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# In search of belonging: first generation, low-income students navigating financial, bureaucratic, and academic experiences at Vassar

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In Search of Belonging: First Generation, Low-Income Students  
Navigating Financial, Bureaucratic, and Academic Experiences at Vassar

Vassar College  
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## **PREFACE**

I started the Transitions Research Project several years ago as a way to understand the experiences of first generation, low-income students at Vassar. It was my hope that I would be able to find ways to share this type of qualitative data with the college in order to shape the direction it takes as it works to find increasingly effective ways to help historically underrepresented students adjust and thrive during their time at Vassar.

In the Fall of 2016, the Vassar faculty voted to move forward with a plan to rebalance the curriculum. In anticipation of the opportunities that teaching a 2-2 course load in the near future might bring, I decided to use my sabbatical leave during the spring 2017 semester to expand my research and pilot a form of participatory action research with a group of first generation, low-income students at Vassar. Rather than continue conducting interviews with this student demographic mostly on my own and in spare moments, I put together a team of nine undergraduate researchers, all of whom are first generation, low income, students of color. Over the course of my sabbatical leave, I trained my team to conduct interviews by exposing them to existing scholarship on college access, qualitative research methodologies, and ethical research practices. At the end of the spring 2017 term, members of the research team began preliminary coding and analysis of hundreds of pages of interview transcripts and during the summer months, we worked to co-author the following report, as well as draft a handful of research paper proposals to submit to the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, which will be held in New York City in April 2018.

It was my intention that this endeavor would provide a mutually enriching experience for all of us, given the unique opportunity to weave together three of the most important elements of a faculty member's experience at a small liberal arts college: teaching, mentoring, and research. It was also my hope that by becoming involved with a research project that is directly relevant to their lives, and whose explicit aim is to help inform the college about the experiences of historically underrepresented students, members of the research team would feel empowered in a space that students like themselves often find disempowering. I feel strongly that the perspectives that these students have brought to the project have strengthened the project overall, through their input into how we should conduct the research (What do we want to know? What should we ask and how? What issues might be salient?), their ability to elicit compelling narratives from their peers (some of which I would find difficult to elicit on my own, given the faculty-student power dynamic inherent in all of the interviews I conduct), and their insights as we have begun preliminary analysis of the data. The report presented here represents our first joint effort to pull together some of our data and preliminary analysis for the benefit of the college and *all* of the students it promises to serve.

Eréndira Rueda  
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## **EXPANDING ACCESS AND SUPPORTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

As the total number of students enrolled in institutions of higher education has risen by 39 percent since 1999 (NCES 2011; Pew Research Center 2009), colleges and universities across the country have experienced a rise in the number of first generation college students enrolling in postsecondary institutions (Engle and Tinto 2008). By some estimates, one in six students can be classified as first generation (Pryor 2005). There has also been a steady increase in the college enrollment rates of students from the two lowest income quintiles since the 1980s (College Board 2010). Tracking the experiences of first generation students is important because most of these students drop out within the first two years (Thayer 2000) and first generation status “confers its greatest liability in [the] initial adjustment to...postsecondary education” (Pascarella et al. 2004: 429.) As the number of first generation and low-income college students increases, postsecondary institutions will be increasingly hard pressed to meet the unique goals, motivations, constraints, and needs of these students (Ayala and Striplen 2002).

### *First Generation, Low-Income Students: National Profile*

First generation and low-income college students differ from their Nth generation and wealthier counterparts along many demographic characteristics and experiences that make it less likely that they will attend or finish college (Choy 2001; Horn & Nunez 2000; Ishanti 2003). For example, first generation students are more likely than their Nth generation peers to come from low SES families and to be from racial/ethnic groups that are historically underrepresented in higher education. First generation students are likely to delay college, attend community colleges, enroll as part-time students, commute, work full time, and live off-campus, among other factors that make it difficult for students to finish college (Chen 2005; Engle & Tinto 2008; Pascarella et al. 2003, 2004).

For first generation students who do enroll in college, the transition itself can be a challenge, which is reflected in the lower college completion rates among this student population. For children of college-educated parents, the transition to college may be experienced as a *continuation* of their K-12 academic and social experiences, whereas for first generation students and their families, the process may be experienced as a *disjunction* (Engle 2007). The transition to college can be far more complex for first-generation students who have to make significant adjustments academically, culturally, and socially (Terenzini et al. 1994). Studies suggest that these are among the many factors that make it difficult for the majority of first-generation college students to earn a degree within four years. Research within the last decade has found that between 27-28 percent of first-generation college students complete college within four years and 50-63 percent do so within six years (DeAngelo et al. 2011; Wei and Horn 2009).

Given the many factors that make it difficult for first generation students to persist toward a degree, it is not surprising that this student population is less likely to engage in the kinds of academic and social experiences that are associated with college success. For example, first generation students interact less with faculty, make less use of student support services on campus and peer study groups, and often do not participate in extracurricular activities or campus life (Lohfink and Paulsen 2005; Pascarella et al. 2003, 2004; Pike and Kuh 2005).

### *Where Students Attend College Matters*

An often overlooked factor in the scholarship dedicated to tracking the educational outcomes of first generation and low income students is the type of college or university these

students attend. A recent report by the Council of Independent Colleges compares the educational opportunities and outcomes of first generation and low income students at smaller private colleges versus at larger public universities (Rine 2015). The report finds that nationally, first generation and low income students fare much better along a range of measures at small private colleges than they do at large public universities.

The experiences of first-generation, low-income students enrolled at small liberal arts colleges is of particular interest to us because these students share many of the same socioeconomic background characteristics as the national population, yet they differ in some important ways. Since first-generation, low-income students are more likely to attend community colleges and public universities, and are less likely to finish on time, if at all, the subset of students who attend small private colleges has a clear advantage by having enrolled in four-year institutions. First generation, low-income students who attend small private colleges have higher graduation rates than their peers attending other types of institutions, are more likely to form relationships with faculty, are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities, and are less likely to graduate with student loan debt (Rine 2015).

Although objective outcomes such as these indicate that small private colleges provide the most effective and engaging educational environments and have strong track records when it comes to ensuring that first-generation and low-income students earn a degree in a timely fashion, it is still the case that first-generation and low-income students struggle at institutions like these. Increasing access and opportunity is crucial, but we would argue that so is providing an array of supports to ensure that first-generation, low-income students are thriving subjectively while they are enrolled in small private colleges, where they are not only a minoritized population by virtue of being first-generation and low-income, but also because this population of students tends to be overwhelmingly from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds. In order to provide necessary supports, it is crucial that we understand the subjective experiences of first-generation, low-income students attending predominantly White private institutions.

## OUR METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

Our data are drawn from an ongoing study regarding the college access and adjustment experiences of first generation, low income students attending small liberal arts colleges in the northeast. While the larger study includes over 100 interviews with students at two liberal arts colleges, the data presented in this report are drawn from a subset of forty-three open-ended interviews conducted with first generation, low income students at Vassar during the spring 2017 semester. The interviews were conducted by members of a ten-person research team which consisted of one professor and nine undergraduate researchers, all of whom identify as first generation, low income, people of color. The interviews ranged from one to three hours and interview topics were clustered into five different sections: family background information; K-12 educational experiences and aspirations; college access and application processes; transitions and adjustments to college and involvement in the college's support program for first generation, low-income students.

The undergraduate researchers served as the very first interview subjects, subsequently receiving interview methods training, and then conducting interviews themselves. This approach, coupled with the concept of *testimonios* inspired by the work of the Latina feminist collective who wrote *Telling to Live* (2001), had a two-fold purpose. First it aimed to make active subjects of the undergraduate researchers, providing them with research opportunities as well as a sociological understanding of their own student experiences. Second, it contributed to the

conversation-like narrative quality of the interviews. This narrative format, informed by the concept and practice of *testimonios*, gives subject-researchers the benefit of mutual understanding that arises from common experience, enriching the gathered data.

For the purposes of our research we defined first-generation students as those whose parents did not complete an education beyond the high school level (Saenz et al. 2007). All subjects identified as low-income and grew up in low-income families: students mentioned growing up on public assistance and in housing projects, having parents who are currently unemployed or had been chronically underemployed, others noted that they were raised by single mothers or relatives, and most parents work in occupations that are low-wage and without benefits (e.g. hotel housekeeping, mechanic, daycare worker, factory seamstress, hairdresser, temp work, construction, custodial/janitorial services). The sample includes first through fourth year students majoring in an array of academic disciplines: eighteen students had declared a major a STEM field (four of whom had also declared a second major in a foreign language and one of whom declared a second major in a multidisciplinary field), five were majoring in the arts, sixteen were majoring in the social sciences or multidisciplinary programs (one of whom had declared a second major in the arts), and four were undeclared. Nearly half of the respondents identify as female, and two-thirds are children of immigrants from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia. We recruited students by sending a call for participants via email to student organizations, dorm listservs, and to the Transitions Program listserv. We also drew on personal networks to invite students to participate in the project.

## FINANCIAL AID

The majority of first-generation, low-income students we interviewed indicated that the financial aid package that Vassar offered was a key factor in their decision to attend Vassar. Students made clear that without the current admissions and financial aid policies, attending college would have been far more difficult, if not impossible. As of the 2007 admissions cycle, Vassar admissions processes have operated on a need-blind basis, making it possible to make admissions decisions without considering the financial need of applicants. Additionally, as of the 2008-09 academic year, the college replaced student loans with scholarship grants for students whose families have a calculated annual income of \$60,000 or less.

Although the majority of costs associated with attending Vassar are covered by the current loan-free financial aid packages that are offered to students whose families make less than \$60,000 a year, there are nonetheless a range of difficulties that students encounter during their four years that are directly tied to being from families in the lowest quintiles of the American income distribution. For the purposes of this initial report, we will focus on the following trends that appeared in our data: 1) making sense of financial award letters, 2) the challenges and limitations of work study allotments, and 3) accessing and navigating the financial aid office.

### *Confusion Over Financial Aid Award Letters*

It is important to recognize that for first generation, low-income students, it can be difficult to understand a financial aid award letter, especially if no one in their family has prior experience with college. The way that financial aid award letters are currently written assumes that all students will understand the terminology used and does not clearly state what the student and their family are expected to pay for.

For example, a common misconception is that books are covered by the Vassar scholarship. This confusion stems from the fact that the financial aid award letter does not specify how books will be paid for, but allocates a certain amount of money for it. It is not written on the letter that students are expected to pay for books themselves, which frequently leads students to believe that books are among the costs that are covered by scholarships. The following excerpts are typical of the confusion among first-generation, low-income students on this topic when they arrive on campus as first-year students:

I think about when I got the financial aid package.... That was another thing that I just wasn't accustomed to, I had no one in my family to look to be like, 'Hey, can you help me look through this financial aid package?' So I saw it, and I was like, 'oh, transportation, books,' and all this money that looked like it was allocated for. So I thought, 'Oh, I don't have to pay for books.' But then you do.

(African American, Drama major)

They sent me my financial aid package [as a] PDF in an email. They put things down to like, 'this is the amount that you are expected to pay' and [the contribution] was zero. They had other numbers where, for travel this is how much you are expected to pay. For books this is how much you are expected to pay. I thought that because it was like on my financial aid package form that meant that [expense] was something that was going to get paid for. Because every time it would mention [an] out-of-pocket cost there would be a zero there. They always made sure you won't have to pay anything. When I came here I

was like okay 'I need to buy books, where can I get money?' They were like, 'That was just an estimate for what *you'll* have to pay.' For two years there was this back-and-forth hustle trying to have them let me use my scholarship money to buy travel expenses and books. They just wouldn't let me. I think what they kept doing was, 'We'll put some money onto your V-card so you can buy books at the bookstore.' I'm like, 'Okay so you are giving me money?' They were like, 'No, the charge is going to be put on your account so you'll eventually have to pay that off.' [It was] a soft loan. I had a lot of trouble with financial aid at the beginning. (White, Political Science major)

Although expenses like books are expected to be covered by work study, some first year students are coming to Vassar with the belief that books will be covered by scholarship awards and are surprised to learn that they are expected to pay out-of-pocket as soon as classes start and before they can access their work study allocations. When students think that books will be paid for, they might not come prepared with the money needed to pay for those costs at the beginning of the fall semester. Given that book expenses per semester often entail hundreds of dollars in out-of-pocket costs, this is an expense that is often a financial challenge for students whose families make less than \$60,000 a year. As the following excerpt makes clear, even when students have figured this out and are able to plan ahead and work to save up for the cost of books, this is an expense that is difficult for low-income students and families to manage.

One example is textbooks, at least in my situation, they're not covered under financial aid and they can be several hundred dollars a semester and so that's been really difficult because where I live, the minimum wage is \$7.25 so when I work over the summer, I save up money, then I get here for the semester and almost everything that I've saved has to be spent on textbooks. It's really frustrating 'cause I work for three months and then in one afternoon everything that I've worked for gets spent on textbooks. (White, Environmental Studies major)

Furthermore, since students are taking four to five courses in a given semester, and some courses require a large number of books, students often scramble to make use of a wide range of strategies to lower the cost of books every semester.

I work my on campus job, I use the money from the summer, or try to budget it so that it lasts the whole year. Sometimes I just opt to not buy textbooks because they're expensive, and I could use that money for food or whatever. (Asian American, English major)

One of my classes this semester asked us to purchase something like 13 books. I was just like even though some of them are \$4, it still adds up, because some of those books were like \$45, and that's just one class, so definitely a financial burden in that aspect. You can't take the class without the book. Luckily we have Connect New York, so there were many books that I could find in the library, or in someone else's library, but there were books that I just had no choice but to buy. (African American, Drama major)

The lack of social networks that allow students more lucrative summer employment and limited financial resources within low-income families are two factors that make the cost of books for the academic year a recurring stressor among first generation, low-income students on campus.

### *Work Study: Challenges and Limitations*

From the beginning of a low-income, first generation student's relationship with Vassar College, they are faced with challenges and confusion surrounding financial aid and what exactly the college pays for. These difficulties often begin with the task of deciphering financial aid award letters and continue throughout a student's time at Vassar. When discussing the economic burdens that students face while at school, the challenges and limitations of work study policies were a common theme across interviews.

*Work study caps and available work hours.* The current student employment policy states that "First year students are permitted to work eight hours per week and can anticipate earning about \$1,750 during the year. Sophomores are permitted to work nine hours per week, and juniors and seniors are permitted to work 10 hours per week, with their anticipated earnings proportionately higher" (Vassar College 2017a). Students acknowledge that restrictions on the number of hours worked per week are intended to minimize the burden of balancing academic and financial obligations by encouraging students to focus on academics. However, for first generation, low-income students, finances are crucial and they need to feel secure in this area in order to feel secure in their academic pursuits.

The existing caps on weekly work hours can become an issue for low-income students because they do not earn enough to pay for their expenses. This can be a particularly difficult challenge for "non-traditional" students, like transfer students. For non-traditional students, it becomes very difficult to pay for personal expenses that are not shared by traditional students, such as paying for off-campus and non-Vassar affiliated housing, and paying for accompanying bills. One non-traditional student described how she has to "live off of credit" because she has outside bills to pay that Financial Aid does not take into consideration.

I have just become like \$10,000 in debt on credit because I'm here. Other students, maybe not all, but some students at least have parents they can fall back on, or grandparents. I don't have anyone, so there's no one to borrow from, there's no one to ask when I'm in a bind.... I wish that there were more options to overload on work, if you want to call it that, because we have the option to overload on classes...but here we can't overload on hours, and it would be nice. You know, I don't have classes on Fridays, what if I could work four hours on Fridays, an additional four hours? That \$40 means so much more to me than it does to other people. It's definitely a burden because again, I can't really pay my bills with the eight to ten hours [of work study] that I get a week.

(African American, Drama major)

Additionally, students may not have jobs where their hours are the same each week. In these instances, students are not earning all of their allotted work study income despite having an on-campus job. The reasons for which this happens to students are usually due to factors beyond their control.

I worked as a drill instructor this year, but we work only for two hours a week, which is still not enough but I can't do anything about it because the professor said "We only need two hours for you to work." So ok, I'm going to live with it, but some of my other international friends on financial aid are saying "You are only working two hours a week? Oh, you poor thing!" They actually said that because they can work for eight

hours, so they can make a lot more money. I don't know, when I apply for jobs, usually they will consider your financial aid...and your financial need. But some of these professors, they are disconnected from those offices, so they don't know about the issue or really care about your financial aid need. Maybe they think that those jobs are some pocket money for rich kids. But for me, it's hard to live on that. So I do wish they could give me more hours of working. (Chinese International student, undeclared)

Well, I also have my on campus job, so my summer earnings plus my campus job earnings. I work a lot. They try to max your hours at nine per week or whatever, but I think when I did the calculation last year, only working X amount of hours put me below my work study allotment. If I can maximize how much I'm allowed to get then I'm going to, because I need that money. (Asian American, English major)

Questions that arose from these discussions included whether financial aid could ensure that students access all work study income allocated in their financial aid packages because sometimes the hours they work do not reflect the money that is allocated and identified on financial aid award letters.

There is also the assumption that all money earned through work study goes toward students' college-related expenses. However, as the following discussion illustrates, it is not uncommon for students from low-income families to contribute to their family income throughout the year.

*Financial obligations to family.* Vassar's financial aid website makes clear the assumptions that operate about how students will spend their work study money. The frequently asked questions page states that "financial aid calculations assume \$2,150 a year for books and personal expenses" and assures students that personal expenses will be low (2017b). The same page on the Vassar website suggests to students that keeping personal expenses to a minimum will not pose a challenges because social life on campus "is centered around the residence houses and campus activities. There are more than 1,000 campus-wide events (lectures, concerts, plays, parties, etc.) on the Vassar calendar each year, almost all of which are free" (2017b). However, the economic realities for low-income, first generation students can be vastly different. For example, not all work-study income earned goes towards their own personal expenses. For some students, work-study jobs also provide income that they contribute to their families.

It's like a constant, at least I constantly think about it, money that is, in terms of like, 'Ooooh, I got \$160 this paycheck, how much am I gonna send my mom home? How much am I gonna try to pay?' (Asian American, Sociology major)

Prior to going away for college, many low-income students held jobs and contributed to their family incomes. Going away to college does not always change their sense of responsibility and duty to their families or their families' need for their financial contributions. Some families reach out to students to ask if they can "help them pay the bills", so students sometimes use work-study income to help their families, in addition to covering personal expenses such as traveling home for breaks and paying for books. This, on top of their dependence on their jobs providing them with all their hours needed to access all allocated federal work study funds, affects how these students use their work study money, and these factors are not directly considered on a case-by-case basis to try to work out what would be most supportive and helpful for students.

### *Accessing and Navigating the Financial Aid Office*

At large, students reported mostly negative experiences in dealing with their financial situations, managing their financial aid package, and interacting with the financial aid office itself. Given the level of economic hardship many of these students describe (e.g. helping parents with bills), as well as the confusion that many students expressed when reading their aid package, it is this population of students that has found itself engaging the financial aid office often, though many do not look on these interactions fondly.

*Frustrations in seeking aid and assistance.* Students generally expressed feeling uncomfortable and even unwanted when in the financial aid office, describing their experiences there as “awful,” “stressful,” and “difficult.” A common thread among this group of students is the need to seek out answers to basic financial questions that they do not know the answers to. Students often felt that they were treated like they should already know the answers to their questions. . The reactions of financial aid representatives to student questions prove to be a point of difficulty for students in this respect, contributing to the feelings of being unwelcome in the office.

They just wanted me to get a lot of paperwork, like I didn't know I needed. But like I didn't know how to get access to [the necessary paperwork]. And they were kind of like mad at me for not knowing. They told me ‘How can you not get in communication with your mom to get this stuff?’ And I was like, that's a very personal question...you don't know my status. You don't know anything of that nature. And then she sent me away, and she was like, ‘Come back with these papers.’ And I was telling her I couldn't get them. And then three weeks later, I eventually got the papers. But that was like three weeks later. And my mom was very worried about my financial aid, and the possibilities of me not getting financial aid and stuff. Or not having the funds to come back.

(Latinx, Biochemistry major)

This student, and many others, come into the office understanding the complexities of their financial situation, often paired with other extraneous familial circumstances that may not be immediately apparent to the financial aid office. Even if students are able to explain the entirety of their situation each time they have a financial concern, the process proves to be a frustrating one. For these students, the reaction to their requests for assistance led them to feel that their requests were unimportant or unwarranted. A lack of understanding between the financial aid office and first-generation, low-income students seems to be a source of friction in this area.

*Lack of clarity.* For these students, a degree of uncertainty seems to be present when it comes to interacting with the financial aid office or trying to understand aid policies while at Vassar. This is partly because students do not know who they need to contact in order to have their questions answered. Some students have expressed confusion over who their financial aid officer is and the role of this officer during their time at Vassar. This confusion compounds the lack of a strong, productive connection between the students and the office. Furthermore, students are often re-routed to other departments and offices, and at times are given different information from different office staff. This leads to further confusion and mistrust of the office as a whole. The following student’s experience of having to interact with a number of different sources in order to resolve a conflict speaks to the kind of tensions, confusions, and frustrations described by a number of low-income students in our sample.

[Financial aid was] like, ‘Just call this number.’ I called that number and they were like, ‘Tell your college to handle it.’ I went back [to financial aid] and they were like, ‘Call this number.’ It was just very frustrating...It's stressful especially when you're low income, it's just like ... I don't know what to ask them. I don't know what to do...It's stressful. [I] don't feel supported with that. (Latinx, Neuroscience major)

This frustration with the financial aid office makes it so that many first-generation and low-income students find themselves locked in a struggle to clear up financial matters. This can affect academic life very deeply, in very real ways, as unresolved financial matters affect the registration process. For many students, then, “100% need met” is not as simple as it sounds.

### *Recommendations*

For many first-generation and low-income students at Vassar, their impression of what the financial aid package could provide for them was a large motivator in their decision to attend the college. Many acknowledge that without the financial assistance provided by the college their ability to attend Vassar, and even their access to higher education at all, would have been severely affected. Nonetheless, the actual experience that students have with financial aid proves to be misaligned with the experience that students anticipate upon their acceptance.

Based on our discussion with students and among our team of researchers, a number of institutional recommendations arose. Given that it is our experience that the institution has a genuine desire to address the concerns that students have faced we hope that such recommendations may provide ideas for possible shifts that need to occur in order for first-generation and low-income students to succeed at Vassar, and do so with an experience that matches that of their more affluent peers. It is of particular importance that the Financial Aid Office keep in mind that low-income and first generation students are often navigating these issues on their own, without the help of parents and family members.

### *Aid Letter Recommendations*

- Create a collaboration between the Financial Aid office and the Transitions Advisory Board to understand the confusion that low-income, first generation students experience regarding financial aid packages and award letters. Such a collaboration can yield ideas for how to update the yearly pdf produced by the Financial Aid Office titled “Understanding Your Financial Aid Letter” in a way that takes into account the particular needs of low-income and first generation students (2017c).
  - E.g. Make clear in financial aid letters which costs are covered by Vassar scholarships, loans, and work study to avoid the kind of confusion that first-generation, low-income students experience regarding costs like books, travel, and “other expenses”.
- Have the Financial Aid office work with staff and students in the Transitions Program to produce website content (such as Financial Aid 101 videos) that help clarify the confusion that occurs among first-generation, low-income students. These videos can be housed on the Transitions webpage, as well as the Financial Aid webpage.

### *Work Study Recommendations*

- Ensuring that students with high financial need are able to access the full work study award indicated in their financial aid packages.
- Prioritizing students on financial aid for work study placements that allow them to complete the hours needed.
- Providing students with a list of work study placements that can guarantee the weekly hours needed to fulfill work-study awards.
- Engaging in discussions with offices and faculty who employ work-study students to ensure that they understand the financial needs of students and are able to create enough work on a weekly basis to help students earn the maximum amount of work-study they are allotted.
- Ensuring that work study jobs are available during the first week of classes so that students are able to start working immediately and are better able to earn the full amount indicated on their award letters.

#### Financial Aid Office Recommendations

- Training for administrators and office staff on how to improve supports for and interactions with low-income and first-generation students.
  - This kind of training can be included in the anti-bias training efforts that are being articulated by faculty and administrators working on the Engaged Pluralism Initiative beginning in the summer of 2017.
- Introducing the financial aid office staff to first year students during the Transitions pre-orientation (recently renamed “Foundations”).
- Making clear to Transitions students who their financial aid officers are so that students understand who is in charge of their case and who they should see for specific issues and concerns throughout their time at Vassar.
- Providing workshops for Transitions students throughout year (e.g. FAFSA workshop) and being prepared to answer questions unique to students’ experiences (e.g. students whose parents are undocumented and lack the kind of paperwork or information required on forms).
- Work with the Transitions Advisory Board to create opportunities for low-income, first-generation students to interact with the office on a regular basis (e.g. find ways to connect financial aid staff with programming that takes place in the Transitions Living Room).

## CAMPUS OFFICES

Although issues pertaining to challenges with financial aid were the most salient for the group of students in our spring 2017 subset, students also articulated a number of other challenges and frustrations with a range of campus offices. Vassar College has over forty administrative offices, the majority of which students interact with on a daily basis. Administrative offices handle almost every aspect of students' lives throughout their four years. Often, campus offices provide information that is not only valuable, but essential for success at Vassar. The services and knowledge that these offices provide is especially pertinent for low income, first generation college students. Unlike their more affluent, Nth generation peers, first generation, low income students cannot rely on family economic resources in the same ways as their wealthier peers and do not have the benefit of being able to draw from the college-going experiences of parents, guardians, and other key family members. For these reasons, first generation low income students must rely more on institutional resources, information, and supports in order to navigate and thrive in college.

It is absolutely vital that first generation, low income students have a positive relationship with campus offices, yet our findings indicate that a majority of our sampled students feel alienated when interacting with many campus offices. Students often characterize their experiences as “invalidating”, stressful, confusing, and often unhelpful. One of the most common themes found across interviews during discussions of interactions with campus offices was hesitation to make use of these offices and an inability to access resources after an initial negative experience. The selected student responses provided below represent the kinds of difficult interactions that first generation, low income students report having when trying to access campus resources. The following excerpts highlight the manner in which interactions with an array of campus offices can leave first generation, low income students feeling invalidated, embarrassed, and hesitant about accessing campus resources more broadly. In an effort to highlight how offices and administrators can more effectively support this student demographic, we have also provided counter examples of the kinds of interactions that have made a significant positive difference for first generation, low income students.

### *Academic advising: In search of validation and recognition*

One of our pre-med respondents recounted an early experience with the Pre-Med Advising Office that left her feeling “invalidated” at a point in her academic career when she gathered the courage to seek help. After experiencing a fluctuation in her grades. She describes meeting with one of the counselors and attempting to explain that she was experiencing difficulties with personal family issues and adjusting to the rigor of college work. She went to the office to ask what her options were, and was told, “Maybe you should consider another field, or not being Pre-Med anymore.” As the student herself explained, “I appreciate honest critique, but to completely disregard all the work that I had done up to that point...I just felt really invalidated.” Unfortunately, by her own admission, the experience soured her future interactions with other offices and “completely turned me away from the idea of seeking help from any of the offices in general.”

In contrast, we heard the following account from another intended STEM major who experienced academic difficulties as a sophomore. She arrived at Vassar planning to pursue a degree in biology but academic difficulties led her in a different direction. However, more positive interactions with key a institutional agent made a profound emotional difference for her as she figured out what she was going to pursue instead.

I was on academic probation. I had to meet with [my class advisor] at the beginning of the semester and then every two weeks or something like that. I met with her the first time and I sat down and she looked at my transcript and everything and then the first thing she told me she was like, 'You're very intelligent.' That was the first time I had heard that in two years. I just cried. I cried because I was like the big difference in this change or finding people who cared about me was really important because I felt really, I felt really dumb or like I couldn't do this. I thought there was something wrong with me but there was something wrong with the school because they were not providing the support that I needed. Because when I met [with my class advisor], she told me all those things and she helped me figure out how to get help in all of these things and just I will never forget she told me, 'You're intelligent.' We had a long meeting but all I remember is her telling me that I was intelligent. I felt so good. (Latinx, Educational Studies major)

Responses like these highlight the important role of key institutional agents (e.g. college faculty, administrators, and staff) in fostering student success. The examples in the following sections also highlight the variety of ways that key institutional agents can shape student access to resources and important knowledge about how to navigate the college, and influence how students feel subjectively about their place in a predominantly white, elite educational setting.

### *Jumping through hoops*

As students from families with limited financial resources, who often lack the economic means to provide the kind of documentation required and to do so quickly, our respondents also spoke at length about the kinds of bureaucratic challenges and hurdles they faced gaining access to some of the resource on campus. These issues were particularly salient when students spoke about the interactions they had with different offices when they tried to access mental health services and establish a need for accommodations of various sorts.

It's so difficult to get accommodations for mental health here. It's a very classist system because you can't use the counseling services here to get approved, you have to go somewhere off campus. (White, Environmental Studies major)

I guess, personally right now, I'm going through like my whole issue of getting exactly diagnosed for my anxiety/ADD because I've been getting a note taker each semester since last spring. I just need help, basically somebody needs to help me find a doctor because I don't know exactly what [to do]. Do I just go to the doctor and be like, 'Hey I need to be diagnosed for anxiety?' Do I just do that? Then I need [to find] someone that could take Vassar's insurance. I just need assistance with a that. The AEO currently is not being the best of help. (Latinx, Biology major)

I had a meeting with [accommodations] for how to deal with my room in terms of like...my asthma and my allergies during the spring and summer. A lot of it was me having to try to prove to her that this was necessary for me, that my quality of life was lowered because of the of air conditioning, or lack of something that would help me breathe, you know? And then she had me, like I get this part, she had me get a doctor's note saying that I had these things. But I remember at the time I didn't have any medical

care, there was a gap of like seven months where I didn't have anything. And so I couldn't get access to the documents that she needed. And during this time, I was having a lot of trouble breathing, because it was the beginning of summer. And in the room [that she and I] were in, it was air conditioned. It was very easy to breathe in there, so that also didn't help me with proving to her that I needed this. Eventually, she kind of just told me that I couldn't. I had to talk to other people and see how they managed it. I kind of just figured it out on my own. I had to go to my friend's room, and just use their spaces and stuff, like go to places that were better for me to breathe in, and do work in. But yeah, that was my experience with that. I feel like a lot of it was having to jump through hoops and having to prove to her. And it was a lot of invalidation in that aspect.

(Latinx, Biochemistry major)

Our respondents highlighted the frustration and discomfort that they experienced in situations that were inherently physically or emotionally challenging and noted how much they struggled with the basic step of reaching out to seek supports and accommodations. Feeling like they had to prove themselves in the face of unsympathetic administrators often left students feeling invalidated. For this particular student demographic, the feeling of being alone in these efforts is a common sentiment since most of our respondents felt like they did not have adults in their lives they could turn to who could help them navigate bureaucratic processes at the college in order to figure out how to access these resources. A common refrain among respondents is the feeling that they must figure almost everything out by themselves and that they often lack an understanding of how office procedures and policies work. Those feelings make encounters with seemingly unsympathetic administrators and office staff feel particularly demoralizing and can leave students feeling uncared for by the institution as a whole.

#### *Lack of transparency*

Our respondents often noted that they were unaware of bureaucratic procedures, particularly those that link the services and resources that link offices. Both in cases when students felt thwarted in their efforts, as in the case where one of our respondents tried to obtain an air conditioning unit in his room to address his asthma and allergies, and in cases where students successfully accessed campus resources, a common refrain was frustration over what students perceived as a “lack of transparency”. In some cases, it is not clear to students what services are offered, requirements to access those services, the cost of those services, whether or not they will have to pay for those services out-of-pocket, or which offices handle different aspects of a given service. For students whose families have little or no economic safety net, even sums that might seem modest can pose a financial hardship for students and families.

Baldwin, I went once. No, I've been in a couple of times, but the one I remember the most was that I was sick and they were like. ‘You need to go to the hospital’ and I started crying because I didn't have the money to go to the hospital and they were like ‘I'm sorry you need to go’ and I was like ‘No, just take care of me here.’ and then they put me in an ambulance. It wasn't a big deal. I really did not have to go to the hospital but they sent me there and like I was upset ‘cause I got charged \$300.

(Latinx, English major)

I had to go for medical leave, when I'd come back, they had a special screening process where you are not allowed back unless you're put in therapy and you're seeing a

psychiatrist regularly. And they're like, so you have to do all that. And then I was like, 'How am I gonna do that? That's like a lot of money and I can't pay for that.' And they're like, 'Oh. Well, talk to your financial aid officer. Talk to financial aid.' And they're like, 'Oh yeah, we have a health fund... We can pay for your stuff.' And so now they're paying for my stuff, but having been forced to see those resources definitely helped because now I figured out that Vassar does pay for that and I can see my providers without having to stress about the financial burden that it brings. Aside from that, the AEO office isn't ever as accessible as it should be. But I have to work through them and my therapist to get my emotional support animal and so that was like, having to figure out and do that on my own was difficult. And no one really helped. (Latinx, Psychology major)

Although some students are being directed to the proper offices and financial resources, and their situations are being addressed, what is striking about the meaning embedded in the recounting of so many of these experiences is the way that students insist that they “had to do it alone” and “no one really helped”. Part of what students are conveying in their narratives is the sense that they are having interactions with offices that feel uncaring and unsympathetic. What often comes across in these interviews is the sense that students do not feel encouraged or reassured, even when staff and administrators are directing them to the offices that might help them access the necessary services.

#### *A liaison model: Building partnerships with Transitions*

The Career Development Office often came up in conversations about student interactions with offices and administrators, with students noting at times that they interacted with the office mostly through the website (e.g. finding information and samples on-line), or admitting that they had not used the CDO resources for a number of reasons, from feeling like the CDO lacks helpful internship information for a particular major (e.g. theatre), a particular area of the country (e.g. towns and cities in the less populated mid-western states), or as the following student noted, out of embarrassment about not knowing how things are done.

I didn't know how much they could've helped...and it felt a little weird because I'm like, it's a little embarrassing to show up and be like, 'Hey, I don't know how to do this.' I'm expecting them to say, 'You don't know how to do this?' But, I figured how to do it by myself and that's great...Yeah, because I think when you come in, they're already expecting like, 'Okay where's this? Where's that?' No one has ever taught me how to do a resume so I'm just like, I have a resume and I don't know if it's a good one. It's just there. I'm too scared to go to the CDO for them to check it because it's just like I don't know if they'll be like, 'What is this part?' Do you know what I mean? I've seen the online resumes and I'm like can we just try to copy that idea? (Latinx, undeclared)

A number of other respondents mentioned the importance of knowing someone in the office, particularly if they felt that their contact at the CDO understood where they were coming from and had a sense of what it meant to be a first generation, low income student trying to access resources on campus.

I went to the CDO...once my first year...I was kind of like encouraged to go because during my [Transitions] cohort there was an upperclassman that I saw a lot that was one

of my interns and they worked in the office and also Tyler...I don't know Tyler's last name but he was a post-bacc last year and he worked with the CDO, so I went in kind of like just to see them and also I was able to access it because of that but the student that I knew that was there went JYA for the full year and Tyler is no longer there, so I kind of feel like I lost my connection to CDO. I've also kind of heard some negative stuff from my peers about how helpful the CDO is. But I have gone to their website and stuff to get their resume packets and that has helped me but I haven't really gone in to talk to anyone there and I don't who I would [talk to]. (Latinx, Cognitive Science major)

During the 2016-17 academic year, a student in a post-baccalaureate position (Lauren Ginton '16) served explicitly as the liaison between the CDO and Transitions. Lauren headed Mentorship Monday, a designated time in which students could seek advice, in the Transitions Living Room. The CDO also offered a variety of Transitions specific programming, especially with regards to resume, application, and professional networking processes that many of our first generation low income students have not had experience with.

The CDO...umm...mainly whenever I go it's just to see the post-bac, Lauren. She's always really helpful and really like willing to be patient with me and help me talk through whatever things I'm planning or trying to plan. But whenever I think of the CDO office as a whole, it's just kind scary and I'm kinda scared to walk in there because I feel like I need a speci- not that I need a specific reason to go, but because I just, they would want me to be like as specific as possible as to what I have in mind.

(Latinx, English major)

Students who interacted more with the CDO last year did so primarily through Lauren and highlighted how important it was to know that she understood who they were as first generation, low income students. Student responses emphasize the importance of feeling as though staff and administrators in different offices understand the experiences and challenges of this student demographic and are there to encourage and reassure students.

The CDO is a particularly important office for first generation, low income students, whose family and personal networks may not be as likely to yield the kind of professional networks that their more affluent peers have access to by virtue of having college-educated parents and family members in well-paid, well-connected professions. Student responses also indicate a desire for key institutional agents who are aware of the kinds of challenges and hesitations that first generation, low income students may have, and who are explicitly invested in their success.

### *Making resources available to historically underrepresented students*

At the center of what many of our respondents articulated is the feeling that while the college has many resources and technically lets students know that these resources are available to all, first generation, low income students navigate this institution with the added barrier of having to navigate an institution that does not reflect their background and experiences, and having to do so alone. Most respondents compared their situations to what they knew or imagined about their more affluent peers with college-educated family members: our respondents talked about not having parents and family members who know the ropes, who know how to interact with college bureaucracies and advocate on behalf of their children.

Students noted that when faced with an administrative or bureaucratic challenge, they had no one to turn to. Students worried about not knowing where to begin, who to contact, what to ask, how to prepare, what things cost, who will pay, which were just some of the many concerns articulated that led to hesitations about accessing resources on campus, especially when students anticipate that campus offices expect them to know how to navigate the institution already. Students often spoke about the assumptions they felt are made by college administrators and are reflected in policies and procedures in different campus offices.

There are problems that they just don't acknowledge. They're just like, 'This is a resource for every student to use. Here we go. Go.' But the thing is, we are not every student.  
(Asian American, Film major)

I feel like Vassar doesn't necessarily think about the student when they make policies. Or when they think about 'the student,' it's not a student that matches me in a lot of ways. And if I look like 'the student' on the surface, I am not actually that student. I think in terms of mental health, I think in terms of one-to-one support, which is something they talk about incessantly at admissions, has not happened at all. I don't think there's 'an adult' I would call or email in an emergency. I don't think I have that contact.  
(Biracial, Media Studies major)

It's both the kind of atmosphere that Vassar has created, but also the type of people they hire in a way are not...they're just not well-versed in knowing how to talk with non-white upper middle class cis/het students. They're just not.... I definitely do think that if they don't start learning and being...in tune with each student and their differences, and being able to provide advice and support that are in line, and which demonstrates that they understand or have attempted to at least work through the student's personal struggles, the individualized struggles, then there's just no way that any of the administrative offices can be good resources for anyone but the majority. I feel like despite all the student protests that have happened, all the demands that have been written in the last four years that I have been here with different organizing from vastly different but also similar groups of students, if they still haven't listened then I just don't really have faith in the administrative offices to change any time soon.  
(Asian American, Biology major)

An overarching sentiment expressed among students was the sense that the institutional culture, policies, practices, and procedures have been structured around a particular type of student, with particular types of knowledge and resources, which our first generation, low income respondents felt do not reflect them. Another key theme in our interviews was the desire for key institutional agents within offices who not only understand where first generation, low income students are coming from, but are invested in their success.

### *Recommendations*

Negative experiences with campus offices often discourage first generation, low income students from seeking help, which can have devastating repercussions as students navigate the college. Since the topics the offices cover have been deemed important enough to have their own designated location, it is important that students of all backgrounds feel comfortable in such

spaces. In order to improve the relationship between first generation, low income students and campus administrators and offices, our recommendations are as follows.

- A. *Professional Development/Sensitivity Training*:** Preferably led by Transitions leadership (e.g. directors, advisory board members, supporting faculty, research team members) to illuminate issues facing first generation, low income students which may not be apparent to these offices with the hopes that this training will help offices provide the kind of clarity, support, and reassurance that first generation, low income students are looking for when they reach out to campus offices.
- B. *Purpose Statements*:** Brief explanations of what the office does, how it accomplishes this, and other useful information. These explanations should be accessible online on the Transitions website and included in the Foundations pre-orientation materials that are sent to students upon admission to Vassar.
- C. *Transitions Outreach*:** An increase in Transitions-g geared programming so that first generation, low-income students are familiar with the office and staff, and more inclined to approach offices when in need of assistance. (For example, outreach from Baldwin and Metcalf could help students have a clearer sense of the services offered, the fees for these services, and how these services are processed and appear on insurance bills.)
- D. *Liaison Model*:** In the interviews, the model pursued by the CDO during the 2016-17 academic year has received superior reviews, and has been very integrated with the Transitions Program. The office may be able to serve as an example for merging administration with the Transitions community. Linking the work of post-baccalaureate positions in different campus offices to the Transitions Program can help provide the kind of outreach imagined in the previous recommendation.

## ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

A recurring topic of discussion among first generation, low income students in our sample was the subjective experience of being at an elite college in general, specifically in classroom settings that are predominantly populated by white, affluent peers and overwhelmingly taught by faculty who do not seem to share much in common with first generation, low income students. Our respondents often articulated struggling to feel like they belonged in the classroom specifically, and at the college more generally. The types of experiences that often prompted these feelings had to do with the assumptions that professors conveyed about who their students are, what their students have already been exposed to, and the things that peers often did and said in class that made the class divide very clear to our respondents and made them feel unwelcomed or out of place.

There's a [media studies] class that I'm in right now where the professor kind of doesn't understand how painful it can be for people to not have their names pronounced right ever. Or to be called 'you' or to be pointed at instead of... And that's something that I've never had to deal with, but I feel it. Because I do feel like that professor kind of is very monolithic in his understanding of not-white...he attempts to talk about race and it never ends well. Like doesn't use the full name of another professor because it's too long and difficult. Said that race relations on campus were a depressing topic and he'd like to get back to other things. It was like, 'Okay...' (African American, Media Studies major)

The [English] professor would say some things and then everyone in the room would nod like they understood, and I'm just like, 'I don't what that means. I've never heard of that before.' And he would name a novel or something, and I'm just like, 'Never heard that before. Like, what?' It just felt weird and really elite. It felt like everyone knew the secret and I did not know the secret. So it was frustrating, and I think the professor was not super helpful whenever I would try to go for help on papers, or something; he wasn't super helpful, it felt kinda like, judgy. (Latinx, Sociology major)

There are little things. There is one time where I was in my physio psych class and this girl is like, 'Ugh, I learned all these things already. My dad's a whatever and he works in a lab. Why are we talking about this?' Sometimes people would say things like that. Not everyone has a researcher father. I don't know. I just, sometimes ... (Latinx, Neuroscience major)

That happened in one of my bio classes...we had labs...one girl would make me feel so little. She was this white senior and she would never ask me for anything. She would double check with my other partner. I was just like, 'Well, I know the same answers.' I would always have the answer and I always knew what we were doing but she just never wanted to check in with me or if I had something, she was like, 'Well, let's double check.' She never trusted me and so I felt so little in that class and I felt like I didn't even want to go to lab. (Latinx, Educational Studies major)

As this sampling of excerpts suggests, there were an array of departments that were mentioned in the interviews. However, for the purposes of this report, we will focus on students' experiences in STEM courses. We hope that this part of the report will be particularly helpful to the group of

faculty who recently administered a survey in 40 courses across all STEM departments in order to gain a sense of students' perceptions of their experiences in STEM courses at Vassar. Preliminary analysis of those survey data highlighted a number of challenges that disproportionately affect underrepresented minority (URM) students and first generation students enrolled in STEM courses. For example, nearly three-quarters of female URM and first generation students reported experiencing barriers compared to just over half of non-URM and non-first generation female students. The survey data also show that there is a clear divide in URM and non-URM students' sense of belonging in STEM classes and departments. "URM students were almost five times as likely to describe interactions with peers as competitive and almost twice as likely to identify lack of community as a barrier to success." The STEM faculty working on curricular innovations in STEM fields that will help address these issues noted that these findings are of particular concern because URM and first generation students surveyed "were also twice as likely as their classmates to feel uncomfortable asking questions in STEM classes." Given the expectation among most faculty "that students will take the initiative to contact them when they have questions, experience problems, or would like to conduct research", the fact that only 35% of URM students surveyed "report feeling comfortable approaching faculty out of class" poses a significant challenge. The interview excerpts that follow can help shed additional light on the subjective experiences of URM and first generation students and provide more details regarding the reasons for which they struggle to feel like they belong in STEM classes and departments and why such low proportions report feeling comfortable approaching faculty.

#### *Lack of connection and support*

While not all students in our sample were STEM majors, given the college's curricular distribution requirements the overwhelming majority of students in our sample had taken courses in STEM fields. Out of the forty-three students in this subset of interviews, eighteen were majoring and one was minoring in a STEM field. A theme that emerged from student narratives was the sense that students were struggling because they lacked support in academic departments, leaving students feeling isolated from faculty and the learning process.

One of the most prominent barriers in STEM courses articulated by our respondents is the lack of connection with faculty in these departments. This was particularly the case among a handful of women of color who had thought of themselves as "science students" in high school and had started college intending to major in fields like math and biology, but who changed their minds after a series of negative experiences in STEM courses. Some students described negative and humiliating experiences with faculty in STEM courses, such as the following instance in which the student was reduced to tears after meeting with a professor in office hours:

I went to office hours, and I was like, 'Could you help me with this problem set?' I was like, 'I've never seen this before.' The professor was just like, 'Can you not read English?' At that point, I was on the verge of tears like, 'Oh my goodness.' How is that an appropriate thing to say? Also, just why would you think that I couldn't speak English? I was on the verge of tears, and I remember just having to leave immediately, and then broke down in the staircase. [There were] so many embarrassing experiences [with] those professors my freshman year. It was, why do people think of me this way?

As the daughter of West Indian immigrants whose only language is English, she felt particularly insulted by the professor's assumption about her language skills. More generally, however, the student was shocked by the unprofessional and unsupportive reaction from the professor. Reflecting on the reasons for which she eventually decided to major in the social sciences instead, the same student noted the key role that interactions with STEM faculty played in her decision:

I think it comes from very distinct interactions with professors. I guess it just left a huge impression on me my freshman year here. I was very open with professors because I thought that we were supposed to build connections with professors, so I just went out there, talking about my story, like that was an okay thing to do. I had a lot of negative interactions where, I think especially in science and math classes, which is what I was doing freshman year, where professors were treating me as if I should have known. 'You're in this school, and we expect all of our incoming students to know these things, regardless of where you're from, you should have a basic background knowledge,' and I was like, 'Yeah, no, I don't know.'

As a result of experiences like these, some of the women of color in our sample set aside their aspirations to major in STEM fields, which has ultimately changed their career trajectories as well.

First generation, low income, women of color who persisted in STEM fields shared narratives about similarly off-putting encounters with faculty in their STEM courses.

The first experience that I had here that kind of—what's the word?—that surprised me, or made me change my perspective on Vassar as an institution, was when I took my first chemistry class here. I took the accelerated course. During orientation a whole bunch of people were told, 'If you know what a mole is, you'll do fine in this class.' I was like, 'I know what a mole is. Even though I didn't take AP chemistry, I'll be good.' I took the class and at first things were going good. The drop period passed and then shit started to hit the fan. I started struggling, I went to the professor for help, and he basically assumed that I was failing all of my other classes. I [said], 'I'm just asking you for help.' He was like, 'I can't help you.' I was asking him for resources. He didn't give me any; instead he told me to go to the dean of freshmen. I was like, 'This is kind of intense.' You really don't have resources to help me? I went to the dean of freshmen and she pretty much told me that I should fail the class. I was shocked. I literally broke down in my room one day. I felt like I didn't belong here, like I was incompetent, didn't fit in academically. I saw everyone else doing well, and I was literally drowning. The fact that I kind of put my pride aside and asked for help and I was denied, that was really a shocking experience for me. (African American, Psychology major)

The first generation, low income students in our sample who were also women of color at times alluded to the fourfold challenge of being students in traditionally white, male disciplines, surrounded by faculty and peers who are overwhelmingly from college educated and more affluent backgrounds. Unable to access the same kinds of resources outside of the college as peers from affluent, college educated families, and feeling unable to connect with professors and

access the necessary help and support from within the college in order to thrive, students often articulated feeling lost and alone.

Student narratives often reflected their sense that interactions with faculty lacked the kind of care and encouragement they had imagined receiving at a small liberal arts college. When asked what makes students more likely to trust faculty and seek help, students often replied that listening was “the first step”. Even when a faculty member does not completely understand a student’s situation, it is important that they listen to the student and not invalidate their experiences or speak in a condescending manner. The conversations that some of these students have found more useful have been conversations in which faculty made themselves available, actively listened, and were honest but encouraging. Students appreciated when professors were available in many different settings, such as office hours and events, so that they have an opportunity to talk to the professor outside of the classroom, beyond just seeking help, and because settings other than the classroom can be more comfortable for students. Students at times described frustration at limited office hours that conflict with their own schedules and, although students wish to talk to faculty, they are not able to attend office hours. Others are disappointed by the conversations they have when a faculty member is available but not helpful. These students walk away feeling invalidated or hopeless from interactions where faculty members do not try to understand their circumstances or offer any sort of help. A recurring theme among our respondents reflects the sentiment that faculty aren’t “adequately trained to understand different students’ experiences”, which comes across to students when faculty seem unwilling or unable to acknowledge the array of experiences that exist among students.

### *Faculty diversity*

When describing helpful and positive interactions with faculty members, the issue of faculty diversity emerged often. Students expressed that when they met a professor who shared a similar background, they felt more of a connection and more trust, because they felt like that faculty member could understand their situation to a greater degree than other faculty members.

It's easier to speak with professors [who] share the same identity as me. I never thought that's something that would impact my relationship with professors, but it does. Regardless of what the academic situation is, I feel like I do connect with professors [who] share the same identity as me, [who] care about the same things. I have a really good relationship with my organic chemistry professor but that is not my favorite subject here. (Latinx, Neuroscience major)

When students are able to find connection and receive support from faculty, students are more likely to develop a mentoring relationship with faculty and are more likely to approach faculty outside of class for a number of reasons. In contrast, as one of our senior respondents noted, the lack of diversity among STEM faculty and a reluctance to share their biographies made it difficult for her to establish connections.

I was always just really intimidated by the fact like, ‘Oh if I had asked questions that well in class, or if I went to office hours...what would my professors think of me?’ With the exception of one or two professors, all of them were also white. Very rarely did they ever talk about themselves and where they had come from in their education journey, or why they're doing what they're doing, and that put more pressure on, ‘What if they won't

understand that I don't get this, because I was never taught this?' Or the high school I went to didn't have these resources. We didn't have good science teachers. What if they don't get that part of me?  
(Asian American, Biology major)

Looking back on her four years as a STEM major, this student noted how different she felt in the few courses she took with a female professor of color, even when she did not necessarily excel in the course.

My first semester was actually my ORGO professor. I didn't do very well in her class, but I just really appreciated her because on the first day, she talked a lot about herself and not only why she's an ORGO teacher and why she loves it, but how she comes from a Latinx background and being a woman of Latinx descent, a woman of color in science. Just that entire experience and how much it means to her, and why she wants us to all do well in ORGO and be able to pursue what we want despite challenges. I think it was just the first couple days of class where she really reiterates that, put me in a very good place. Going forth, it was just easier to go talk to her and seek help, especially since I wasn't doing well. I had higher hopes that she would be able to understand that...the difficulty of seeking help. I don't really know how to explain that, but there was definitely an internal sense of comfort for myself, seeking her out.

Student narratives make clear the profound value of having a diverse faculty population, so that there might be more points of potential contact between faculty and our increasingly diverse student demographic. What student narratives also make clear is that the presence of educators who are thinking about students holistically, about what an array of students might need in order to feel integrated, welcome, and able to thrive, is of equal value and importance. Discussions about what motivates faculty to do the work they do, about the kinds of challenges faculty have faced in the pursuit of their education and career trajectory, and their awareness of the kinds of barriers that exist for different groups of students seem to be the types of conversations that make underrepresented students of various backgrounds feel more comfortable approaching faculty.

Students who felt discouraged from pursuing a STEM major also noted the importance of faculty diversity to their educational experience and their aspirations.

I came here and I took my first biology class and it...was amazing. [The professor] was so much fun. She was a person of color. She was a woman of color in science so that was really good and I was like, 'Yes, I can do this!' All those labs were fun to me. I was having fun. Learning was fun. I remember having to do lab reports and I was never like, 'Oh my god, I don't want to do this.' I was like, 'I can do this. I'm having fun!'  
(Latinx, Educational Studies major)

Connection to and guidance from faculty mentors has been associated with the development of greater academic self-efficacy and academic success in the sciences among underrepresented students (Cole & Espinoza 2008). When students feel recognized and supported by faculty mentors, underrepresented students are more likely to believe in their ability to succeed in STEM courses (Carlone & Johnson 2007; Foltz, Gannon, and Kirschmann 2014). The qualitative data from our student narratives and the survey data recently collected by STEM faculty at Vassar

both point to establishing student-faculty connections as a key challenge in need of attention for our first generation, low income, and historically underrepresented students.

*Curricular innovations: A desire to connect science and society*

One of the benefits of a Vassar education is the ability (and requirement) that students take courses across curricular divisions, so that students are exposed to a range of content and perspectives that span the breadth of academic disciplines. Students who struggled to feel like they belonged in STEM courses and who struggled to establish connections with STEM faculty spoke of the places on campus where they were able to see themselves and their experiences reflected back in their professors, their peers, and the curriculum. As one of our computer science majors noted, as the day progressed, she found herself in different kinds of classroom contexts and engaging in discussions and interactions with faculty and peers that felt more validating and comfortable.

Things need to change for people to feel comfortable being [in STEM courses]. I've talked to some other friends of mine [who] are in STEM departments, and they're just like 'I feel the same way.' They just don't feel comfortable, or don't feel like they belong in that department. [Now that I've taken non-STEM] courses I've noticed like complete opposites, 'cause being in [non-STEM] courses I see professors of color, I see other students of color. We're studying students of color [in those classes], and even the director of the [program] is a black guy. And then I turn around and go to the STEM department, there's no professors of color, there's five of us, like five people of color in the class...and there's no support system because for whatever reason white men think that they can do everything by themselves, so that's what happens at the department. Everybody's just doing everything by themselves, even if you go to like coaching hour or something, they're just like 'You should know how to do this, like whatever, whatever, whatever, we went through it in class.' I feel so comfortable being in my [non-STEM] courses. 'Cause even today...I take a sociology class [with a professor who is] amazing. I love her. And half of my friends are in that class. And so like the stuff that we talk about is stuff that like, I'm just like whoa, like this is my life, like this is where I came from, and it's so relatable. And so I, I understand it, and I love writing papers.... It's so weird 'cause in a day I'll go from feeling like really uncomfortable to feeling like yeah, I can do it. I had computer science and math in the morning and then I had [a sociology] class in the afternoon, and now I'm here [doing this interview], so it's a nice little slip into being really comfortable, but I started off really feeling on edge.

Student narratives emphasized the importance of connecting with faculty who are actively working to help historically underrepresented students (e.g. students of color, first generation students, low income students, children of immigrants) cultivate a sense of belonging within the institution, within particular disciplines, and within classroom settings.

Our data also suggest that precisely because students are encouraged to take courses across disciplinary boundaries and because there is quite a lot of effective teaching and learning taking place, students are making important connections across disciplines. Comments like the following indicate that students are craving more structured opportunities, such as more curricular offerings, that build on the connections across disciplines that they are making on their own and can help them develop those connections and insights more extensively.

Rather than talking about that, generalizations about certain countries, generalizations about certain people are made, and we very very rarely talk about how a lot of clinical research that is done is usually at an advantage for white middle class people, and a lot of times utilizes the experiences and also bodies of poor people or people of color who need the money, especially in clinical studies that need participants, without recognizing that for research to be valid, it has to be applicable to all of the people.... These aren't classes that I want to be in, the type of class atmosphere, I want to be in, but I now finally understand after this semester what a lot of my peers in the past have talked about, about feeling like they're the only one in the bio class [who] really, really cares about anything besides the technical aspects, or the methodology of a study, or why the study matters scientifically. It's important that we talk about why it matters scientifically, but it's very rare that we look at it beyond science. I often wish that I was an STS major because I think just looking at the catalog of classes in general, there's just more consciousness on how we study and why we study what we study, that I feel like just doesn't- not that it doesn't exist, because there are definitely wonderful professors who try to make it a focal point, but there's still so much work for that to be compact and just very integrated into the curriculum within STEM at Vassar. (Asian American, Biology major)

Our data suggests that there is great interest among historically underrepresented students in STEM courses for curricular offerings that connect research in STEM fields with questions that are grounded in human and social experiences. Giving students an opportunity to explore moments in history when science has been used to both ameliorate human suffering as well as contribute to it and how various forms of inequality and systems of oppression (e.g. racism, sexism, classism) have been used to justify particular types of scientific exploration and technological advancements are among the kinds of issues that students seem to be calling for.

### *Recommendations*

STEM fields are commonly perceived as a gateway to financial stability and social mobility after graduation (Dika & D'Amico 2016). However, STEM disciplines often leave first generation, low income students, and especially women of color, feeling isolated in those departments due to a lack of faculty mentors, academic support, and a sense of belonging. These are only some of the factors that produce first generation, low income student attrition in these disciplines and make these academic pathways less than enjoyable for students who are able to persist. Existing scholarship has established the primary importance of key institutional agents (such as faculty) for the academic success of underrepresented college students (Museus & Neville 2012; Rendón, Jalomo & Nora 2000). Faculty serve this function in a variety of ways, by validating students' cultural backgrounds, exhibiting concern and support for students, advocating for students, and by humanizing the educational experience (Museus & Neville 2012; Watson et al. 2002). Other studies have found that the perceived relevance of coursework to students' lives has a positive impact on the academic and social adjustment of *all* students in the sciences, regardless of their background (Hurtado et al. 2007), and that a perceived lack of relevance with their social values and a desire to improve conditions for their communities might be why underrepresented students in particular often leave the sciences (Bonous-Hammarth 2000). Given the role that campus environments play in shaping the experiences of first generation, low income students in STEM fields, we recommend the following:

- A.** Faculty professional development that provides a strong foundation in inclusive pedagogies that can help strengthen faculty-student interactions both inside and outside of classroom spaces.
- B.** More intentional and explicit faculty mentoring of historically underrepresented students in STEM fields.
- C.** More emphasis on creating research opportunities specifically for URM and first generation, low income students.
- D.** A continued commitment on the part of the college to diversifying its faculty along a variety of dimensions, so that students who are first generation, low income, racial/ethnic minorities, children of immigrants, etc. have increased opportunities to establish connections with faculty who might share some element of their background and experiences.
- E.** Curricular offerings that bridge the divide between STEM fields and other disciplines, so that students can receive additional support for the connections they are making across disciplines by virtue of attending a liberal arts college that encourages breadth in course taking patterns.
- F.** The creation of programming and opportunities to gather specifically for historically underrepresented students across STEM disciplines at Vassar, so that URM and first generation, low income students might find it easier to connect with each other, share resources, and develop ways to support each other.

## TRANSITIONS PROGRAM

Access to elite, highly selective institutions of higher education like Vassar is not a given for first-generation and low-income students. A majority of the students interviewed were only able to apply and attend Vassar because of college access programs that provided a wide range of resources that assist students and their families financially, socially, and academically. Students often spoke about the invaluable role of participating in college access programs like QuestBridge, Schuler Scholars, College Match, and Opportunity Network. These programs provided students and their families with resources and opportunities such as assistance filling out college applications and financial aid applications, as well as help writing personal statements, free SAT tutoring, and college visits. Students who were not a part of these programs relied heavily on adults outside the family context, such as high school teachers and/or counselors. The involvement of these key institutional agents in the college application process was of particular importance for students in our sample given the limited help and information that most parents and family members were able to provide.

While some college access programs continue to provide supports once students enroll in college, they are understandably limited in what they can provide given the emphasis on college *access* and the assumption that colleges and universities will take the baton once students step on campus. Even though first-generation, low-income students are very resilient, it is important to avoid framing them as super heroes and expect them to be able to take on single-handedly all of the hardships they encounter as they navigate higher education. The support systems that first-generation and low-income students had in high school need to continue through their college years in order for students to be able to thrive as well as they did prior to enrolling in college.

At Vassar, the Transitions Program has provided a number of these supports and resources for first generation, low-income students on campus. While the program originated in 2010 as a three-day pre-orientation experience prior to the annual New Student Orientation, the program has expanded over time and in particular during the 2016-2017 academic year. As of the Fall 2016 term, the program has begun to expand in an attempt to support students throughout all four years, providing resources that are specific to each year (e.g. JYA supports for sophomores, networking events and a senior summit for seniors), and providing a wider web of opportunities for students to contribute and connect to the program (e.g. a range of intern, advisor, and coordinator positions; the newly created Transitions Advisory Board; and research positions).

Students interviewed expressed their gratitude for the community that Transitions has created for them at Vassar and for the constant support the program provides. The Transitions Program does an excellent job of providing a range of resources—academic, economic, and social—to low-income and first-generation Vassar students. The Transitions Program is still growing and developing, and the students interviewed provided an array of insights into how Vassar can better support them, particularly through the continued support and expansion of the Transitions Program.

### *Providing a community and facilitating a sense of belonging*

A common thread across interviews when students spoke of the role and impact of the Transitions Program in their adjustment to Vassar was the way that Transitions created opportunities and spaces for students to come together and feel more at ease. Words like “community”, “family”, “shared”, “similar”, and “inviting” occurred repeatedly in the interviews as we coded transcripts to gain a sense of what the Transitions Program provides for students.

Students felt that the spaces, supports, and resources offered by the program are continually affirming and comforting.

It's just like a good community to have to be able to be surrounded by these people who've had the same experiences as you or share the same common similar experiences as you. And being able to relate to experiences on campus and how it feels to be a low income first generation student on this campus. (Latinx, Education major)

[Transitions provides] a sense of community, because, financial status or generational status is not something you can read on a person. So it's easy to walk around and not know there's anybody else who's like you, and then to have this group that meets and it's like, 'oh, like you're just like me,' you know. It's not easy as pie and there's other people who know what I'm going through, so that is important, yeah. (African American, Drama major)

The way I view the program is in terms of how I experienced pre-orientation week compared to how I experienced orientation week outside of the Transitions family, because I had a very bad student fellow situation. I was able to fall back on the Transitions people. That's why I'm like, 'Oh, I'm so glad I did it.' In terms of the program, I'm glad I did it too because once every other student got here, I knew people. I was comfortable. I wasn't as scared. (Latinx, Neuroscience major)

We heard similar comments from first-generation, low-income students who did not attend the pre-orientation program and have not participated in Transitions programming. Among that subset of students, there was often a sense of regret about not having been able to attend the pre-orientation in particular.

I still do wish that I had gone to Transitions [pre-orientation], that I had been able to make that work 'cause I feel like I wouldn't feel so isolated here. (White, Environmental Studies major)

I didn't. I was invited to but I didn't. I didn't participate in transitions any of the four years really. I really missed out on an opportunity to have a good community, a really good bunch of people. Going through Vassar it was a constant struggle in trying to find people that were like maybe similar to me. Which was why I always kick myself with not joining Transitions because I know a lot of lower income students join Transitions. I really missed out on finding people that are Vassar students and also maybe have similar life experiences as me. (White, Political Science Major)

The subset of students who did not attend pre-orientation but later began participating in Transitions programming also articulated similar sentiments, noting that a need to find a community on campus was among the reasons for which they found ways to connect to the program.

I was so sad first semester. I look back at old me and I'm like, 'Aw, I'm so sorry for you.' I feel like I have found my space and things that I'm interested in. I think you have to find

that community. I think if I had come for [the Transitions pre-]orientation I wouldn't have had such a hard time because I didn't know who was poor.... But that's why I wanted to do Transitions this year, because I was like, 'Okay, I want to make sure that I'm in this group,' and also so that freshmen don't have the same experiences that I had.

(African American, Biology major)

[My involvement] honestly just started with friends...and then I met more people, just more of the [Transitions] students, because of the fact that they were so close. I was just tagging along to anything they did. And eventually I met Luis Inoa who was like, 'You're part of the family. You weren't here for [pre-orientation], but you're here now, and that's all that matters.' And at first I was hesitant, because I was like, 'you can just say that to anybody, really,' but eventually I would get the emails and then I'd get invited to the events on Facebook, and then I just started going and I got to know most of that [cohort]. Eventually it became the people that were already a part of my community became a part of the Transitions community. (Latinx, Latin American/Latino Studies major)

I think it's just the increasing amount of isolation I felt on this campus. I was just looking for a group of people who shared my experiences and shared experiences of not...just not being wealthy, because I think it's really hard. I'm happy where I'm at. I'm happy with the things that I have. It's not like I necessarily want to be a millionaire.... I just wanted a group of people who shared that feeling and that I could complain to. Because when I complain or *try* to complain to some of my friends, or even my boyfriend, they just really don't get it because they don't come from a similar background. They just think that I'm complaining or I'm bitter...They just don't empathize. (Asian American, English major)

The last quote above in particular represents the way that some students described their experiences and feelings about the Transitions Program in direct contrast to their experiences with the college more generally. While students at times discussed a general or overarching feeling of disconnect from the institution as a whole and a sense of isolation within the institution, they described the Transitions Program as a refuge from those feelings and experiences.

### *Misunderstandings and misconceptions about Transitions*

Given how important the Transitions Program has been to so many first-generation, low-income students on campus, our respondents were eager to discuss a variety of ways to improve the supports and resources that the program and the College provide to this student population. One of the main themes that appeared within our data was that of missed opportunities to connect with the Transitions Program. The following section outlines some of the patterns that emerged across interviews with respect to when and how students became involved with the program, some of the reasons for which students did not initially participate, and reasons for which a small subset of students have yet to integrate into the program. Among the 43 students we interviewed, 19 have been involved with Transitions since the pre-orientation program. Of the 24 students who did not attend pre-orientation, half indicated that they have since become involved with Transitions in a variety of ways, from attending events, using the resources and supports the program provides, making use of the Living Room, and/or taking up leadership

positions within the program (e.g. interns, big siblings in the Hermanx program, Advisory Board, the Transitions Research Team).

There were a series of recurring misunderstandings and misconceptions among our respondents which often centered on a lack of understanding about the program's purpose and who it is meant to serve. The following excerpts are representative of the kinds of misperceptions that students had about the program, which centered on confusion about whether the program is intended to serve primarily students of color, and who "counts" as first generation or low-income.

I know that Transitions is always primarily, I don't think it's explicit, primarily serves like students of color. I just thought that probably wasn't the best place for me to just insert myself. (White, Political Science major)

I'm always confused when they say first gen because I have two older sisters and they went through community college and I'm like, 'They went through college. And now I'm going through college.' I'm like, 'but do I count?' And also my dad went. He didn't graduate from college but he went to some college in Mexico, so I never know. I'm like, it's not applicable to the U.S. system, but I'm like, he did go, so does that count or not count? I'm unsure. I was like, 'I don't want to take someone's spot who deserves it more. So I won't apply.' So I didn't apply. Then I regretted and then I was talking to Luis about it when I got here, and Luis was like, 'You should've applied.' (Latinx, Psychology major)

But I was just like I don't know what it means to be a first generation person, and I don't know if they really explained that in the email. So I think when I applied for Transitions I don't think that I put I was first generation but then I started understanding my definition of being first generation, and I was like oh, I probably should've clicked that. (African American, Cognitive Science major)

This pattern highlights the need for the College to provide better supports for the Transitions Program so that it can more effectively inform incoming and current students about their eligibility. As one of the recommendations at the end of this section suggests, incorporating the content that has been created on the Transitions Word Press site into the official college website would go a long way toward helping to clarify the aims of the program, who it is meant to serve, and who is eligible to participate.

Another common misconception among students about the program was that students are only part of Transitions if they attend the pre-orientation.

I guess there's this misconception--I thought if you didn't participate in the pre-orientation program, you weren't part of transitions but I guess that's not the case... So I didn't know that until my friend told me that. So before that I wasn't involved in Transitions and they didn't really reach out either, so if it wasn't for my friend I don't think I would have gotten involved with Transitions again. (Latinx, Economics major)

Yeah, so I think I've become an honorary member. I get emails, and I've gone to Transitions events, but I wasn't formally part of the program.

(West Indian, Sociology major)

I didn't know it was a thing. I thought transitions was in the summer and then that was it and then you were done. I didn't realize it was a system and then you were supposed to be in Transitions forever. I didn't know it was a forever thing. I thought I was just like, 'Oh. You came in the summer early and then that was it.' You know?

(African American, Biology major)

This misconception is understandable, given that until the 2016-2017 academic year, the pre-orientation program and occasional Sunday brunches constituted the bulk of what Transitions offered to students. Student responses suggest that even though the program has recently expanded to provide supports and resources throughout a students' time at Vassar, it is not clear to current students that the program is now open to all low income, first generation students, regardless of their involvement in the pre-orientation.

A related sentiment expressed by students who did not attend pre-orientation has to do with their reluctance to join Transitions because of the sense that they missed out on the bonding opportunities facilitated through pre-orientation. Some students spoke of the discomfort they anticipated feeling if they were to attempt to join a group that has already bonded.

I haven't asked to be on a mailing list yet, because I feel like it's too late. The point of Transitions is to form this community. Once you get here you can see who the other people are who are from a similar place as you, or who have similar struggles in adjusting, it would be hard for them too. And because I wasn't part of that initial group, no-one thinks about me in that way. And I feel like if I just started showing up all of sudden, people would be like, 'Who is this person?'

(African American, Sociology major)

Um, so actually I didn't know about Transitions, which is very strange because I guess I kind of heard about it once I came to Vassar, that some students had come early for Transitions and like found friends within Transitions, which I was like a bit sad about because I think I do meet the requirements for Transitions. So um, I wasn't really sure about why I didn't know about it. I was really confused. So like I haven't really gone to any of the meetings and stuff, just because everyone is already super close and like friends with each other, so I feel like it would be a bit weird.

(Asian American, Undeclared)

Friendships, like really strong bonds, are formed during pre-orientation. It's kind of overwhelming when you see these people but they're already so close. It's like I can't catch up. You don't have the time to catch up to that.

(African American, Biology major)

In addition to these types of misconceptions and hesitations about the program, students articulated an array of family and administrative barriers that prevented them from arriving early and participating in the pre-orientation programming. Although the Transitions Program sends

out invitations to the pre-orientation program (recently renamed “Foundations”) to all first-generation, low-income students in the first-year class, not all students are able to attend. Given the financial constraints that low-income families face, some students shared that they chose to stay home longer in order to continue working in summer jobs and/or to continue providing much-needed contributions to household and childcare needs within their families. Other students indicated having overlooked the invitations that were sent via email message or that they received the invitation to participate in pre-orientation after they had made travel arrangements. Given the financial constraints among low-income families, changing travel arrangements was often not a feasible option.

I didn't check my email. I was at work every day. I didn't come home and look what's on my Vassar email. I didn't even think I could get emails at the email yet. I thought it was going to be used when the school year started. I felt like if you weren't in that program, then it's all up to you, it's an individual thing at that point. (Latinx, LALS major)

I did not [attend pre-orientation]. No I couldn't. I'd already bought my plane ticket. I feel like I found out about it a little- I don't remember when they sent it in the summer but I wish I would have gotten it sooner. (Latinx, Economics major)

Given the timing of the invitations to attend the program and the lack of understanding about administrative matters, such as when students are assigned a Vassar email address and can begin checking email, it is important for the College and the Transitions Program to find ways to ensure that a broader range of students are aware of the opportunity to come to campus early and participate in the Foundations Pre-Orientation. Some students suggested that the college and the program provide clearer and more consistent advertising throughout the academic year to encourage students to feel comfortable using the resources and attending program events, even if they were unable to attend Foundations.

I guess more advertisement for students who didn't do Transitions [pre-orientation]. Be like, 'Hey. Even though you didn't do it, you identify as this ...' Or I feel like, maybe you can always join. Yeah. I feel like advertising that it's not a closed thing. You can always join. You can always be a Transitions student. Everyone who identifies as this is a Transitions student even though you didn't go to the Transitions program in the summer, you're still one of us. (African American, Biology major)

Other respondents suggested ways to invite and integrate students who cannot come early for Foundations pre-orientation. For example, although the Foundations pre-orientation programming happens in the week prior to New Student Orientation, the Transitions Program can make itself known to first generation, low income students during the general orientation week by providing opportunities for all first generation, low income students to come together.

I know I had a friend who told me that they wished that after pre-orientation, like during orientation [the College] would have done more with Transitions because they felt like it was a great group of people and then orientation came around...and then having to unpack a lot of the things that were said during orientation, without that same comforting support network, was difficult. I've heard really great things and I think that it's been

really helpful to garner support through people who, in the past, haven't really gotten a whole lot of support. And really building community out of that, I think is great, and I'm like, I wish I would've gone through it, but I'm happy that I'm still part of it in one way or another. (Latinx, Psychology major)

Transitions programming of this sort could help prevent students who cannot attend Foundations from feeling like they are not eligible for Transitions programming during the academic year and might make it easier for new students to integrate into the program by including them in programming during their first week on campus.

### *Supporting and expanding the Transitions Program*

Given the recent departure of Luis Inoa, Associate Dean of Students, Director of Residential Life, and Director of the Transitions Program, we would be remiss if we did not dedicate a section of this report to highlight the invaluable role of staff in the success of the Transitions Program and in the lives of the students it serves. Across our interviews, students emphasized how meaningful it was to have Transitions administrators who shared a similar background and whose engagement with the program and its students transmits love, care, and a sense of community. Students repeatedly noted how important it was to see—through daily practice, presence, and the embodiment of an ethic of care—that there are administrators on campus who are making a clear and concerted effort to help historically underrepresented students cultivate a sense of belonging and thrive within the institution.

I love Transition so much. Luis Inoa is amazing, and I love him. Literally, I aspire to be [like him]- I cannot say the words for this man. I might work for him during the summer, so I'm really excited for that. Transition is an amazing program. (Latinx, Biology major)

I also appreciate Luis and Capria and Diane, because like seeing Transitions-identifying people just doing things. They do great things and they really care about us. Sometimes Diane sits, because I have meetings with Diane biweekly. She just sits there and she talks about how much she loves us and cares about us. I can just see the amount of care that she has for Transitions and the support. (Latinx, Latin American/Latino Studies major)

Even though I'm not Transitions...when we were here for spring break, I was out here starving. Luis is like, 'Here's some food.' I was like, 'What?' I wasn't even on the email list. I was not- he knows I'm not Transitions, but just because of who I am, what I look like, that's enough. And that's what I- Luis is just amazing.

(African American, Biology major)

Very early on my first meeting with my pre-major advisor, I literally was talking to her for like a minute and she goes, 'Do you know Luis Inoa?' and I'm like, 'No, I don't know. Who is that?' and they were like, 'You should talk to Luis Inoa,' and wrote down his information and slid it over to me. I hit him up and he's like, 'Come down to my office. Please come down to my office.' I just walked into his office and we just talk, like very small talk. [It was] one of the first times I had ever had small talk on this campus, like a week in, when I was so awkward and he's like, 'All right I have to go do some stuff but it was really great talking to you. It sounds like you really like movies. I have this

movie poster I bought for my daughter but I don't think she wants it, do you want it? Also I think you should read this book by a professor on campus, it's a very great book.' He gives me the book, he tells me to come back to his office on Friday, I do and he gives me a poster so I could hang up in my room. It's my only poster...it was such a loving gesture. I still felt so weird on this campus. I still felt like I knew nobody...but I look back on those moments, like if not for that, what would-? That was great beginning.

(Asian American, Sociology major)

Because of the phenomenal administrators that the program has had to-date and the successful expansion of the program's resources and supports during the 2016-2017 academic year, the students in our sample noted repeatedly the invaluable role of the program in their ability to navigate the college more effectively.

Finally, students noted that the program has been key in their ability to start cultivating a sense of belonging on campus, and ultimately being able to thrive. One of the most commonly repeated sentiments is reflected in the following statement by a Latinx, Cognitive Science major: "I don't know what I would have done without the Transitions Program."

I feel like Transitions always provides a space for when I feel lost here, I don't know, it's something I can come back to. I feel secure and I can keep going again.

(Latinx, English major)

The emotional support from Transitions peers has been so important for, I think, surviving at Vassar. Or, not even surviving, but *thriving*, because- Yeah, it's not [just about] surviving anymore. I feel that's essential to succeeding.

(West Indian, Sociology major)

Transitions is amazing, and I love [it]. I hope that they do this more in other colleges because Transitions is the smartest idea ever. Now that we have the Transitions Living Room, there's even more spaces for us. Transitions, I love it. (Latinx, Biology major)

As the college administration considers potential candidates for the role of Associate Dean of Students and Director of Residential Life, members of the Transitions Research Team hope that the administration will give serious consideration to the needs of the Transitions Program and redouble its commitment to supporting a program that is heavily needed on campus and does a world of good for the students whom it serves. In recent years, Vassar has garnered national recognition for its efforts and commitment to diversity and affordability in higher education over the last decade. Vassar is listed among the most economically diverse top colleges in the United States by *The New York Times* (2014) and was awarded the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation's (2015) inaugural \$1 million award. Embedded in Vassar's successful recruitment and retention of low-income, first generation students is the existence and work of the Transitions Program, which also garnered national recognition of its own by American Public Media's *Marketplace* (Scott 2015) for helping low-income students develop a sense of belonging on campus.

The goals, supports, and resources provided by the Transitions Program are also in perfect alignment with the \$1.6 million four-year initiative that has been partially funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (Vassar College 2016). The initiative—"Engaged Pluralism:

Belonging and Thriving at Vassar College”—is designed to further the college’s mission to offer a more “inclusive and affirming learning community” for students, in part by “strengthening programs that foster a sense of *belonging* within the institution and that *empower* students to thrive”. Continuing financial, programmatic, and staff support for the Transitions Program so that it can continue to expand and facilitate belonging and thriving among the historically underrepresented students it serves falls squarely within that plan. Although the program has until recently benefited from caring and dedicated administrators and staff under the leadership of Luis Inoa, we urge the college administration to put its full support behind adequate staffing and leadership for the program now that Luis is gone. As one of our respondents noted, Luis has been the heart and soul of the program since its inception and he has been instrumental in growing the program in recent semesters:

Honestly I just would love to see it expand because right now, the way I see it, it just seems like the- it’s Luis’ baby, right? Luis, he loves all of the students, he takes care of the students. He does most of the major programming. I would love to see Transitions be something that’s ingrained like more with the College formally.... I just want Luis to not be the only one that has to take care of Transitions. I want Transitions to be like a huge program on campus. I want it to continue growing and I want it to have very formal support from the College so that Luis doesn’t have to go out of his way to make it exist. Like it can just exist on its own. (White, Political Science major)

In order to continue growing the program and expanding the much-needed supports and resources that first generation, low income students need in order to feel like they belong on campus and can thrive, the college should appoint a director and staff to oversee the expansion and maintenance of the program. At present, and particularly in the face of Luis’ departure from the college, the program will most likely be unable to keep growing without dedicated administrative staff. At best, given that the interim co-directors of the program have an array of other primary administrative roles to play on campus that will likely take higher priority than the Transitions Program, we anticipate that Transitions will only *maintain* the programming that was piloted during the 2016-17 academic year, rather than be able to *grow* to meet the needs of the students it serves.

### *Recommendations*

Our first overarching recommendation is to form a committee of administrators, faculty, and students who have been directly involved with and dedicated to the Transitions Program to discuss and plan how the college can continue to support the program and help it grow. We recommend that this committee be composed of the current co-directors (Diane Eshelman and Capria Berry), the two former chairs of the Committee on Inclusion and Equity who have long-standing involvement and dedication to the program (Zachariah Mampilly and Eréndira Rueda), and members of the Transitions Advisory Board (e.g. Assistant Professor Jose Perillan and student members). The Committee on Inclusion and Excellence has been the supervising body for Transitions since the program’s inception, with the Director of Transitions reporting to CIE every year regarding its plans and progression. Given this relationship, the two former CIE co-chairs (Professors Mampilly and Rueda) can convene and oversee a committee designed to articulate how to continue supporting, staffing, and growing the Transitions Program. Based on our study findings and discussions with key stakeholders, we recommend the following:

## Staffing

- Making use of the half-time FTE budgeted in the Mellon Foundation Award to fund a program director to oversee the maintenance and growth of the resources and supports that the Transition Program provides for students.
- Making use of the NODA Internship Program to hire a coordinator over the summer whose primary task is to develop the programming for Foundations pre-orientation. <http://www.nodaweb.org/?page=InternshipProgram>
- Maintain the expansion of leadership roles for students within the program so that students can provide invaluable peer-to-peer support – e.g. Transitions senior interns, Transitions interns, sophomore advisors, advisory board members, work study students tending to the Living Room, and the Transitions Research Team.
- Continue supporting the creation of post-baccalaureate positions who provide invaluable support for the Transitions Program by helping with programming and by linking the program to various campus offices and resources.

## Program Visibility and Clarity

- The Transitions Advisory Board and the Office of Communications should discuss a plan to incorporate the content from the Transitions Word Press site (<http://pages.vassar.edu/vassartransitions/events/faq/>) into the official College website in order to provide prospective and current students with more detailed information about what the program does and who it is meant to serve.
  - For prospective students, a link to a Transitions webpage can be included in the paragraph about the Transitions Program under the Diversity Outreach link on the Admissions page. <https://admissions.vassar.edu/apply/diversity.html>
  - The Transitions Advisory Board and the Office of Communications should discuss ideal places to provide a link to the Transitions webpage from other parts of the college website (e.g. under the Resources tab, and ultimately, the webpage should be linked to the office on campus that is supervising the program) so that current students can find more information about the program when needed.
- The Transitions Advisory Board and the Office of Admissions should discuss a partnership that will allow all admitted students to learn about the program as part of the admissions information that they receive.
  - Including a “save the date” notice, eligibility requirements, and a description of the Foundations pre-orientation with these materials will make students aware of their eligibility and the dates for the program, well before they begin making travel arrangements.
- Pre-major advisors should be made aware of the Transitions program, who it serves, and eligibility requirements so that they can encourage their students to make use of the resources and supports provided by Transitions.

## Events/Programming

- Foundations pre-orientation should send reminders to eligible admitted students well in advance of the program so that students are aware of the opportunity in advance of making travel arrangements to arrive on campus.

- Transitions should create additional points of contact among first generation, low-income students during New Student Orientation week that will allow students who were unable to attend Foundations pre-orientation to connect with the program, its students, administrators, and supporting faculty. Doing so will help make clearer to students that attending Foundations pre-orientation is not a pre-requisite for becoming part of Transitions.

## CONCLUSION

One of the most striking themes to emerge from our interview data is the need and desire among students to establish meaningful connections with other members of the campus community. In instances when students felt they lacked supportive connections with others, the overriding experience was one of loneliness, frustration, and self-doubt, whether students were describing their interactions with campus offices, administrators, peers, or faculty. That lack of connection and support is often paired in student narratives with a sense that they do not belong on campus. Students also made clear that lacking connections with key institutional agents makes it that much more difficult to navigate campus offices and their academic pathways during their four years at Vassar. The manner in which students spoke about the Transitions Program, however, makes clear that the spaces, resources, and supports on campus that are explicitly and intentionally created with the needs of first generation, low income students in mind go a long way toward helping students cultivate a sense of belonging and make it easier to thrive.

Research from across the educational spectrum, whether it be K-12 or postsecondary research, suggests that developing a sense of belonging to educational settings is correlated with more positive educational experiences and outcomes. This should come as no surprise given that the need to feel connected to something greater than the self is a basic human motivation and everyone shares a strong need to belong, to feel that one is important and matters to others (Strayhorn 2012:1). At the college level, “sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling...of connectedness...the experience of feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g. campus community) or others on campus (e.g. faculty, peers)” (Strayhorn 2012:3). The narratives that students shared with us make clear the crucial role of key institutional agents—such as faculty and administrators—in shaping student experiences on campus and facilitating access to important resources. Student narratives highlight the need to ensure that historically underrepresented students on campus are able to establish meaningful connections to key institutional agents who can facilitate access to the information, resources, and supports that are crucial for a successful adjustment to college and the ability to thrive holistically while at Vassar.

Although the adult-to-student ratio is much smaller at Vassar and students are receiving far more personalized attention than they would at a large public institution, student populations that have been historically excluded from and marginalized within higher education still perceive a lack of care and understanding of the constraints related to their personal and financial circumstances. Students conveyed very clearly how difficult it has been to find help navigating their academic trajectories and different offices. As first generation, low income students, our respondents usually do not enjoy the benefit of being able to call home and talk to parents and family members who already know the ropes and can provide logistical support and advice for how to proceed. Instead, our respondents note the frustration, hesitation, and difficulty they encounter as they try to figure out how to access resources, how to interact with different offices, how to approach faculty and administrators, who to talk to, where to start, and what might need to be done in order to access needed supports.

While the college provides a broad array of supports and resources, and does communicate the existence of those resources to students, what our respondents are often alluding to in their narratives is the difference between aesthetic care and authentic care (Noddings 1999, 2003; Valenzuela 1999). When students spoke of moments when they felt they had made meaningful connections, they highlighted the importance of establishing connections with key institutional agents who shared common ground with students in some way, who were

able and willing to provide holistic support for students, were willing to humanize the educational experiences, and provided proactive support for those students (Museus & Neville 2012). Students' narratives make clear the importance of thinking about the care and supports provided in relational ways, that is, understanding how students experience the claims and efforts made by college administrators, faculty, offices, and departments when they claim to care, to be there, and to provide supports. By adopting a relational understanding of care, and focusing on an emic understanding of what it means to receive care, the college's efforts to cultivate a sense of belonging and make it easier for *all* students to thrive in this context are more likely to be successful.

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