimed that only a strong academic curriculum could increase academic achievement and that participation in co-curricular activities had no noticeable impact on academic performance (Chambers & Schreiber, 2004). These studies complicate the discussion but are outnumbered by research that suggests the opposite is true. These complications bring nuance to the current study in that incorporation through social belonging does not always guarantee greater academic success and increased retention. It may be important to examine the types of activities that students participate in and whether or not they are beneficial for incorporation.

Some scholars suggest that a balance needs to be achieved between co-curricular and academic engagement; some studies indicate that co-curricular involvement can lead to concerns when time management becomes a problem. For example, Rathore et al. (2018) found that students who participate in activities that were compatible with a regular studying schedule performed better on exams than those who had irregular studying patterns caused by co-curricular activities. Tahir et al. (2021) warned that students who were over-encumbered with social participation had less time to study, but that students who participated in these co-curricular activities were more confident than their less-engaged peers. Like Tahir et al.

(2021), Black (2002) found that co-curricular activities have the potential to instead distract students from academics, impeding their studying and worsening academic outcomes.

Co-curricular engagement has also been linked to increased classroom attendance which comes with its benefits for academic achievement (Rathore et al., 2018). These students had more connections built with peers and found social life encouraged continuous participation in co-curricular activities and academics, creating strong resistance to departure (Rathore et al., 2018). Participation in co-curricular activities is not always beneficial for all student outcomes, but if students can strike a balance between co-curricular activities and their academics then their participation is well worth it (Rathore et al., 2018; Tahir et al., 2021).

Very few researchers disagree about the importance of student engagement in co-curricular activities (Black, 2002; Chambers & Schreiber, 2004). Instead, researchers have pointed to positive outcomes such as increased retention and positive perceptions of the university from students who are socially engaged (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; Rathore et al., 2018; Tahir et al., 2021).

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the purpose of this study is to better understand the specific challenges and experiences fat students face with finding a sense of belonging at their university. As evident in the literature, fat people face anti-fat bias and fatphobia in different stages of education which can harm their academic and social lives. Researchers recognize the importance of incorporating college-aged students to resist departure and achieve academic and professional goals. The journey of incorporation through co-curricular and academic engagement by fat students who face discrimination and bias from their peers and faculty is not well understood, nor are the

outcomes these students may achieve from these activities. This study may shed light on what fat students gain from engagement inside and outside of the classroom or what they may miss out on if they are unsuccessful in engagement which could greatly help the further study of the fat student experience in higher education.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This qualitative study used collective case studies with in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gain a better understanding of how fat college students engage in academic and co-curricular activities and how these students navigate feelings of belonging on campus. These interviews centered upon engagement on campus including participation in academic and non-academic settings, types of bonds they create inside and outside of the classroom, and how the existence of these relationships or lack thereof contribute to a student's sense of belonging. This qualitative study sought to uncover nuances that would otherwise not be possible through a quantitative framework. One of the advantages of a qualitative approach for this study includes an opportunity for fat student affairs graduates to contribute their own experiences on the topic to the field of study. Collective case studies were the preferred method for this study because they allowed the researcher to examine individual cases and identify common themes and experiences amongst them.

The research questions that guided this study are:

1. How does participation in academic and co-curricular activities impact the way fat students find their sense of belonging on campus?
2. What are some of the factors fat students face that impact participation in campus life?
3. How does their identity as fat inform the students' relationships with peers, faculty, and staff on campus?

## **Participants**

The participants of this study were college student affairs professionals and pre-professionals who self-identify as being fat during their time in undergraduate studies. Fat undergraduate students could be a hard demographic to have access to for this study because of remote learning efforts in the past two years due to Covid-19 and it is unlikely that many fat undergraduate students would associate with the term fat because of its related stigmas. Student affairs professionals were chosen because they were easier to access and additionally this demographic provides an interesting perspective on belonging as it is likely that they have considered and thought critically about higher education accessibility and structure.

All participants must be 18 years old or older. This study interviewed five participants and its sample size is comparable to other similar qualitative studies (Davis, 2021). Forty-five participants partook in an initial intake survey and were asked if they would like to participate in a follow-up interview. The five respondents accepted the survey invite and meet the study criteria. A diverse group of student affairs graduates was selected based on undergraduate institution type and region.

## **Sampling**

After permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct this study was granted, I utilized purposive sampling to recruit participants. Initial participants were recruited through a social media post on the Facebook group page Fat Student Affairs Professionals (Appendix C). This posting included the preselected study criteria. I selected this method of sampling because people who identify as fat are a unique demographic, and it could be harmful to presume how one self-identifies. I wanted to refrain from personally approaching potential

participants who may meet the criteria because, for some, being fat is not an identity they are comfortable with. Passively recruiting through social media pages, whose membership suggests comfortability with the term fat, avoided any potential conflict. Participants who responded to the initial survey were contacted and further introduced to the study and the expectations of their role should they choose to participate in the follow-up interview. In addition, they were given contact information for me and the chairperson of this study, Dr. Karyn Rabourn.

### **Instrumentation**

All participants were interviewed virtually to avoid complications with institutional Covid-19 policies. All meetings took place over Zoom. Zoom's built-in audio recording software was used during all interviews, it was the interviewer's responsibility to set up this software and to let the participants know when the recording had begun. The interviewer was in a room that ensured participants' privacy from listeners. The audio files were then sent to a third-party transcription service where the dialogue transcript was delivered securely to the researcher. Subsequently, the audio recordings were erased.

### **Data Collection**

My role as the primary researcher and interviewer was to set up recording software, conduct interviews, have the interviews transcribed, analyze the data, and report the findings. Interviews were scheduled for an hour, but actual times vary based on the discussion. Before the interview started, I collected demographic information from participants via an initial intake survey (Appendix B). This was to ensure the intersectional nature of fatness was considered as race, gender, or sexual orientation may also contribute to the student's experience. Further demographic questions were asked during the interview in case there were any other salient

identities not captured in the initial intake survey. After agreeing to participate in the interview, participants chose pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Once the interviews began, participants were only referred to by their pseudonyms.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, in which I had a series of questions to help guide the conversation with the participants. Once the interview began, I started with welcoming questions, which eased the participant into the question-and-answer process. The semi-structured interview format included a series of questions related to three topics that were used to guide the conversation (Appendix A). Participants were asked questions related to their identity as a fat student, their experiences with co-curricular and academic activities, and the quality of their social relationships on campus. These questions were pre-approved by the IRB. These questions guided the interview, but other questions were asked in response to what was discussed during the conversation. Conducting semi-structured interviews allows the interviewer to ask follow-up questions, this was done primarily for further clarification.

### **Data Analysis**

To ensure the validity of the data, member-checking must take place before analysis. This process involves reaching out to each participant after the interview to verify an accurate representation of their accounts was transcribed (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The first round of analysis will be in the form of open coding, followed by axial coding, which is then followed by selective coding using markers pulled from Tinto's (1993) framework. Developing selective codes will take place between the first and the second analyses, these may include phrases that indicate bonds, departure, or isolation.

## Open coding

During open coding, I went through each interview transcript line-by-line marking initial observations. This step is important to recognize any emerging concepts or themes, this was achieved by marking any similar word usage or concept indicators within thematic clusters (Williams & Moser, 2019). These patterns or thematic clusters helped to later inform the usage of selective codes. These notes were handwritten in the margins of the interview themselves.

## Selective Coding

The selective coding phase further refined emerging themes and started making sense of the interviews through the lens of the theoretical framework established by Tinto (1993) and the proposed framework components crafted by Brown (2016). This form of data analysis allows the researcher to work toward themes and eventually towards theory creation (Williams & Moser, 2019). The markers pulled from Tinto (1993) and Brown (2016) will aid in this step, by using terms noted during the open coding phase to define codes based on these theories, and their frameworks later helped lead the discussion portion in chapter five.

Table 1  
Coding Process Example

Theoretical Code (Theme)	Open Coding	Selective Coding
Connections with their University Community	Peers	Friends Classmates Co-workers Teammate Club members
	Campus Support	Supported Advocate Advise Community

	Assist
Faculty and Staff	Professor Teacher Advisor Leadership Older Fat People

### **Positionality**

As the primary researcher of this study, I need to disclose my positionality on this topic. I identify as a gay, white, non-binary, fat activist who has a robust history of student engagement with co-curricular activities during my time in college. I am also pursuing a career in student affairs and hope to one day work with identity resource centers on college campuses. I am very passionate about fat studies as a field and hope to contribute to the field throughout my academic and professional career. During my time in undergraduate studies, there were certainly roadblocks to pursuing co-curricular and academic activities because I was fat. I did find that there were engagement opportunities on campus for some to catch my interest and for me to find a comfortable place to belong. In some ways, I became invested in this study because I want to know what strategies other fat students utilize to find successful incorporation during their college journey. With this study, I hope I can better advocate for fat students' needs and to be able to articulate the experiences of this unique student group.

Researchers need to recognize their own biases and connections to their research to ensure their personal experiences do not interfere with the data collection and analyses. In qualitative demographic studies, it can be challenging to avoid researcher bias which comes with its unforeseen challenges (McFarlane-Morris & Dempster, 2020). With this awareness and help

from the thesis committee, I was able to proactively avoid making presumptions based on my own anecdotal experiences.

### **Summary**

This study of fat students was conducted through interviews discussing fat student affairs graduates' experiences with co-curricular and academic activities, building relationships and a sense of belonging, and their identity as fat students during their time in undergraduate studies. Participants were recruited on a Facebook group page, using a purposive sampling method. The anonymity of these participants is a priority and thus pseudonyms were chosen for each subject to protect their identity. These collective case studies were then analyzed individually and then as a group to find any emerging themes in the data, and the researcher used existing theoretical frameworks to make sense of these thematic clusters. There were similarities and differences between their accounts that lead to a fruitful discussion and the results will hopefully further the knowledge scholars have about the impact of social engagement on marginalized identities.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

In chapter 4, I present the findings of this study. I begin with some context, including participation information and narrative profiles. Following that, I present various major themes that emerged from the data and group them into three categories. These major themes include information concerning: being fat on campus, social and academic incorporation, and connections with their university community.

### **Context**

This study collected demographic information from forty-five student affairs professionals who are members of the Fat Student Affairs Professionals Facebook group via an initial intake survey. This group page had 652 members as of February 2022. From the initial forty-five respondents, thirty-seven indicated that they would like to participate in a follow-up, hour-long, post-survey interview. Invitations were sent to twelve participants, selected by their responses to the initial survey to ensure a diverse group of participants was interviewed. The first five subjects who responded to the invitation, agreeing to participate in the interview, were selected.

### **Participants**

Of the five participants, each provided verbal or written consent to the study process, and each showed enthusiasm for the study and a willingness to participate. Each participant was over the age of 18 and self-identified as having been fat during their time in undergraduate studies. In addition, each participant used a pseudonym to protect their identity. Throughout the recruitment and interview process, participants were reminded of the voluntary nature of their participation, the fact that they did not need to answer any questions they were uncomfortable with, and their

ability to withdraw consent at any time. To ensure anonymity, the undergraduate institutions they attended are not mentioned, as well as where they currently work.

### **Ashley**

Ashley (she/her) graduated from a Mid-Atlantic private liberal arts college between 2010 and 2015. Ashley identifies as a white, Jewish, queer, and bisexual woman. During her time in undergraduate studies, Ashley used terms such as plus-size, and the Yiddish word *zaftig* which is comparable to the term curvy, to avoid using the word fat to describe herself. However, she recognizes that the culture in the United States has evolved and is happy to see that the term fat is being used and reclaimed, and has since adopted the term to describe herself. During her undergraduate studies, Ashley was active in both academic groups such as the German language club as well as co-curricular activities such as ice hockey, hiking, and camping, she also volunteered in her campus environmental group.

### **Elizabeth**

Elizabeth (they/them) graduated from a Midwestern public university in 2020. Elizabeth identifies as a white, non-binary, first-generation, and bisexual student. During their undergraduate studies, Elizabeth would avoid associating themselves with the word ‘fat’, preferring to use terms such as plus-size or curvy on social media and dating apps. In graduate school Elizabeth changed their mindset around the term, influenced by their passion for social justice, and by recognizing the oppression of fat people they began to reclaim the term fat and use it to describe themselves. Elizabeth was very academically involved on campus, partaking in

the first-year honors college, excelling in ancient language courses, and is passionate about writing.

### **Jennifer**

Jennifer (they/them) graduated from a Mid-Atlantic public university between 2015 and 2020. Jennifer identifies as white, low-income, non-binary, and as a physically disabled person. At the beginning of their undergraduate studies, Jennifer greatly preferred the term plus-size, but in their later years of undergraduate studies, they became radicalized by size politics and started identifying with the term fat. Jennifer was very involved in co-curricular activities during their time in school, they were a Resident Assistant, volunteered and worked with their Center for Women and Gender Equity, was involved in the creation of a peer support group for survivors of sexual assault, and participated in various forms of political activism around campus.

### **Michael**

Michael (he/him) graduated from a New England private university in 2020. Michael identifies as a white, Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income student, and as a gay man. During his undergraduate studies, Michael internally identified himself as fat, however, he never voiced this term externally. He felt that his size was apparent and did not require him to express it to others. As Michael grew older, he became more comfortable with the term 'fat'. Michael described himself as a social butterfly, and that his undergraduate experience came with a level of fame around his campus, he also expressed fond memories of his time as an Orientation Leader and building many connections with peers and faculty around campus.

## **Shawna**

Shawna (she/her) graduated from a Midwestern community college between 2015 and 2020. Shawna identifies as a white, low-income, cisgender, queer woman. During undergraduate studies, Shawna would avoid acknowledging her body or would use the term bigger to describe herself. Since then, she has become more comfortable with the term fat and uses it to describe herself, however, when speaking with thin people in a professional setting she catches herself reverting to using a euphemism when describing herself to avoid uncomfortable denial of her size by others who see the term fat as a negative thing. She does not feel this same need to change her vocabulary around other fat people. Shawna described herself as a typical “over-involved budding student affairs professional” and she participated in her school's activity board, worked at the school’s recruitment center, and as a liaison to her school’s president.

While the participants share a lot of similarities, such as being either LGBT or a member of the queer community, each participant identified as white, and each of them brought a level of excitement and interest in size justice to the table. Because this study was limited to participants who work in student affairs, the experience of fat students is likely much broader than that of these participants. These participants were highly engaged fat students, and because they graduated up to 11 years before this study, their experiences could be reasonably different from current fat students.

It is also important to recognize their differences before evaluating the findings. Each of the participants brings their unique perspective and personality to the discussion, and participants graduated from their undergraduate institutions at different times in the past eleven years and at

different stages of their own lives. These similarities and differences aid in providing additional nuance to this study. In the next section, I will introduce my key findings from the interviews.

## **Findings**

As stated in chapter three, where I established guidelines for the coding process, three major themes emerged from the data. These three themes encompass a wide breadth of emerging subthemes that showcase how participants navigated social belonging and inclusion as fat undergraduate students. They also cover various aspects of life as a fat student, and unique obstacles this demographic experiences. The three major themes are; being fat on campus, social and academic incorporation, and connections with their university community.

### **Being Fat on Campus**

The first major finding that emerged was how being fat impacted the participant's college experience on and around campus. These were not necessarily negative experiences, but participants expressed having to overcome or navigate through physical, social, and mental complications in ways that others did not. Under this theme, I share what participants had to say during the study about identity development, seating, university promotional clothing, and food culture.

### ***Fat Identification***

Because the fat community is still defining itself and attempting to normalize and standardize terminology and because it had been anywhere between a few years to over a decade since participants were in school, it was important to consider how participants' self-identification may have been different during their undergraduate studies than it is today. It

can be safely assumed that the participants of this study are now comfortable with the term ‘fat’ as they were recruited from a dedicated Facebook page for fat student affairs professionals, however, each participant was asked about how they identified themselves during school, how they identify currently, and if they don’t align, how did they change their thinking around their identification. A common theme amongst participants was that they initially rejected or avoided associating with the term ‘fat’, but they eventually grew more comfortable with it throughout their education. For Elizabeth, this was brought on by learning more about social justice:

It wasn’t until I kind of, you know, got to grad school or maybe when I started thinking more on the leftist, radical lines of thinking about social justice where I began thinking about fat oppression that I kind of came into this label of fat that I’m comfortable with now. But I definitely would have used the term plus size or if I was on a dating app or at a party would have gone with curvy.

When talking about how they used to identify themselves, many of the participants described using some other euphemism to make themselves and others more comfortable. Shawna also explained how she, even today, uses terms she thinks will be more palatable to different people depending on who she is speaking with:

I definitely feel like my identity has changed since undergrad. Um, I don't think I would have like openly said ‘fat’. I’d probably say bigger, or I would use some other euphemism for my body, or I just wouldn’t acknowledge it. Since I have gone to grad school, and am now in a professional role, I personally identify with the word fat. I do see myself when talking to straight-size people I’ll use “of size” or I also say, “bigger body”.

The oldest participant in this study, Ashley, who graduated from their university eleven years ago, reflected on how different things are for fat people today:

Oh my god, I wish I grew up today because I didn't have words for myself. Like I knew I was fat, but I didn't want to call myself fat because that was bad back then. So, I used all the euphemisms like plus-size and curvy, I'm actually Jewish and so there's a movement to reclaim the word *Zaftig*, which is a Yiddish word, that basically means curvy.

From the use of plus-size, curvy, student of size, bigger, and *zaftig* it was clear that participants initially distanced themselves from fat.

Eventually, the importance of social justice in providing the words to describe themselves was felt in almost every participant's interview, and how learning more about fat as an identity lead to many of the participants expressing relief from discovering that there is a growing community normalizing their existence. Learning about fat activism helped them describe or identify fatphobia as well. Jennifer explained how finding fat activism helped her:

I definitely think as I got further along in college, I recognized more of this and that didn't mean it went away, but I was much more aware of it and would just, I could put a name to it, which I think was helpful for me. It took some of my own self-shame and self-blame off of it... It's not my fault that I can't fit in these desks, it's the university's fault for not having size-inclusive desks.

For Jennifer, identifying with the community allowed her to recognize injustice and call it out. And for many of the participants, a very common experience of injustice for them was inaccessible classroom seating.

### *Classroom Seating*

Each participant was asked about how they identified during undergraduate studies and how it might have changed, however, only one participant expressed that he did not necessarily put his size into words during undergrad. Michael indicated in the interview that during his undergraduate studies being fat was seen as less an identity for him but rather an unspoken fact, but he explained that he was still confronted with his size in academic spaces:

I would say it was probably just more of a detail about me...I became very conscious about it in classrooms, at desks. In general, I'm like, oh, I know I'm not going to fit there, or it's not going to be a comfortable day. Or a comfortable semester. The relief that I would feel if it was a lecture-style hall, and you just kind of sat in a swivel chair, and you had a moment of like a sigh of relief that would come over from that. But other than that, I just kind of saw it as another fact about me.

As an undergraduate student, Michael never felt compelled to acknowledge his body size because it rarely mattered to him. It was in classroom spaces where he was forced to consider his size because of the discomfort he felt at certain desks. Michael also recalled complications with classroom seating when asked about participation in the academic spaces:

I do think my comfortability in the class like physically, would [impact] my participation. 'Cause if I'm just not comfortable, I'm not having a good time. I'm just trying to get through this. I don't want to talk. I just want to get out of this seat as soon as possible because I can't feel my lower back anymore.

Shawna also brought up her concerns with seating when asked to define her experience of being a fat student.

I probably felt [fat] the most in the classroom setting, like how much room my body was taking up, especially in those desks that are connected. I hate those fucking desks. They were just, I could never fit into them. ... it was painful during class to have to sit in chairs that didn't fit my body. And then it just made me more self-conscious during class because I was hyper-aware of the spaces that I was taking up within the space where I don't think my straight-size counterparts had that same level of awareness, or at least they weren't going through the same experience.

Shawna later returned to the topic of hyper-awareness of her body.

...going back to the hyper-awareness and my body, being at the forefront of my mind, it took up so much space in my mind that I'm sure it hindered my overall focus in the classroom.

Physical pain and discomfort were often brought up by participants when discussing academic spaces. Participants mention the desk material, structure, and size as being different causes of pain. Some participants took steps to avoid the issue altogether. Jennifer recounts adjusting her courses to avoid this issue:

I distinctly remember avoiding scheduling three-hour classes in this one building because they have really old metal desks that would cause me to get cramps in my hips...I had to literally restrict what classes I took because of the desks... I would distinctly choose where I'm going to use the bathroom on campus based on if the building is older or newer. Are the stalls big enough to accommodate me?

Similarly, Elizabeth describes the anxiety classroom seating would bring them and how they would prepare ahead of time in a way that their thin peers did not:

Yeah, I have a personality that I like to plan pretty far ahead. So what I would do is when I got my class schedule the week before classes I would go to the different classrooms that I knew I had classes in and I would pick a seat and I would make sure it was comfortable and [on the first day] I would go there ahead of time to make sure that when I'm already nervous about getting places and it's really busy that I knew where I was going to sit already, that way I felt comfortable enough in the space and I didn't have to worry about it.

For these participants, body size had a very real impact on their time on campus, and for most, this was something that they could not entirely ignore or avoid. There will be other themes explored in this chapter that touch on how the participants avoided emotional, or social discomforts, but next, we will look at another physical point of concern.

### ***University Promotional Clothing***

While many of the participants were fairly involved on campus, which will be discussed later in this chapter, a noteworthy experience for the participants was how university T-shirts were a major source of discomfort and caused feelings of exclusion. T-shirts are often given out for free to students for various reasons, such as promotional material, prizes, or participation in some student employment. Jennifer shares their experience with T-shirts as not being accommodating:

Whenever events happen on campus there are free T-shirts, they never have a T-shirt that would fit me...I always hated that feeling of like, "oh, here's your free T-shirt," cool, this is an extra-large, that will fit my thigh.

Jennifer also comments on a related occurrence, where even well-intended size inclusion can still be disrupted by unaware or inconsiderate peers.

Oh, the two 3xl's that we had? Yeah, people that are size medium took them because they're really into oversize clothes.

Michael also recalled his discomfort with asking for accommodations to be made for T-shirt sizes:

When we order swag, T-shirts, every form that I have seen never, ever has my size. So, I either had to put the largest size that's there and like a comment saying, *Hey, I actually need this size...* That was always the thing that I was not looking forward to... I kinda had anxiety around that because that's when I had to verbally indicate, I am fat.

Short statements about university clothing came up in almost all interviews, but not everyone talked about it at length. As mentioned previously, not all of the discomforts had to do with physical barriers, in the next subtheme social discomfort will be discussed as a part of the campus experience of fat folk.

### ***Food culture***

For some of the participants, there was anxiety surrounding eating on campus. Sometimes this was for events, or employment training, while other sources of discomfort were from eating around peers and receiving comments from them. Michael explains his anxiety around eating at an event, and what lengths he took to avoid doing so:

I always get anxious when I have to go to an event and there's food involved and I'm kind of expected to eat... I always have to come up with an excuse like, *Oh, I ate already. I don't wanna. I'm fine.* I just came up with some excuse.

Jennifer also experienced judgment from peers which negatively affected their mental state:

...During R.A. training and like us having extremely structured meal times and like me kind of putting a limit on what's going to eat to fuel my body because I didn't want all the comments that come from like, "Oh, you're having pasta again?" or "Oh, you really like pizza don't you?" Those types of like not even backhanded compliments, but just like snide comments that would come from the staff I worked with... would really have an aggressive impact on my mentality whenever I was around people like that.

The shame Jennifer felt from comments caused them to adjust their eating habits and It became clear that participants were concerned with what their peers thought of them, whether they received criticism or not.

In each interview, when participants were asked to describe their time on campus common experiences were discussed, each participant brought up forms of physical discomfort as well as social and emotional discomfort. None of the participants shared positive experiences related to their fatness. This is not to say that they did not have positive experiences, in fact, each participant shared that they enjoyed their time on campus, however, while each participant had very different favorable experiences, they all had similar characteristics in the challenges they faced. The next major theme will connect some of the positive experiences with their overall inclusion on campus.

### **Social and Academic Incorporation**

An important aspect of this study was to investigate how participants navigated social inclusion and incorporation into campus life with their peers. In this major theme I will look at how participants successfully and unsuccessfully involved themselves with peers in academic

and co-curricular activities, and any challenges they may face in doing so. Topics discussed in this section include engagement, presumed prejudice, humor, and dating.

### ***Engagement***

Each of the participants shared rich and robust undergraduate experiences of participation in either academic and/or co-curricular activities. Their involvement during their undergraduate experience was not unexpected as each of the participants are student affairs professionals. Of the participants, Elizabeth was the least involved in co-curricular activities but shared the most comfort of any of the participants within academic spaces. Meanwhile, the other participants opted to speak more about their time in co-curricular activities when reminiscing about fond memories at their university. Many of the participants were involved in campus work such as Resident Assistants and Orientation Leaders. During his time as an Orientation Leader, Michael shared that he had quite a lot of notoriety around campus:

I was a social butterfly... It got to points where I couldn't even get to one building to another within a two-minute walking distance without having to say hi to, like, a million people. That's just how it was. I knew everyone and everyone knew me.

He went on to say that because he was an orientation leader he was put on a pedestal and that this was very different from his time in high school. It was his first chance for people to recognize him and to know him for his personality.

Meanwhile, Shawna had a very busy schedule of co-curricular activities. In her interview she shared a lot of activities that preoccupied her time in college:

I was, you know, the typical over-involved budding student affairs professional. I [was involved in] campus activities board, I worked in the recruitment center, I was the liaison

to the president, I worked on a mental health board, ... I did a lot of knitting...I liked hiking, hanging out with friends, I like to be outdoors a lot... I became an orientation leader...I was basically on any sort of task force that needed a student representative. There were not many areas of campus life left untouched by the participants of this study. Many of them expressed compassion for advocacy and social justice, involvement in student leadership, and academic coursework or related recreational activities. Participants spoke fondly of their time in these activities. In the next section, participants share some challenges they faced in social settings.

### ***Anticipated Stigmatization and Prejudice***

The participants were asked about being fat in the social landscape of their university. Many participants brought up self-selecting out of various friendships, clubs, and other opportunities on campus, sometimes because the participants presumed they would be excluded from the group or that they may face cruelty from peers. All five of the participants were active in academic or co-curricular activities, but when asked about whether their fatness ever created social obstacles Elizabeth explained that:

100% yes. I think my personality and how I go about the world, like thinking about social justice, I would have maybe done really well in Greek life...you see the sororities hauling girls from the walkway and being like, “*you* look like you would be a good fit. *You’d* do great here. *You* look like just the person who would do well here.” And like, as if that person would ever even look in my direction... I simply was not invited to [Greek life] because of my size.

The participants were asked a series of questions about how, if at all, their fatness impacted their social and academic involvement. The purpose of these questions were to determine whether these subjects experienced any correlation between being fat and the type, quality, or intensity of their engagement with their campus through academic and co-curricular activities. Participants frequently brought up self-doubt or anxiety about fitting in with their peers. When asked if they felt as though their fat identity impacted their relationships throughout undergraduate studies Jennifer stated that:

I do. I think that it probably held me back from trying to be the person that has a whole bunch of friends and goes out and goes to parties and is a social butterfly. Uh because while I was really social in terms of extracurriculars and activism and things like that, I wasn't in other ways, I kind of got afraid to go out and put myself out there and be that person that gets invited to go to social gatherings... I think a lot of that had to do with me being fat and thinking, "oh, no one's going to want to be around me. I'm annoying and like all I ever talk about is fat activism and like intersectionality and things like that, and no one wants that person at the party.

Jennifer also brought up concerns about fitting in with Greek life:

I was terrified about ever joining a sorority because of my size and figured that I just would not be accepted in a space like that as a larger person because my perception of sororities was everything you see on TV, like "Legally Blond" where everyone's really, really thin and pretty and blond... In hindsight, sometimes I wish I had broken out of that shell and just tried it out.

Avoiding possible judgment and anxiety caused by how peers perceive them was common among most of the participants in some capacity. Interestingly, what emerged from this discussion was methods employed by the participants to avoid social stigmatization or prejudice, and to increase their acceptance by peers.

### ***Humor***

A few unexpected themes emerged during interviews with participants. One was the use of humor to provide “value” to their social groups. Participants described using humor to avoid exclusion and to strengthen relationships with peers. Ashley explained that because she was not conventionally attractive, she felt the pressure to provide something for her peers to remember her by:

I don’t know if it’s because I’m fat or if it’s because I have other insecurities, but I always feel like people are going to forget about me. And that’s been a lifelong thing. So if I make them laugh, surely they’d remember me right? And also it brings value when you’re funny. Like, I don’t bring value with my beauty, and we’re taught that, growing up as a cis woman, that’s what I was taught, your beauty is your worth. And I don’t have that, so I need to find my worth in other ways. I’ve always kind of been the funny one.

When Michael was asked how he would define successful and unsuccessful peer relationships during his time as an undergraduate student he explained that:

I think the most important thing for me is humor. I do believe I’m a very funny person. I have the ability to make people laugh just by saying dumb stuff, and if I’m able to have good banter with somebody then that is the cream of the crop for a relationship.

He later elaborated on his relationship with humor and friendship:

Humor is a very important aspect of my life, I definitely vibe with people who have the same humor or even have a better type of humor than I do. I truly picked such hilarious people to be friends with. I think that's something that is shared amongst every single friend that I have. It's very central to relationships as well.

Michael did not seem to rely on humor in the same way as Ashley, to mitigate insecurities, instead, humor was a great way for him to select close friends. In both of these examples, however, it seems like humor was a major part of their socialization with others.

### ***Dating***

The second unexpected theme that came up in quite a few of the interviews was topics concerning dating as a fat person or exclusion from this aspect of campus social life. For many of the participants who spoke about dating, they felt pressure to conform to beauty standards for acceptance by their peers, especially on dating apps. Jennifer described what it was like using Tinder during their college years:

I was in college when Tinder became a thing, and I distinctly remember thin fishing myself on my Tinder profile. I only posted selfies, not a full-body photo because I didn't want someone to swipe left on me just because they saw that I was a fat person... I wanted the Love Is Blind experience.

Perhaps this is another example of anxiety about social exclusion based on appearance, but Jennifer later went on to explain that:

I never really navigated dating outside of online dating because I wasn't the person who would get hit on at X, Y, and Z events... honestly, in hindsight, I'm happy I wasn't. But

at the time, it made me upset, like I'm out and about with other friends who are straight-sized folks and that was never me, I was the fat friend.

Ashley also expressed anxiety around dating in college as a fat woman:

How do I fit myself into this situation? I had no romance. I didn't date anyone in college, I didn't even kiss anyone in college. And it wasn't because I didn't want to, it was because- I mean, partially, because I was a little scared and I didn't approach anyone, but also no one approached me. It was very clear that I was the fat friend, I wasn't attractive to people. And so that felt really othering.

From talking about this topic with participants it became clear that many of them felt as though there was an ideal person they were meant to be in college and that for some reason they were not living up to this expectation. This internal conflict caused many of them to self-select out of dating on campus.

While being fat was expressed by the participants as one of the sources of their anxiety, it was not the sole cause. Elizabeth explains that:

My friends didn't understand why I had this I don't know, fixation? Or kind of a mental process of trying to figure out how to be, you know, young and fun, but also fat where people didn't want to date me, or I had a harder time in social situations because no one really took me seriously. My friends didn't understand that.

Elizabeth later reflects on dating when asked about whether their fat identity impacts their social relationships and they share the hurt that this exclusion caused them and how it impacted their college experience:

Yeah, absolutely. Mostly, it's a situation where I'm talking about dating with my girlfriends and we're talking about they're like, "Oh, yeah, I'm dating this person," (meanwhile) I'm not dating anyone. And I'm just like, Well, you know, at that age, the only thing I could think of why that would be s because of my size...(it) chips away at your confidence...(I was) not necessarily being like outright bullied or like harmed because of my size, but kind of this mental, societal, thing where I felt like I couldn't be a whole total person because of it.

Issues with self-doubt and self-esteem lead many of the participants to feel as though they were left out of a major component of college.

Participants spoke on various triumphs and challenges with social and academic inclusion. While there was anxiety and fear of stigmatization and prejudice causing self-selecting out, as well as methods being used to find a feeling of worth to their peers, there is more to understand about the participant's social lives on campus. In the following major theme, I will explore the participant's relationships with peers and faculty on campus.

### **Connections with their University Community**

This major theme explores how relationships with others impact students' social inclusion, how relationships impact self-worth, and how they help students see themselves in the landscape of campus culture. For many of the participants, a common re-emerging theme of the discussion was a point of comparison between themselves and those around them. For some, this was acknowledging how peers might not understand all that they are going through, or that campus support networks do not always consider how diverse bodies might need additional support. The subthemes covered in this section are peers, campus support, and faculty and staff.

## *Peers*

Participants were asked to reflect on their peer relationships during undergraduate studies, this might have included close friends, classmates, club and organization members, or student employment co-workers. One of the first things asked was how their peer's body types compared with their own. Ashley explained that her friends were all thin:

Slim. Athletic. Um, I was friends with a lot of people who I would classify as crunchy, hippie hypes. Like hikers, yoga practitioners. Very, very slim. Very much within the societal beauty standard of what a particularly feminine body is supposed to look like. Jennifer, who also expressed that all of her friends were thin, provided some additional insight showing how their friend's attitudes towards themselves and their bodies impacted Jennifer's relationship with their own:

They were all thin. I was, and now am almost always the fat friend... I've always had friends that are like straight size folks. I had those friends in college who are constantly working out and measuring everything they eat because they're like, "I'm fat, and I need to lose weight" and I'm just standing here like, *so what do you think I am?* Now I'm far more educated and recognize how eating disorders work and that doesn't mean that they think I'm a beached whale, they just have some body dysmorphia and can't imagine what their body actually looks like.

Elizabeth also reflected on how their friends were also commonly concerned about their own weight:

Everyone but me was always pretty thin and pretty athletic, like my friends growing up in high school. But then I would say my first couple of years of college were still very much

people who were always working out at the gym and would go on diets a lot because they would gain and lose the freshman 15, right?

A common occurrence among the participants was having friends who were very concerned with their own weight, this detail was shared in many of the interviews and caused varying levels of discomfort among the participants. Some of the participants have since changed their perspective on this since graduation, but it was clear that it stuck with them.

While many of the participants shared that most of their peers were thin, a few of them explained that this changed over their time in undergraduate studies. Shawna explains that:

I mean, it was pretty much all thin people. I didn't really have a whole lot of fat friends until basically the last couple of years.

The participants were also asked if their peers shared any salient identities with themselves including being fat. Michael explains that for him and his friends being fat was not always spoken about amongst each other:

Maybe for a few of them. Only in the sense that they also identified as fat. I think it was kind of an unspoken thing... There's one person I'm specifically thinking of. We not only shared a fat identity together, we shared a low-income identity together and there were a lot of things that we were able to talk with each other about that we couldn't talk about with other people.

For the participants who did have common identities with each other, it became clear that in most cases, unless one of the identities was being fat, fatness was not something commonly talked about between peers. The stand-out example of this was a friend of Jennifer's who was thin but also passionate about size inclusivity in the fashion industry.

Peers were a source of insecurity for some and a source of identity development for others. While each participant expressed having many thin friends in college, the impact of their social relationships differed amongst the participants. Participants also differed in the support they received from university partners.

### ***Campus Support***

Participants were asked to talk about their experiences with support on campus. Support could come from peers, as well as faculty, staff, and campus organizations. These questions were designed with the purpose to showcase any close connections fat students may have made during their time on campus to the institution itself, or any places connections were lacking. For the participants of this study, the results were very mixed. Michael expressed that he felt very supported by his campus:

100% I always felt supported. What really helped me be more confident with who I was was that no one looked at me and noticed my body first. They noticed my personality.

They supported and loved me for just being me... I did feel supported in that way by both my peers, professors, and staff members.

Like Michael, Shawna felt supported by her community, however, she had played an active role in receiving support:

I would say I did feel supported. I definitely had to do a lot of advocating, though. I was definitely outspoken in undergrad.

Elizabeth was also asked whether they felt supported by their campus community at their size and they explained that:

No, it wasn't that I wasn't supported. It was like it was not on anyone's mind that this was an identity that needed to be supported. It was completely off the radar from even from advisors or professors that I really, really liked and got along with. It was not something that was ever brought up.

Elizabeth brought up an interesting issue of how fatness is not necessarily on-campus employees' minds as a population of students who could need additional support. It is unclear if campuses are acknowledging fat student challenges and if attempts to address them are becoming any more common, however, the presence of fat folk on campus seems to be changing.

### ***Faculty and Staff***

Each of the participants in this study is now or is soon to be an employee of a university. Because of this, they were asked about where they see other fat people on campus, if at all. Shawna explained that during her time in undergraduate studies there were not many fat people employed by her university:

I will say there wasn't a huge population of fat people within my undergrad and especially in the leadership positions. Thinking back that's just kind of odd. Like I was typically one of the only fat people in the space.

Feelings of social isolation were not uncommon amongst the participants, it is unclear how a lack of fat mentors might impact a fat student's sense of belonging, however, while Ashley was not explicitly talking about her time in undergraduate studies, she did express relief after relocating to a region with more fat people:

I've been in therapy on and off my entire life for various reasons, but thinking back on the therapy that I did, like, I would go to the college counseling center. A lot of it was

focused on my body image, my feelings, and my self-confidence. And it wasn't until I moved to the south, where there are just normal old fat people walking around, that I actually felt okay with myself. I was like oh yeah, I'm normal. I'm not some freak. Finding representation among the people who surrounded her led to her feeling better about herself.

### **Summary**

Participants in this study shared quite a few common experiences amongst themselves, however, they all had their challenges, means of overcoming adversity, and personalities. In breaking these subthemes apart and grouping them by major themes it became clear that the experience of a fat college student is a complex issue and that there is work to be done to help these students create stronger bonds with their university and campus community. The information provided in chapter 4 will contribute to the discussion, and recommendations for practice and future research in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

### **Summary of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore fat students' sense of belonging at their university and to expand the literature about fat students where fat student voices are at the center of research. Participants were asked to share their experiences navigating campus, identity, and social and academic inclusion during their undergraduate studies. Two theoretical frameworks guided the research questions, design, and interpretation of the findings. Tinto's (1993) Institutional Departure Model was designed to understand how students use social and academic connections to foster strong relationships with their campus environment and university to resist departure. Brown's (2016) recommendations for a fat identity theoretical framework were also used to understand the unique characteristics of fat identity. Together, these frameworks were used to create the research questions of this study:

1. How does participation in academic and co-curricular activities impact the way fat students find their sense of belonging on campus?
2. What are some of the factors fat students face that impact participation in campus life?
3. How does their identity as fat inform the students' relationships with peers, faculty, and staff on campus?

This qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews. Participants were recruited on the Fat Student Affairs Professionals Facebook page. Five participants were selected to interview from an initial pool of forty-five student affairs professionals who partook in an intake survey. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to an hour in length. All participants identified themselves as having been fat during their undergraduate studies. After the interviews were

completed, audio recordings of the conversations were sent to a third-party transcription service. After member-checking with participants to ensure an accurate account of the interview had been captured, data analysis began.

During the coding phase, Williams and Moser's (2019) approach to coding yielded 237 initial observations that were grouped into rough categories. From these categories, clusters of similar related content emerged within them and were narrowed down into three thematic clusters. The three thematic clusters were: being fat on campus, social and academic incorporation, and connections with their university community (ex: Table 1).

### **Discussion**

This study sought to better understand how fat students find a sense of belonging in their campus community. The second research question of the study, *what are some of the factors fat students face that impact participation in campus life*, was addressed by some of the findings in the first thematic cluster *being fat on campus*.

Participants were asked a series of questions related to the development of their fat identity and the experiences of being fat as a college student. This is an important element of the research because issues of language are a component of the field of fat studies (Brown, 2016). While the field recognizes that the term fat is a neutral adjective (Brown, 2016), not everyone self-identifies with the term, and this study was able to ask participants how their self-identity developed.

Each participant acknowledged that they were not comfortable or fond of self-identifying with the word fat during the beginning of their undergraduate studies, but this changed for some in their later years in college. Instead, participants elected to use terms like chubby, curvy,

plus-size, or bigger to describe themselves. Participants cited learning more about social justice and size politics in school and from peers, which helped them become more comfortable with using the word fat as a neutral descriptor. All participants have since discovered the term and self-identify with it. Throughout their interviews, the five participants frequently returned to ways in which they felt uncomfortable or left out because of their bodies and the way their universities were set up.

A common source of discomfort discussed by the participants was classroom seating. The pain, embarrassment, or anxiety of attempting to fit in tight desks was brought up in each of their interviews as a prominent feature of the participant's experience being fat on campus. The types of seating available in classrooms that caused the most problems for the participants were consistent with Hetrick and Attig's (2009) description of desks with metal chairs and an attached writing surface or lecture hall seating with hinged desks, participants also expressed how distracting this was to their academic participation much like Hetrick and Attig (2009) stated it might. For the participants of this study, seating was a concern that confronted and challenged their academic success and the way they thought about their bodies. For many, this was a physical barrier that presented a challenge that they could not ignore, so much so, that participants felt anxious about how their entire semester might pan out if their classroom's seating is not size-inclusive. Participants described being in pain and attempting to contort their bodies to fit. They acknowledged that while their minds were focused on the pain and discomfort caused by the seating there was no space left to be focused on class. Some participants even took evasive action to avoid scheduling in classrooms they knew to have uncomfortable seating. This ultimately led to scheduling conflicts in their academic programming.

Many of the participants were involved in co-curricular campus programs like orientation leadership, resident assistantship, or members of their campus activity boards and leadership. This was often described in a positive light, surrounded by fond memories. Participants commonly brought up how associating with these student programs came with free university promotional clothing which created challenges for the participants. T-shirts can be a major source of anxiety and discomfort for larger bodies when their sizes are not included in the order sheet. What was described by participants was either that they needed to advocate for themselves and actively seek out accommodations for size-inclusive clothing options, or that at times participants were given the largest size the organization had ordered (typically a 2xl) and told to make do. Only one participant shared that they had their size custom ordered by supportive organizers, but this came only after asking for accommodations. When self-advocacy was not an option, participants found themselves forgoing the attire and feeling left out. Some described being further subjected to questions from their peers about not wearing the clothing for group photographs and having to embarrassingly explain to others how they did not fit the t-shirts provided.

The final topic in this theme had to do with eating on campus. The culture of food on campus is a complex issue, but for the participants of this study, food was a common source of anxiety. Eating around peers created a fear of rejection or judgment, which was caused by comments participants had received about their eating habits in the past. This led some participants to skip meals or change their eating patterns around peers altogether. The fear of anti-fat stigmatization was brought up several times during the participant's interviews, and in this case, created challenges with body image and disordered eating in a way that, what some

sources say, is common amongst this demographic of college students (Bailey et al., 2020; Brewis et al., 2016; Levitt, 2004). Inaccessible academic spaces, accommodating uniforms/group attire and perceived judgment of eating and food choices are some of the common factors that impact the participant's participation in campus life.

The first research question of this study, *how does participation in academic and co-curricular activities impact the way fat students find their sense of belonging on campus*, has some interesting findings found in the second thematic cluster, *social and academic incorporation*.

The participants in this study were very actively involved in social and academic activities on their campus. As discussed earlier, student leadership was a common source of connections for the participants. Some participants excelled in academics, while others did not, but each person spoke about their social life on campus fondly and listed multiple examples of membership and participation in co-curricular activities. This is, perhaps, unsurprising as subjects were selected from a Facebook group for student affairs professionals, which is a career path typically introduced to students through their engagement on campus. But what is important to this research is how their fatness interacted with their involvement.

While participants were involved in a diverse range of activities, a common occurrence was their self-selecting out of opportunities because of anticipated anti-fat prejudice and stigmatization from their peers. For instance, participants provided the example of Greek life as an environment that which they did not see themselves as being a good fit for due to their size, and the social behavior of fraternity and sorority recruitment reinforced this when they only saw their thin friends being approached. This is consistent with Stevens' (2011) research that

suggested that the anticipated stigmatization of fat students was based on either past experiences or intuitive anxieties, resulting in not taking chances on social inclusion.

A couple of unexpected themes emerged in most of the participants' reflections on their social life at their university. Humor was used by a few of the participants to create and maintain friendships with their peers. By one participant, this was seen as creating value for themselves within their social circle. This might point to the anxiety of exclusion or issues with self-worth. Dating was another theme that came up in a few of the interviews. Participants described feeling left out of this part of campus life, and that they were isolated from it because of their bodies as their thin peers did not share the same issue. Some participants self-selected out of dating while in college because they believed that dating was not for fat people. Other participants tried to date during college but did so through "thin-fishing," where they took "flattering" photos of themselves or photos that did not showcase their body for their dating apps to hide their size from potential dates. This too points to an anticipated fear of rejection.

Because participants were involved elsewhere on campus, and only spoke on a few occasions of avoiding opportunities that they may have otherwise enjoyed, it is not supported by the data that academic and social incorporation is inaccessible to fat students. Instead, this study suggests that for these participants, their fatness created slight hurdles and unique challenges, but incorporation into academic and co-curricular activities or a sense of belonging on campus was still readily available to them.

The third research question of this study, *how does their identity as fat inform the students' relationships with peers, faculty, and staff on campus*, has some movement towards an answer in the third thematic cluster *connections with their university community*.

We can understand how their identity as fat impacts their relationship with peers clearly when the participants were asked to describe their peers and the strong relationships they made on campus. Most of the participants described having thin friends during their early years on campus. Some of the participants described having close friendships with people who had their own internal anti-fat biases. They described that while their friends struggled with self-image, there was a lot of talk about weight loss and body shaming by their peers. Only having thin friends changed for some of the participants as they settled into their academic programs and made more like-minded friends or saw changes in their friend groups throughout the years. But this was a point of contention for some of the participants, as it took time to develop friendships with people who were either considerate of fat people or were fat themselves. No participants described having trouble making friends or struggling to maintain friendships throughout their time in college, so the data does not suggest that these participants struggled to make friends because of their size, rather, this data suggests that the participants valued fat friends or friends who were sympathetic and understanding of their size.

Participants had mixed reports on whether they received support from their campus community. Social and academic inclusion can come from support within the campus community, so it is important to recognize that without it students can become disconnected or at risk for departure (Tinto, 1993). Some participants expressed that their size was a non-factor in most of their interactions with academic faculty, campus staff, and peers and that they were treated with the same respect as their thin peers. While other participants described feeling like their size was completely ignored, and that the context of their physical body was not considered in programming or events. This can be harmful because there are certain activities that fat

students cannot participate in because of their size, but with proper acknowledgment of this, adjustments could be made to be more size-inclusive.

Finally, participants described their relationship with faculty and staff specifically in terms of representation. Participants expressed that they rarely saw their own identities in the leadership around campus. One even expressed feelings of isolation and that no one might relate to their experiences leaving them to doubt if the challenges they were dealing with were legitimate concerns. It was not until later in life did that participant recognize the importance of advocacy for fat people to bring more size-inclusivity to their community. Being alone on campus with a highly visible identity can bring isolation, however, none of the participants expressed that this was at all a concern worth leaving their studies early over.

The findings in this study showed that the participants are highly capable of seeking out and making academic and social connections on their campus, but that certain physical and social concerns create challenges unique to this demographic. With these findings in mind, I will examine and offer some recommendations for practice and future research. These recommendations will hopefully lead to more size-inclusivity on college campuses and will raise awareness that size-inclusivity is important for the success of fat students in college.

### **Recommendation for Practice**

As a researcher of fat studies and student affairs, some practice recommendations were very clear based on the data. While the interviewed participants, as students, did not overwhelmingly struggle with peer relationships, nor did they discuss any examples of not getting along with faculty or staff, each participant struggled to find comfort in academic spaces. This was largely to do with non-size-inclusive seating options. Educational institutions must be

intentional with classroom design and pay especially close attention to accessibility in the usage of desks and classroom seating. A way that this could be accomplished is to have a student affairs professional who is experienced in working with diverse student populations on the planning committee of new buildings or renovation projects. Another way is to create student testing groups to try out furniture before purchases are made that consist of students of various heights, weights, and physical abilities.

All of the study participants found a sense of belonging on campus. What did emerge from the data, however, was a need for visibility and recognition, early introductions to fat politics, and inclusive considerations.

Participants expressed not having many fat peers or faculty and staff to relate to their challenges. Throughout their schooling, they either had to ignore their shortcomings or advocate for themselves, which is taxing to expect undergraduate students to do. Some participants expressed feeling as though their size was completely ignored for better or for worse. As it currently stands, there is not much evidence that shows that weight inclusivity is being discussed or even considered by university administrations across the United States. This might contribute to the lack of accommodating academic seating, or other physical obstacles found around campus for fat individuals. Raising awareness of anti-fatness, weight bias, and body diversity could improve campus cultures around inclusivity and physical accessibility. This could be done through student programming or by including fatness as an identity discussed by diversity and inclusion departments of student affairs. Including fatness in diversity initiatives could also help with another point that was discussed by some of the participants which was how their development of conscientiousness to fat politics grew in college. Early introduction to size

politics gave students resources to better describe their situation and advocate for their own needs.

Finally, an easy adaptation university staff can make is to retire using t-shirt order forms that ask students to choose from pre-selected size options, and instead allow students to fill in a blank space. This can help fat students from feeling othered, or that their size accommodations might be a burden. Universities need to start expecting fat students to participate around campus so that they can plan accordingly instead of reactively. To help fat folk, universities should partner with size-inclusive clothing brands. A concentrated effort by university professionals to establish a safe and inclusive environment for fat students is a necessary step for mitigating the impact of anti-fat bias in our society.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study unveiled a surprising number of holes in fat studies and higher education research that could be fascinating to further investigate. As other literature on this topic has called for, more research needs to be done on fat students in higher education broadly. While this study adds to the current literature available concerning fat students, some specific themes of potential research emerged from the data. These include matters of intersectionality and an investigation into select areas of social life.

In this study, all five participants identified as part of the LGBT community. While this study did not intentionally seek out queer participants it became clear that their intersecting identities influenced their perception of social and academic inclusion on campus. Participants expressed being unsure whether their experiences were brought on by their fatness or by other identities, or a combination of many identities at times. Fatness presents unique forms of social

stigmatization within queer spaces and stigmatization is also impacted by culture and race. Future research might consider looking at how intersecting identities including fatness might impact how students navigate belonging on campus.

Participants also expressed various aspects of young adult social life that could easily generate their own studies. For instance, dating as fat brings unique challenges that could be explored in the context of higher education. Participants expressed feeling socially excluded from this dynamic stage of young adulthood, but little literature has been produced on this topic. Another dimension of social life discussed by participants that was not commonly discussed in the literature that preceded this study was the use of humor to create and maintain social connections with peers. This might not be unique to fat students, however, a study that explores the relationship and usage of comedy by fat people to fit into social settings could bear fruitful discussions as this was a common trend amongst the participants of this study.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study investigated thematic clusters found in the data produced from interviews with five participants. The findings were then explored in the discussion and related to the research questions that guided this study. Discussion centered around how the participants were successful in finding belonging on campus through social and academic connections with their peers. This success did not come without challenges, however, as their social and academic discomfort caused participants to hold back or self-select out of participation in some aspects of student life due to fear of social stigmatization.

While this study is far from a comprehensive study of fat students' sense of belonging on campus, the testimonies provided by the participants are an important starting point for future

scholarship. More literature is needed to better understand this population of students, but student affairs professionals can start raising awareness of anti-fat bias and anti-fat stigmatization to bring light to the experiences of fat folk navigating a world that so frequently ignores their presence.

This study brings the voices of student affairs professionals, reflecting on their own experiences as fat during their undergraduate studies, to the body of literature on fat studies and higher education. Participants were excited to share their stories, reflect on their identity development, and provide new perspectives on the fat experience. Their love of student affairs was felt in their discussion, and their willingness to challenge themselves and others to think critically about size politics and its implications on the students they work with was truly inspiring.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

#### **Welcoming questions:**

Tell me why you chose your university.

Tell me about your favorite campus experience so far.

#### **Questions related to Fat Identity:**

Many students identify as fat, students of size, midsize, etc. how do you identify yourself?

How would you define your relationship with your identity?

How would you define the experience of being fat?

What's it like being fat on this campus?

- Have you experienced barriers while on campus?

#### **Questions related to co-curricular and academic activities:**

What sort of hobbies do you enjoy?

- Why do these resonate with you?

How would you describe your participation/involvement on campus?

What motivates you to participate in campus activities?

- How would you describe co-curricular activities you've enjoyed
- How would you describe co-curricular activities you didn't enjoy

How would you describe your participation in the classroom?

Have you ever considered leaving your university, either temporarily or permanently? If so, how would you describe your motivations for leaving? If not, how would you describe your motivations for staying?

#### **Questions related to social relationships:**

How would you describe your approach to creating peer-to-peer relationships?

How would you describe the relationships you have built since arriving at your university?

- How would you describe your successful relationships?
- How would you describe your unsuccessful relationships?

How would you describe any shared identities amongst you and your strongest relationships on campus?

When you think about the strongest relationships you've made on campus, how would you describe what you have in common with them?

## **Appendix B: Intake Survey Questionnaire**

Confirm you have read the Informed Consent Document and wish to continue

☐ I have read the Informed Consent Document and wish to continue

Confirm that you meet the following criteria:

Be 18 years or older;

Be a resident of the United States of America;

Hold a bachelor's degree (or equivalent);

Identify yourself as fat during your undergraduate studies;

Be a current member of the Fat Student Affairs Professionals Facebook page.

☐ I meet the above criteria

What is your age?

- ☐ 18 - 24
- ☐ 25 - 34
- ☐ 35 - 44
- ☐ 45 - 54
- ☐ 55 - 64
- ☐ 65 - 74
- ☐ 75 - 84
- ☐ 85 or older
- ☐ Prefer not to say

When did you graduate college?

- ☐ Before '80
- ☐ '80 - '85
- ☐ '85 - '90
- ☐ '90 - '95
- ☐ '95 - '00
- ☐ '00 - '05
- ☐ '05 - '10
- ☐ '10 - '15
- ☐ '15 - '20

☐ '20 +

What institution type did you earn your bachelor's degree (or equivalent) from? E.g., public, private, HBCU, religious, etc.?

\_\_\_\_\_  
What U.S. region was this institution located in? If you graduated outside of the U.S. please indicate that here.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Did you attend more than one institution to obtain your degree - if so, how many?

\_\_\_\_\_  
What is your gender? Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Man
- ☐ Woman
- ☐ Transgender
- ☐ Non-binary/non-conforming
- ☐ \_\_\_\_\_/other.
- ☐ Prefer not to say.

How would you describe yourself? Please select all that apply.

- ☐ White
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ \_\_\_\_\_/other.
- ☐ Prefer not to say.

In an effort to select participants for a follow-up interview with diverse college experiences - how would you describe your undergraduate experience? In one to two sentences.

\_\_\_\_\_.

Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview?

- ☐ Yes (Please leave your name and provide your preferred contact method)
- ☐ No

### **Appendix C: Recruitment Message**

My name is Kyle Holcomb and I am a graduate student enrolled in the College Student Affairs Leadership program at Grand Valley State University. I am conducting a research study about the sense of belonging of fat students in college. The study will focus on the experiences of fat student affairs professionals and pre-professionals during their time in undergraduate studies.

I am seeking volunteer participants from Fat Student Affairs Professionals for my study. To participate in this study, you must meet the following criteria:

Be 18 or older;

Be a resident of the United States of America;

Hold a bachelor's degree (or equivalent);

Identify yourself as fat during your undergraduate studies;

Be a current member of the Fat Student Affairs Professionals Facebook page.

Participation includes completing an 8-10 minute initial intake survey. Approximately six participants will be invited to participate in a one-on-one interview that will last approximately one hour.

If you are interested in participating, please follow the link to the initial intake survey and review the informed consent form at the survey introduction.

If you have any additional questions, please contact me at [holcombk@mail.gvsu.edu](mailto:holcombk@mail.gvsu.edu).

Thank you for your interest in the study and I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Kyle Holcomb

Master's Degree Candidate, College Student Affairs Leadership  
Grand Valley State University

## Appendix D: Consent Document



Title of Study: **Exploring Sense of Belonging Among Fat College Students**

Principal Investigator: **Kyle Holcomb, Graduate Student at GVSU**

Faculty Advisor: **Dr. Karyn Rabourn, College of Education and Community Innovation at GVSU**

### PURPOSE

This research study seeks to explore the personal experiences of belonging from student affairs professionals and pre-professionals during their undergraduate studies as fat students. The study uses the preferred neutral adjective “fat” generally accepted by fat studies scholars. Participants will be asked a series of demographic and institutional questions on an initial intake survey. A select group of participants will be further asked to conduct a one-on-one interview. In the interview, they will be asked about their identity as a fat student, their experiences with co-curricular and academic activities, and their social relationships. By participating in this study you will help me and other student affairs practitioners better understand how fat college students find a sense of belonging during their undergraduate studies.

### PROCEDURES

Participants will answer questions on the initial intake survey. The expected time to complete the survey is 8-10 minutes. Six participants will be asked to participate in an hour-long, one-on-one, virtual interview over Zoom. Audio from this interview will be recorded and transcribed for use of the Principal Investigator.

### RISK

There is no risk to participate in this study.

### POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO YOU

This study will provide you with space to share and reflect on your experiences as a fat undergraduate student.

### VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate. You may quit at any time without any penalty to you.

### PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The information you provide during this research study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. Your personal information, including all responses to research questions, will not be linked in any way to your identity as a study participant, nor will your identity be included in the study results.

Interviewing participants will use pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. Interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. The recordings will be used solely for the accuracy of data collection. After each interview, I will have the data transcribed by Athreon and erase the recording. The transcriber and I will be the only ones who will have access to the recordings. Anything stated in our interview will remain between you and me.

### AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

By participating in this study, you are agreeing to the following:

1. The details of this research study have been explained to me, including what I am being asked to do and the anticipated risks and benefits;
2. I have had an opportunity to have my questions answered;
3. I am voluntarily agreeing to participate in the research as described on this form;
4. I may ask more questions or quit participating at any time without penalty.
5. I give my consent to participate in this research project.

### CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions about the study you may contact:

Kyle Holcomb, Graduate Student (616) 795-6799  
[holcombk@mail.gvsu.edu](mailto:holcombk@mail.gvsu.edu)

Dr. Karyn Rabourn, Thesis Chair (616) 331-6850  
[rabournk@gvsu.edu](mailto:rabournk@gvsu.edu)

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the **Office of Research Compliance & Integrity** at Grand Valley State University,

1 Campus Drive, Allendale, MI. (616) 331-3197 [rci@gvsu.edu](mailto:rci@gvsu.edu).

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