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## What's the Big Fat Deal?: The Experience of Fat Students in College

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What's the Big Fat Deal?: The Experience of Fat Students in College

by

Andrea Marie Melrose

A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Education

School of Education

What's the Big Fat Deal?: The Experience of Fat Students in College

by

Andrea Marie Melrose

This dissertation has been approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Education

at Lindenwood University by the School of Education

*Roger "Mitch" Nasser Jr.*  
Dr. Roger Nasser, Dissertation Chair

06/09/2023  
Date

*Kilinyaa Cothran*  
Dr. Kilinyaa Cothran, Committee Member

06/09/2023  
Date

*Shane Williamson*  
Dr. Shane Williamson, Committee Member

6/9/2023  
Date

Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work here at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree here or elsewhere.

Full Legal Name: Andrea Marie Melrose

Signature:  Date: 6/15/23

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I would be remiss if I did not thank the fat college students who participated in my research. They freely gave of their time and brought their stories forward, because they wanted their experiences to help inform positive change for fat students in college, and I am so grateful for them.

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## **Abstract**

Weight-based discrimination is considered the last acceptable form of discrimination in the United States. Fat bias and stigma are present in healthcare, employment, and education. This dissertation study explores the experiences of fat students on college campuses, examining their experiences of anti-fat bias and discrimination. Additionally, this study explores policy and practice implications for improving the experiences of fat college students and supporting body diversity on campus. This dissertation has four overarching research questions that focus on the following topics: fat students' experiences of weight-based stigma and discrimination in college, the limitations of physical space on college campuses, perceptions of available resources for fat students, and the impact of demographic factors on the fat student experience in college. Eighteen survey participants and six interview participants provided data. Participants stated that their experiences of stigma and discrimination did not impact their overall college experience, which they reported as positive. Study participants expressed the need for a greater understanding of the needs of fat students and the need for increased opportunities to feel like they belong. This study shows that higher education institutions are not doing enough to support fat students and suggests changes for increased inclusion and retention.

*Keywords:* fat studies, fat stigma, fatphobia, weight discrimination, higher education, college students

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

Human development across the lifespan is rich and complex, shaped by experiences and environments, including education. The time of most rapid growth and development in a person's life is between the ages of 18 and 25, during which a young person is exploring their abilities, identities, values, and purpose. The State Adolescent Health Resource Center (2013) describes this time as:

When very little is normative. It is a period of frequent change and exploration that covers many aspects of [the adolescent's] life: home, family, work, school, resources, and role. The process of becoming an adult is more gradual and varied today than in the past. Young people take longer to achieve economic and psychological autonomy and early adulthood experiences vary greatly by gender, race and ethnicity, and social class. (p. 1)

Student development is when college students become “increasingly able to integrate and act on many different experiences and influences” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 7). Student development theory describes the positive changes that college students experience, as related to their cognitive growth, self-awareness and self-efficacy, social identities and intersectionality, and engagement with others and the world around them.

College student development theory includes identity development theories on ability, age, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status, as well as psychosocial identity development, epistemological and intellectual development, moral development, and the development of self-authorship. A person's relationship to their physical body is missing from the scholarship on identity,

particularly the development of an adult's identity as a fat person. "Weight is just one more characteristic that makes us variable" (Aronson, 1997, p. 22). Scholars and practitioners must consider weight and body diversity as part of a person's identity and sense of self.

Negative messaging from society shapes a fat person's relationship with their body. "There's a social attitude that if you're mean enough [to overweight kids], then maybe they'll do something about their size" (Satter, as cited in Aronson, 1997, p. 22). Weight-related discrimination is called the last acceptable discrimination. Goldberg (2019) reported that research from Harvard University on explicit and implicit bias shows weight bias is changing the slowest of all attitudes (para. 8). "It is the only attitude out of the six that we looked at that showed any hint of getting *more* biased over time" (Goldberg, 2019, p. 1). The study found that from 2004 to 2010, body weight bias increased by 40% (Goldberg, 2019, p. 1).

Crandall and Martinez (1996) conducted a study that "supports the perception that Americans, among the fattest of the nations, are singularly intolerant of fat" (p. 1172). Lupton (2013) states it best:

In a society in which most people understand that discriminating overtly against social groups such as women, people of minority ethnic or racial groups, gays and lesbians, and people with disabilities is wrong, and where such discrimination is legally prohibited, fat people are apparently fair game. (p. 2)

The experience of bias and discrimination against fat people is, at best, inconvenient and, at worst, painful and debilitating. For example, in her TedXTalk on thin privilege and fat

bias, Krall (2017) stated that because of weight-related discrimination, fifty percent of fat people would give up a year of their life to not be considered obese.

In *Tipping the Scales of Justice: Fighting Weight-Based Discrimination*, lawyer Solovay (2000) writes:

Stereotypes about fat people affect the whole group and are not based on the abilities of individuals. The prejudice against fat is similar, sometimes more severe, than race-based bias. Young children of different races and sizes identify fat children as lazy, dirty, stupid, cheats, and liars. These stereotypes are identical to many racial stereotypes. (p. 113)

Weight, obesity, or “fatness” are not legally protected categories under the United States Constitution or federal laws. However, the state of Michigan and some cities and towns have enacted laws to make weight a protected class. Twenty-one higher education institutions have protections for weight discrimination: eighteen in Michigan.

In the United States, a fat person is seen as lacking control and blamed and shamed for their condition (Blaine & Williams, 2004; Crandall & Martinez, 1996; Crandall & Schiffhauer, 1998; Crocker et al., 1993; Farrell, 2011). The medical community and the weight-loss and beauty industries have reinforced the belief that weight is an easily controlled variable. We constantly see anti-fat bias play out on social media and television.

Fatness is hyper-visible to others but is invisible in terms of lived experience (Rezai R., personal communication, 2021; Saguy & Ward, 2011, p. 54); only the obese person experiencing the stigma truly understands the challenges. Stigmatization of fatness has impacted persons of size outside of the college environment, but there is

limited information on the experience of fat college students. The majority of scholarly research on the fat experience of college students is on body image and eating disorders in college women (Aparício Araújo, 2019; Baugh et al., 2010; Buckley, 2011; Cash et al., 1997; Choate, 2005; Harring et al., 2010; Hesse-Biber et al., 2010; Leavy et al., 2009; Leone et al., 2011; McGrath et al., 2009; Miles, 2009; Naz et al., 2017; Schmidt et al., 2019; Smith-Jackson et al., 2014; Stanley, 2013; Thomas & Warren-Findlow, 2020). Storytelling in personal narratives captures the experiences of fat people and fat college students (Brown, 2018; Gay, 2017; Hagen, 2020; LeBesco & Braziel, 2001; Manfredi, 2019; Reidinger, 2020; Stewart, 2018), leaving a gap for more scholarly research.

Some scholarly research on the experiences of fat college students does exist, but it is merely the beginning of understanding how body diversity is experienced on campus. Research connects body image to student academic achievement (Aparício Araujo, 2019; Chazan, 2019; Latty, 2020; Miles, 2009; Naz et al., 2017). Crandall (1991) looked at the recruitment and enrollment of students of size in college and found that they are less likely to apply for school and more likely to struggle to finance their education. "Submitting virtually identical applications to colleges, for example, with photographs of overweight or average weight people, produces strikingly different acceptance rates. [ . . . ]. The results point to a strong correlation between obesity and rejection" (Aronson, 1997, p. 21). A 2013 study by Parr found that academics who interview graduate school candidates favor those who are thinner, reinforcing the notion that weight-related discrimination exists in academia.

In 2006, Lincoln University in Pennsylvania instituted a rule that students with a body mass index of 30 or above would be required to take a fitness course to meet

graduation requirements (Jaschik, 2009; Landau, 2009). In 2007, the DePauw University chapter of Delta Zeta sorority purged the group of all but the thinnest and prettiest young women.

The mass eviction battered the self-esteem of many of the former sorority members, and some withdrew from classes in depression. There have been student protests, outraged letters from alumni and parents, and a faculty petition calling the sorority's action unethical. (Dillon, 2007, para. 7)

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the experiences of fat students to understand their experience as a person of size in a college environment.

Stigmatization of fatness has impacted persons of size outside of the college environment, but there is limited information on the experience of fat college students. Scholarly research on the experience of college students and their bodies focuses on body image and eating disorders in college women, or the experiences of fat students is shown through personal narratives. This study aims to examine the common themes in the experiences of fat college students and provide data to college administrators who can affect the culture and policies that impact fat students on campus.

It is of critical importance for college student affairs and diversity and inclusion professionals to understand the experiences of fat students, so that we may begin to change our campus cultures as they relate to students of size. One way to begin that education and understanding is to consider the student's experience as a fat person on campus.

## **Research Questions**

The researcher developed four overarching questions to guide this study and explore fat students' experiences on college campuses. These questions address stigma and discrimination, the college environment, student support, and intersectionality of identity as it relates to campus student support services.

### ***Research Questions***

**Research Question 1:** How have students of size experienced weight-based stigma and discrimination in college? What impact has this had on their overall college experience?

**Research Question 2:** How have fat students been challenged, if at all, by limitations within the college environment?

**Research Question 3:** What support, if any, have fat students received relating to their college experience as a person of size? What are the perceptions of weight-based campus resources, if they exist, by fat students?

**Research Question 4:** How do demographic factors impact the fat student experience on campus?

I believe that by exploring the answers to these questions, student support practitioners (university faculty and staff) will have more data on fat students and will be able to improve the overall student experience on campus.

## **Significance**

Scholars and practitioners of student and identity development theory can alleviate shame and reduce weight-based discrimination by including body diversity (large, small, short, tall, etc.) as part of human identity development. "Focusing on size

as one facet of human diversity can help diffuse prejudice against the overweight" (Aronson, 1997, p. 22).

The results of this study will be available to assist student affairs professionals and college administration in supporting and advocating for fat students on their campuses. In addition, college administrators can utilize the data to suggest changes to campus environments and influence changes in campus support for students of size.

In the 2018 article, "About Fat Campus," author, Stewart, asserts that fat discrimination and fat-phobia are alive and well on college campuses. They charge faculty and staff to look at weight-related bias on campuses, develop awareness, and take action to improve. Stewart (2018) writes:

We must render the experiences of fat students visible. We must contend with the ways that fat people, at times, experience embarrassment, humiliation, and discomfort on campus and in our classrooms. While it is a complex and messy reality, we must navigate, we can make our campuses better for fat people, and we should. (p. 33)

I believe that understanding the fat student experience will assist college professionals in understanding and supporting students of size and reduce stigma and discrimination on college campuses. In addition, student recruitment, retention, and overall satisfaction will increase if we take steps to improve the campus culture to be more equitable and inclusive of fat people.

### **Background of the Study**

This study is comprised of an online survey and qualitative interviews of current students or recent college graduates, aged 18 to 25 years. The online survey includes a

qualifying survey, demographic and exploratory questions, and a consent form. The initial data assessment was formatted as a *Qualtrics* form that was shared via email and social media (Facebook and Instagram), with the goal of approximately 50 survey participants and 8 to 12 qualitative interviews. Conducting 8 to 12 qualitative interviews allows for establishing themes and patterns without overwhelming the researcher with data. The interview questions investigate the experiences of fat students during college, focusing on their experiences of discrimination, the physical environment at the university, and resources and support for students of size. The actual response rate returned 18 complete and viable surveys and six interviews.

### **Keywords and Definitions**

Before further exploring this topic, it is essential to reflect on and clarify critical words, topics, and definitions that will be used throughout this study and paper.

#### ***Academic Interference***

Yanover and Thompson (2008a, 2008b) coined the term ‘academic interference’ to denote the behavioural manifestation of body image disturbances that impact academic performance. Such disturbances include a preoccupation with appearance, eating, and exercise that interfere with class attendance, attention paid in class, and homework completion behaviours. Academic interference, otherwise stated, is the academic functioning difficulties that are accounted for by eating and body image-related symptoms. The researchers found university students’ level of academic interference to have significant negative associations with GPA. (Chazan, 2019, p. 8)

#### ***Access***

Access is the

a) permission, liberty, or ability to enter, approach, or pass to and from a place or to approach or communicate with a person or thing; b) freedom or ability to obtain or make use of something; c) a way or means of entering or approaching.

(Merriam-Webster, 2021, para. 1)

For students both on and off campus, the access to physical space and resources, the ability to obtain and engage in the campus opportunities, and the permission to experience college fully is an essential topic regarding equity and inclusion for fat students.

### ***Anti-fatness and Anti-fat bias***

Those that identify as overweight, obese, or fat experience anti-fat bias or weight-related bias.

Anti-fatness and anti-fat bias are umbrella terms that describe the attitudes, behaviors, and social systems that specifically marginalize, exclude, underserve, and oppress fat bodies. They refer to the individual bigotry as well as institutional policies designed to marginalize fat people. Anti-fatness and anti-fat bias are also sometimes referred to as fatphobia, fatmisia, sizeism, weight stigma, or fattism.

(Gordon, 2020, p. 10)

### ***Body Image***

Participants in this study shared their perceptions of their body regarding weight and being above-average size.

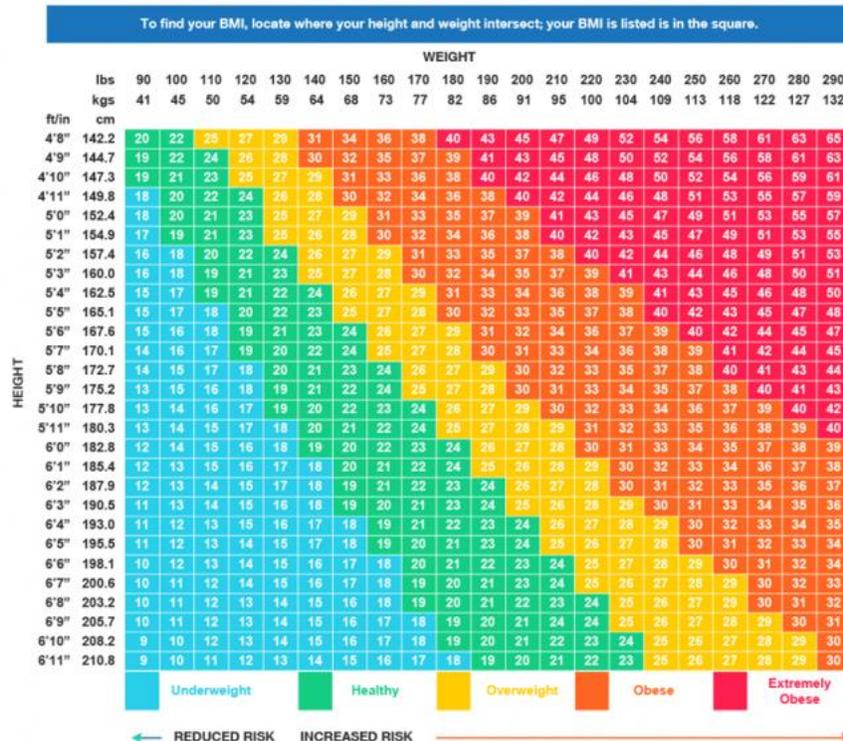
Body image has been defined as a person's subjective concept of his or her physical appearance. Garner (1981) defined body image to include both a self-

perceptual component of what we see or think we see in size, shape, weight, feature, movement and performance, and an attitudinal and affective component of how we feel about those attributes and how our feelings motivate certain behaviors. (Forrest & Stuhldreher, 2007, p. 18)

**Body Mass Index (BMI)**

Body Mass Index (BMI) is a person’s weight in kilograms divided by the square of height in meters. A high BMI can be an indicator of high body fatness. BMI can be used to screen for weight categories that may lead to health problems but it is not diagnostic of the body fatness or health of an individual. (Center for Disease Control, 2021, para. 1)

**Figure 1: BMI Calculator Chart**



Note: (image: <https://bmiccalculatorireland.com/>)

Underweight: BMI < 18.5; Overweight: BMI = 25-29.9; Obese I: BMI = 30-34.9; Obese II/III: BMI >= 35 (Carr & Friedman, 2005, p. 251).

**Covering**

Covering is the act of downplaying a disfavored identity (Yoshino, 2006). For example, persons of size may discuss trying to hide or cover their fatness or identity as a person of size. The act of covering is an effort to take something hyper-visible, like fat bodies, and make it invisible.

***Fat***

While “fat” can evoke a negative connotation, it is merely an adjective describing a person’s body.

Fat is a neutral descriptor for predominantly plus-size people. While *fat* is frequently used to insult people of all sizes, many fat activists---those of us who are undeniably, indubitably fat by any measure---reclaim the term as an objective adjective to describe our bodies, like tall or short. [ . . . ]. Fat stands in contrast to the endless parade of euphemisms---*fluffy, curvy, big guy, big girl, zaftig, big boned, husky, voluptuous, thick, heavy set, pleasantly plump, chubby, cuddly, more to love, overweight, obese*---all of which just serve as a reminder of how terrified so many thin people are to see our bodies, name them, have them.

(Gordon, 2020, p. 8)

***Fat-phobia***

Fat-phobia exists when “thinner bodies are defined as morally, medically, aesthetically, and sexually desirable, while heavy bodies are vilified. The suffix ‘phobia’ evokes the fear and hatred that visible fat on oneself or on others provokes for many in the contemporary United States” (Saguy & Ward, 2011, p. 54). Young children and

adults have expressed fat-phobia. The fear of being fat shows up in both implicit and explicit biases.

### *Fatness spectrum*

The fatness spectrum assists with describing the range and subcategories of fatness (Transcripts, 2021, para. 2). The researcher used these subcategories in the demographics and data collection.

**Table 1: Fatness Spectrum Table and Terminology**

<b>Fatness Spectrum</b>	<b>Women's Sizes</b>	<b>Gender Neutral/Men's Sizes</b>
Small fat	1X-2X and size 18 or lower; Torrid clothing sizes 00 to 1; you can find clothes that fit at mainstream brands and can shop in many stores	XL-1XL
Mid fat	2X-3X and sizes 20-24; Torrid clothing sizes 2 to 3; can shop at some mainstream stores, but mostly shop dedicated plus brands and online	2XL-3XL
Super fat	4X-5X and sizes 26-32; Torrid clothing sizes 4 to 6; wear the largest sizes at plus brands; can often only shop online	4XL-5XL
Infinifat	6X and higher and size 34 and higher; Some Torrid clothing size 6; very difficult to find anything that fits, even online; often require custom sizing	6XL and higher

### *Health at Every Size (HAES)*

The Health at Every Size (HAES) movement developed in response to the obesity epidemic sparked by the medical community. Health at Every Size is a program designed for people to focus on improving their health and not on weight loss or body size.

*Health at Every Size* is [ . . . ] about healthy living, one designed to support you as you shift your focus from hating yourself and fighting your body to learning to

appreciate yourself, your body, and your life. It's [ . . . ] designed to help you break free of weight-loss mentality and embrace the health-and-happiness mentality. (Bacon, 2011, p. 1)

### ***Identity development***

To participate in this study, participants had to identify as a person of size, obese, overweight, or fat. Describing a person's appearance and weight is an aspect of physical identity development specific to body size (i.e., short/tall, large/small, etc.).

Identity development is the complex process by which people come to develop a sense and understanding of themselves within the context of cultural demands and social norms. [ . . . ]. This transition involves a cognitive reorganization in how youth think about themselves in relation to others as they gain physical, social, and psychological maturity. [ . . . ]. Additionally, [ . . . ], identity development is an ongoing process that continues throughout adulthood where one forms an identity within a larger and transitional cultural context. (Psychology, 2023, para. 1)

### ***Intersectionality***

Students of size do not just have one identity; their understanding of their other social identities influences their understanding of their body diversity. The framework of intersectionality helps develop an understanding of the impact of overlapping identities.

The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage; a theoretical approach based on such a premise.

Intersectionality is a framework for conceptualizing a person, group of people, or

social problem as affected by a number of discriminations and disadvantages. It takes into account people's overlapping identities and experiences in order to understand the complexity of prejudices they face. In other words, intersectional theory asserts that people are often disadvantaged by multiple sources of oppression: their race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and other identity markers. Intersectionality recognizes that identity markers (e.g., "woman" and "black") do not exist independently of each other, and that each informs the others, often creating a complex convergence of oppression. (YW Boston Blog, 2017, para. 5-7)

### ***Obese and Overweight***

The terms "obese" and "overweight" are weight classifications determined by BMI as being fat enough to present health risks. A person whose weight is 10% to 19% more than average is usually considered to be overweight, and 20 % or more than average is considered obese. Those 100% to 150% over normal weight are considered "morbidly obese" (Callahan, 2013, p. 34). The term "obese" is derived from the Latin *obesus*, meaning "having eaten oneself fat," inherently blaming fat people for their bodies. The term "overweight" implies that there is an objectively correct weight for every body. A growing number of fat activists consider obese to be a slur. The terms "obese" and "overweight" are derived from a medical model that considers fat bodies as deviations that must be corrected. (Gordon, 2020, pp. 11-12) Fat activists reject these words, and the adjective "fat" is becoming the preferred term when describing a larger body. "Using 'fat' instead of 'obese' or 'overweight' is an open challenge to dominant obesity discourse" (Brown, 2016, p. 203).

### ***Positive Body Image (PBI)***

Researchers have looked for links between positive body image and performance, including job performance and academic achievements. Developing a positive body image could be considered part of an individual's exploration of identity.

As a multifaceted construct, positive body image can be defined as a sense of love and respect for one's body, containing aspects of body appreciation and acceptance, body image flexibility, broad conceptualization of beauty, inner positivity, and body functionality orientation. (Aparício Araujo, 2019, pp. 3-4)

### ***Stigma***

Stigma is "a mark of shame or discredit" (Merriam-Webster, 2021, para. 1).

Stigma is not a characteristic of a person in the stigmatized group. It is a socially constructed phenomenon that shifts and changes over time. Stigma is the product of others' reactions to a person who is a member of a low-status or rejected group rather than anything essential to that person. (Escalera, 2009, p. 206)

### ***Weight bias internalization***

Weight bias internalization (WBI) is a form of self-stigma that "involves applying negative weight-based stereotypes to oneself and engaging in self-blame for one's weight status" (Puhl et al., 2018, p. 167). Fat people receive messages that their bodies are different and "bad." The internalization of these messages and personal belief that they are responsible for their "bad bodies" is weight bias internalization.

### ***Limitations***

As we are experiencing a global pandemic, many students have not been on campus full-time from March 2020 to July 2022. The participants limited time on

campus does reduce the amount of relevant data from sophomore and junior year students. Due to the global pandemic, students have limited experiences living and learning on campus, which has an impact on the data gathered for questions related to living on campus, in-person classroom experiences, co- and extra- curricular activities, physical environment and accommodations, and access to on-campus resources and support. This pandemic experience may skew the data and make it difficult to draw conclusions based on the student's year in college.

### **Assumptions**

An assumption is an unexamined belief or something we think without realizing we are thinking it. In the case of this study, I assume that participants will answer survey and interview questions honestly. I am also assuming that by actively participating and providing data, the participants have had a significant experience as fat students on campus and want to share their experiences.

### **Summary**

Individual identity and the social attitudes and messaging related to those identities influence a student's college experience. Body identity, particularly the experience of fat students, is one such identity that experiences stigma and discrimination. This study takes a closer look at the experiences of fat students to provide data to campus decision-makers, so they can make changes that improve the experiences of future students of size.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction**

This study aims to describe how fat college students experience college and provide policy and practice ideas for improving their experience. First, the literature review examines body-weight discrimination and the impact of anti-fat bias on access and equity for fat people in the United States. Second, the literature review examines how fat students experience discrimination and weight-related challenges during their undergraduate university experiences. The third section discusses the various responses to fat, from weight-loss and change strategies to body diversity awareness and the body positivity movement. The fourth section briefly examines the topic of fatness as a disability. The final section of the literature review discusses intersectionality and the identities that intersect with body diversity.

### **The Big, Fat Stigma**

A social construct is a concept or idea that exists due to human interaction but is not based on facts or objective reality. For example, “race” is a social construct with no basis in science, but society treats those of various races differently, based on those identities. The social construction of difference results in privilege and oppression being assigned to those with different identities and group memberships. “Privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they’ve done or failed to do” (Johnson, 2018, p. 17). Those identifying with a privileged social group experience greater access to resources and opportunities than those in an oppressed social group.

Oppression may be so ingrained in societal norms that it is no longer observed or questioned.

Woven so effectively into the social fabric, the processes and effects of oppression become normalized, thus making it difficult to step outside of the system to discern how it operates, like fish trying to understand the water in which they swim. For example, the exclusion of people with disabilities from many jobs does not require overt discrimination against them. Business as usual is sufficient to prevent change. Physical barriers to access go unnoticed by those who can walk up the stairs, reach elevator buttons and telephones, use furniture and tools that fit their passage, and thus support and maintain policies that seem perfectly natural and fair from the privileged vantage point of those not affected. (Bell, 2018, p. 38)

Members of oppressed social groups experience stigma and discrimination based on that membership.

Stigma [ . . . ] is the mark, the condition, or status that is subject to devaluation. Stigmatization is the social process by which the mark affects the lives of all those touched by it. Both are dependent on four general and essential process components. Stigma requires (a) distinguishing and labeling differences, (b) associating human differences with negative attributions or stereotypes, (c) separating “us” from “them,” and (d) experiencing status loss and discrimination. (Pescosolido & Martin, 2015, p. 91)

Stigma is actualized through social interactions; although a person may anticipate labeling, stereotyping, isolation, and discrimination, it only becomes real through

interacting with others. “Responses [to difference] can be mild or harsh, whether from the stigmatized or the stigmatizer, or from individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, or an entire society” (Pescosolido & Martin, 2015, p. 92).

Bias is “a disproportionate weight in favor of or against an idea or thing, usually in a way that is closed-minded, prejudicial, or unfair. Biases can be innate or learned” (Wikipedia, 2023, para 1). Stigma and discrimination are behaviors that are rooted in bias. Implicit biases are associations or reactions to a specific group that emerge automatically and without awareness. People are generally consciously aware of their explicit biases (preferences, beliefs, and attitudes) and can articulate them, whereas, they are not aware of their implicit biases. “Importantly, research suggests that both implicit and explicit bias can shape the judgments and decisions we make, as well as how we behave, albeit often in different ways” (Daumeyer et al., 2019, para 2).

A long-term study from Harvard University examined 4.4 million online tests for implicit and explicit biases from 2007-2016 (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019). According to the study, the implicit bias for body weight is getting more biased. Goldberg (2019) reported that body weight bias is “changing the slowest of all explicit attitudes. That was surprising in and of itself. Implicitly, it showed an even starker difference: It is the only attitude out of the six we looked at that showed any hint of getting *more* biased over time” (p. 1).

In 2017, Madison Krall presented a TEDx talk entitled “Let's talk about fat bias and thin privilege.” In her presentation, Krall details eight specific instances of thin privilege including: “being able to eat whatever I want without being judged,” “I can be assured of finding lots of clothing options in my size,” and “I can be reasonably

comfortable in seats at public venues.” Krall states that thin privilege is unearned opportunities and favors she receives because of her thin body and that fat oppression occurs when fat people are punished and judged for their outward appearance.

The issue of fat bias and discrimination should be at the forefront of the work of inclusion and equity conversations, if just simply because it impacts so many. “More than 60% of the United States population is overweight or obese, and if the current trajectory continues, 50% of the population will be obese by 2030” (Dor, 2010, p. 4). In addition, Puhl et al. (2018) stated that “as many as 40% of U.S. adults have been a target of weight-based teasing, unfair treatment, or discrimination” (p. 167), and further stated that these experiences are associated with physiological and emotional distress.

Fat bias and discrimination are alive and well in the United States. Stigma or discrimination about something you cannot control (age, race, gender, etc.) does not impact self-esteem. In contrast, stigma or discrimination about something perceived to be within your control, such as weight, affects self-esteem. In Crocker et al.’s (1993) article, “The Stigma of the Overweight,” the authors point out that being overweight is immediately recognizable and elicits negative responses from others, ultimately impacting self-esteem.

Being overweight carries with it the burdens associated with two types of stigmas:

It is both an abomination of the body that elicits immediate negative affective responses from others on the basis of its aesthetically displeasing qualities and a character stigma that carries with it the shame and self-guilt of moral failure.

(Crocker et al., 1993, p. 60)

Anti-fat bias is a belief or attitude regarding overweight or obese people; weight discrimination is an action against those perceived as fat. Carr and Friedman (2005) believed that weight bias was “weakly” related to discriminatory actions, so they ran a study comparing 3,437 obese and average-weight individuals and their frequency of institutional and interpersonal discrimination. The researchers found that “compared to normal weight persons, persons classified as obese I and obese II/III are 40 and 50 percent more likely to report any experiences of major discrimination, respectively” (Carr & Friedman, 2005, p. 252).

The Psychology department at Harvard University completed a longitudinal study on implicit and explicit bias led by Charlesworth and Banaji (2018). The results of this study showed that bias has decreased or stayed the same for sexuality, race, skin-tone, age, and disability, but that the attitude regarding body weight has gotten worse over time. In a 2019 interview, Charlesworth stated that body weight is

the only attitude out of the six that we looked at, that showed any hint of getting *more* biased over time. That was particularly true in the early years that we were looking at: from about 2004-2010, body weight bias actually increased by 40 percent. (as cited in Goldberg, 2019, p. 1)

Charlesworth continued by stating:

And that is striking to us because it counters the simple narrative that everything’s gotten better. There are some things that are getting worse. And, of course again the question might be: why? What is specific about body-weight attitude? We can only speculate: Body weight has been the target of much discussion, but discussion in a negative light. We often talk about the “obesity epidemic,” or

about “the problem” with obese individuals. Also, we typically think of body weight as something that people can control, and so we are more likely to make the moral judgment of, “Well, you should just change.” (as cited in Goldberg, 2019, p. 2)

American culture assigns many meanings to fatness besides just its physical traits; fat people are considered lazy, irresponsible, ugly, immoral, gluttonous, and are “often treated as *not quite human* entities to whom the normal standards of polite and respectful behavior do not seem to apply” (Farrell, 2011, pp. 6-7). Crandall and Martinez (1996) studied the beliefs and attitudes of college students in Mexico and the United States, finding that anti-fat attitudes and both the dislike and the fear of fat were lower in Mexico (p. 1171). In addition, “Mexicans were less likely to believe that weight is under the control of an individual’s will power” (Crandall & Martinez, 1996, p. 1171). The pervasive belief in the United States is that a fat person can control their weight and body size, and that it is all just a matter of diet, exercise, and self-control.

In addition to the belief that weight is controllable, there is a commonly held belief that targeting fat people is acceptable. Bessenoff and Sherman (2000) stated that the “motivation to control prejudice against fat people is relatively low” (p. 335), and that is substantiated by the frequency of bias and discrimination that fat people experience. Weight bias and discrimination are pervasive and can turn up unexpectedly, like other experiences with discrimination, including racism and sexism. Weight bias and discrimination exist in all facets of life and “occurs from employers, health-care professionals, educators, and even family members” (Puhl et al., 2008, p. 992).

The indoctrination of fat fear starts early. Pregnant mothers are urged to keep their weight in a healthy range and to beware of having a fat or obese baby. Parents, specifically mothers, are blamed for not monitoring their children's diets closely. In "Fat Kids, Working Moms, and the 'Epidemic of Obesity': Race, Class, and Mother Blame," author Boero (2009) states that "as children are held less personally responsible for their weight, mothers are viewed as passing on poor eating habits" (p. 116).

For many fat people, bias and discrimination starts at home. "Fat children grow up to think less of themselves when their parents think less of them. Fat children and their parents need help in learning to deal with the prejudice and social and emotional challenges associated with obesity" (Satter, 1995, as cited in Solovay, 2000, p. 48). Lupton (2013) stated that for fat children, "remarkably, even their own parents may favour their thinner children over their bigger ones" (p. 2). In their study, Lydecker et al. (2018) found that nearly all (93%) of parents reported moderate to strong agreement with survey items reflecting weight bias (p.788). "Parents may contribute, among many others, to the stigmatizing environment experienced by youth with overweight/obesity, which has been associated with negative child psychological functioning and health" (p. 784). The fat prejudice found at home does not stop with adulthood. Crandall (1995) found that parents were less likely to help fund their fat daughters' college tuition; he posited that parents might be less willing to pay college tuition, because they see their fat children as less deserving (p. 733).

This belief that it is acceptable to discriminate against and even bully fat children continues in their socialization at school. In 1994, the National Education Association published a "Report on Discrimination Due to Physical Size," which stated that:

For fat students the school experience is one of ongoing prejudice, unnoticed discrimination, and almost constant harassment. From nursery school through college, fat students experience ostracism, discouragement, sometimes violence. Often ridiculed by their peers and discouraged by even well-meaning education employees, fat students develop low self-esteem and have limited horizons. (as cited in Wann, 2009, xix)

For fat students, school can be “psychologically inaccessible and unsafe” (Solovay, 2000, p. 49). Fat students must battle hatred, hostility, bullying, and isolation.

Numerous studies show that kids reject obese children. In these studies, young subjects are presented with average-looking children and children who have appearance related stigmas like facial scars, deformed hands, fat, and wheelchair usage. The subjects are then asked to rank the kids in the order they would most prefer to have as friends. The fat-child option is consistently chosen last or next to last. (Solovay, 2000, p. 49)

Educators often overlook this awful treatment of fat children by their peers, and when they do choose to intervene, teachers can do more harm than good. In *Tipping the Scales of Justice: Fighting Weight-Based Discrimination*, author Sondra Solovay recounted several stories of teachers weighing fat students in front of their peers and announcing their weight to the rest of the students (p. 50). Solovay continued by sharing that:

The National Education Association, in its report on Discrimination Due to Physical Size, recounted other teacher interventions including telling parents of fat children to put the kids on diets, prizes offered to the children for weight loss,

keeping fat children off the honor roll, and refusing letters of recommendation to fat students. (Solovay, 2000, p. 50)

As a society, we have moved to a place where most differences are accepted and celebrated; but that is not true for fat people.

Fat people also experience discrimination in the workplace, and there is often no recourse as body weight, with some exceptions, is not a protected category. Job applicants, current, and “former employees are protected from employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, sexual orientation, or gender identity), national origin, age (40 or older), disability and genetic information (including family medical history” (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2023, para. 1). Employment discrimination based on weight is explicitly illegal in the state of Michigan and a few additional cities and towns. "Weight discrimination is both damaging to the U.S. economy and unfair to the affected individuals. Nevertheless, there is very little legal protection for its victims" (Kristen, 2002, p. 60). Additionally, “fat workers are paid less, for no other documentable reason other than weight; over a forty-year career, the disparity can total one hundred thousand dollars less in pre-tax earnings” (Wann, 2009, pp. xix-xx).

Studies show that fat people are less likely to be hired, less likely to be promoted, less likely to receive professional development, and can be paid less, based solely on their weight. “One study looked at hiring discrimination among candidates matched on credentials but differing on weight status and found that implicit (but not explicit) attitudes about people with obesity were associated with the likelihood that the candidate

would be invited for an interview” (Lydecker et al., 2018, p.785). In an interview with CNBC, Kent State University Assistant Professor Himmelstein (2020) stated:

People with obesity are seen as less hireable, are seen as having less supervisory potential, are hired less often---when they are, are hired at lower salaries. If it's in a job that's existing, people are willing to penalize them more relative to thin applicants. What's really interesting about this literature is that even when you have a resume of an unqualified applicant who's thin, they're still seen as better for the job than a higher body weight applicant who is qualified for it. (as cited in CNBC, n.p.)

A 2005 study found that overweight persons are 26% more likely than normal weight persons to report weight-related discrimination and that severely obese persons (obese II/III) are 84% more likely to report discrimination (Carr & Friedman, 2005, p. 252). In their study, Puhl et al. (2008) found that 60% of their participants experienced weight-based employment discrimination an average of four times during their lifetime (p. 996). However, fat discrimination at places of employment is likely underreported due to internalized fat bias and low self-esteem. Solovay (2000) points out that “although anecdotal evidence abounds, definitive numbers measuring employment discrimination against fat people are difficult to ascertain” (p. 101).

Fat discrimination at work is even more salient for women. Women experience more pressure and bias related to appearance. “Women in professional occupations are particularly discriminated against in the workplace if they are overweight, failing to reach the higher echelons compared to thinner colleagues” (Lupton, 2013, p. 1). As a result, fat women earn seven thousand dollars less in annual income than thinner women.

What is even more telling is the fat bias admitted to by employers and professionals. For example,

93 percent of human resources professionals said they would hire a ‘normal weight’ applicant over a fat applicant with the same qualifications. Fifteen percent would not promote a fat employee. One in ten think it is acceptable to fire an employee for being fat. (Wann, 2009, p. xix)

This data shows us that many employers do believe the stereotype that fat people are lazy and less intelligent, making them less desirable employees.

While studies provide data to support the narratives that fat bias and discrimination are actively occurring at home, school, and work, current anti-fat attitudes are rooted in medicine and healthcare. The idea that being overweight is a choice and easy to control was loudly touted by the medical community with the “obesity epidemic” scare tactic that began in the United States in the 1980s and continues to this day. The medical community supports the public outcry against obesity by closely tying weight to wellness. “Mainstream dietetics buttresses a conventional weight management agenda that is associated with weight preoccupation, body dissatisfaction, size oppression, and troubled eating” (Brady et al., 2013, p. 345). *U.S. News and World Reports* (2019) stated that:

Obesity has become a public health crisis in the United States. The medical condition, which involves having an excessive amount of body fat, is linked to severe chronic diseases including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure and cancer. It causes about 1 in 5 deaths in the U.S. each year –

nearly as many as smoking, according to a study published in the *American Journal of Public Health*. (p. 1)

This reporting is, at best, inaccurate and contributes to the narrative that fat people are unhealthy and can control their weight and therefore control their health and well-being by losing weight. It is irresponsible for government and medical professionals to perpetuate the belief that fat equals unhealthy. For example, in 2003, former U.S. Surgeon General Carmona stated:

When you look at obesity, what I call the terror within, a threat that is every bit as real to America as the weapons of mass destruction, obesity as an epidemic is . . . growing. If we don't do anything about it, we will have a morbidly obese, dysfunctional population that we cannot afford to care for because obesity leads to diabetes, cancer, hypertension, [and] other cardiovascular diseases. (CNN, 2003, p. 2)

The rhetoric of “the obesity epidemic” and “the war on fat” is dramatic and alarmist (Bombak, 2015). Obesity is often cited as the lead contributor to health issues, such as diabetes, heart disease, and kidney failure (Callahan, 2013, p.1). In addition, government and medical officials regularly state that obesity causes over three hundred thousand deaths a year. Still, the research suggests that there is merely a “link” and not a causal relationship between weight and disease, illness, and death (Farrell, 2011, p. 13).

Additionally, healthcare workers admit to being repulsed by fat people (Lupton, 2013) and severely obese individuals report being denied services or receiving inferior health care three times as often as normal-weight people (Carr & Friedman, 2005). Many medical professionals and policymakers view stigmatization as a motivator for weight

loss (Himmelstein & Tomiyama, 2015). The negative treatment of fat people by the same medical professionals tasked with helping and “doing no harm” is why fat people are less likely to seek medical attention. “Ironically, fat people often avoid attending medical appointments because of their concerns about being judged negatively by the doctor. This means they may not receive early preventive treatment for medical conditions they may have” (Lupton, 2013, p. 2). “Fat people are denied surgery available to thinner people with the same condition” (Aphramor, 2009, p. 900). In the “Fat Chat Community” Facebook group, which boasts over five thousand members, the group members share stories of being denied fertility treatments or told to lose weight before being eligible for treatment for other various health concerns.

The health and beauty industries greatly influence a fat person’s weight bias internationalization. In addition, weight bias and stigma from external sources contribute to an internalized stigma or weight bias internationalization (WBI).

WBI is a significant and independent contributor to poor emotional and physical health (including depression, anxiety, stress, clinical eating pathology, binge eating, health-related quality of life, poor weight loss maintenance, and metabolic syndrome) beyond the effect of BMI and, in some cases, independent of experienced weight stigma. Some studies have pointed to WBI as a mechanism through which experienced weight stigma exacerbates adverse health behaviors, potentially through low self-esteem and basing one’s self-evaluation on body weight. (Puhl et al., 2018, p. 167)

The person experiencing WBI does not believe they are of enough value to take care of their overall health and well-being as a person of size. The belief that obesity is an

epidemic that needs to be addressed and controlled, coupled with cultural values of thinness and beauty, contributes to high body dissatisfaction.

The medical community generally does not believe that a fat person can also be a healthy person. As a result, healthcare and medical providers push for their fat patients to change.

For fat people, individual change strategies may include dieting and other weight-loss regimens, or undergoing surgical procedures, such as gastric bypass or liposuction. Historically in the United States, individual change strategies have and continue to be the most widely promoted by the medical care system. (Lindly et al., 2014, p. 180)

But weight-loss is also big business. Surgery, weight-loss regimens, celebrity diets, extreme exercise programs, personal trainers, slimming drinks, and pills are all marketed to people who are dissatisfied with their bodies. "Selling fear of fat is a highly lucrative business" (Aphramor, 2009, p. 902). In 2011, the private weight-loss industry in the United States was estimated at \$58.6 billion annually (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011, p. 1).

Fat people in the United States can experience anti-fat bias and discrimination in every facet of their lives, including their homes.

Outside healthcare, size bias carries over into housing allocation, insurance, adoption and jury service, as well as the provisions of goods and services. For fat students, from nursery school onwards, discrimination manifests as harassment and rejection by peers, negative teacher attitudes, unfair dismissal, lack of family support for education, and even violence. (Aphramor, 2009, p. 900)

Fat people do not have equity; they are treated as second-class citizens, and less deserving of the same rights and opportunities afforded normal weight or thin people.

The various forms of *discrimination* that fat people experience, in schools, in doctors' offices, in the job market, in housing, and in their social lives, means that, effectively, their *life chances*---for a good education, for fair and excellent health care, for job promotion and security, for pleasant housing, for friends, lovers, and life partners...in other words, for a good life---are *effectively reduced*.

(Farrell, 2011, p. 7)

For most people, the existence of fat bias and discrimination, and even that of fat-phobia, is not novel information. The impact of that discrimination on a fat person's life and the decreased opportunities for a fat person in the United States may be more surprising. Upon learning this information, a reduced quality of life for any human, including fat people, should be deemed completely unacceptable.

### **The Big, Fat College Experience**

College students are often targeted as the sample population for research studies, as they are readily accessible to university researchers and academics. Most of the research on college students and weight has focused on body image, body dysmorphia, and disordered eating (Aparício Araújo, 2019; Baugh et al., 2010; Buckley, 2011; Cash et al., 1997; Choate, 2005; Haring et al., 2010; Hesse-Biber et al., 2010; Leavy et al., 2009; Leone et al., 2011; McGrath et al., 2009; Miles, 2009; Naz et al., 2017; Schmidt et al., 2019; Smith-Jackson et al., 2014; Stanley, 2013; Thomas & Warren-Findlow, 2020). The conclusions of many of these studies suggest that fat students need supportive change strategies, such as counseling, dieting, and physical exercise programs.

The research on the experiences of fat students on college campuses is even smaller. Much of our information is anecdotal and personal, showing that fat students experience bias and discrimination from faculty, staff, and fellow students. For example, Stewart (2018) interviewed two fat students for their article “About Fat Campus.” One student shared that they experienced “emotional duress” because they believed they were watched and judged when trying to fit into student desks (p. 32). Another student told Stewart (2018), “At times, it makes me uncomfortable to go to classes or interact with some professors who were fat shaming in either their lectures or even their speech/behaviors outside of classes” (p. 32).

Getting admitted to a college or university is the first hurdle for people seeking higher education. Unfortunately, current research shows that it is more difficult for fat students to be admitted to college (Aronson, 1997; Crandall, 1995; Crandall & Schiffauer, 1998; Wann, 2009). “High school counselors are less likely to encourage fat students to apply for college, colleges are less likely to admit equally qualified fat candidates, and parents are less likely to pay a fat daughter’s college tuition” (Wann, 2009, p. xix). Aronson (1997) writes that, whether it is an application for a job or college admittance, there is “a strong correlation between obesity and rejection” (p. 21). “Submitting virtually identical applications to colleges, for example, with photographs of overweight or average weight people, produces strikingly different acceptance rates” (Aronson, 1997, p. 21).

Crandall, a Psychology professor and researcher at the University of Kansas, studies prejudice against fat people “as a starting point to understand a wide variety of prejudices” (as cited in University of Kansas, 2023, para. 2). Crandall’s (1995) research

has found that college-bound students, especially women, receive less support to attend college and that overall “heavyweight men and women are underrepresented in college” (p. 732).

In a study of how undergraduates pay for their tuition and fees, Crandall found that fat people relied more on family-independent income (e.g., job, savings, scholarships, and student loans) than their less corpulent counterparts, who relied primarily on their parents’ largesse. (Crandall & Schiffhauer, 1998, p. 458)

Puhl et al. (2008) also found that fat people are on the receiving end of “discriminatory experiences [ . . . ] in educational institutions through discouragement by a teacher or advisor from seeking higher education and denial of scholarship” (p. 996).

Studies on fat people applying for advanced degrees encountered similar barriers. In 2013 an associate professor of evolutionary psychology at the University of New Mexico tweeted, "Dear obese PhD applicants: if you didn't have the willpower to stop eating carbs, you won't have the willpower to do a dissertation #truth" (Ingeno, 2013, p. 1). This tweet sparked outrage and concern that fat applicants to the Psychology program were experiencing discrimination.

In investigating the validity of the professor’s tweet, Parr (2013) found that “academics who interview graduate school applicants systematically favor thinner candidates” (p. 1). In one study, researchers at Bowling Green University found that when postgraduate applicants participated in face-to-face interviews, those with a higher BMI were less likely to be admitted to the program. In another study from the University of Westminster, members of the public were shown pictures of women and asked to select who would be most and least likely to be chosen for admittance to college. The

study found “a link in people’s minds between BMI and lack of academic ability” (Parr, 2013, p. 2). “People who are deemed to be physically attractive are often perceived to have positive qualities, so those who are underweight and normal weight might be perceived as more clever, more sociable and perhaps more suitable for university” (Swami, 2013, as cited in Parr, 2013, p. 2).

While there is evidence that fat people are denied entrance to undergraduate and graduate school programs, research supports the premise that fat students are less likely to apply for college degree programs, due to lower self-esteem.

Academic achievement and educational/career aspirations were interwoven as well, as supported by Miles (2009), who describes a positive association between academic achievement and intentions to attain an advanced education. Although scarce, research on this topic suggests that body image exerts influence on academic performance, considering that body dissatisfaction appears to create negative feelings about one’s capabilities. (Aparício Araujo, 2019, p. 19)

It is important to note that external stigma from family and educators and the fat person’s weight bias internalization are barriers to their access to education.

Fat people experience stigma and discrimination from individuals, society, and systems. They are also likely to develop self-stigma, which is internalized shame and negative attitudes about their identity or group membership. Guarneri et al. (2019) examined college students and self-stigma as it relates to mental health, race, ethnicity, and identity.

These characteristics, which span individuals’ social, personal, and demographic attributes, naturally intersect, meaning that the forms of perceived or self-stigma

resulting from them are especially pervasive in dynamic and diverse social settings. One such context is that of higher education, which has become highly diversified as a result of increasing accessibility. (Guarneri et al., 2019, p. 48)

The researcher's findings on self-stigma and college students are applicable to college students' experience of fatness and internalized oppression. In reviewing the literature, the authors found that stigma consciousness has a negative impact on academic performance (Guarneri et al., 2019, p. 53). Students with higher levels of self-stigma experience decreased self-esteem and increased disengagement in social and co-curricular activities (p. 54).

Once admitted to an institution of higher education, fat students will continue to battle stigma to succeed academically. In "Positive Body Image, Academic Achievement, and Career Aspirations in University Students," Aparício Araujo (2019) states:

In college students, body dissatisfaction and body concerns appear to be correlated to poorer academic achievement and functioning, as they might result in school absenteeism due to social anxiety about one's physical appearance. Specifically in women, it was observed a significant association between negative body image and academic performance, graduation rates, motivation, and the likelihood of course withdrawing. Complementarily, higher academic achievements have been found in students who were able to reject appearance norms or were less focused on their physical appearance. (p. 2)

Aparício Araujo (2019), Chazan (2019), Latty (2020), Miles (2009), Naz et al. (2017), and Schrick et al. (2012) found evidence that students with higher self-esteem and

positive body image achieved higher grades and students who reported more anxiety and preoccupation about appearance received lower grades. “Body preoccupations, such as a fixation on appearance, food, and exercise, can cause disruptions to academic functioning, known as academic interference” (Chazan, 2019, p. ii). Chazan (2019) pointed out that for a fat student to perform in front of the classroom, they must put their physical appearance on display to be judged (p. 28). Naz et al. (2017) found that students who are satisfied with their self-image achieve higher grades. The researchers also pointed out that the amount of energy expended by a student being distressed regarding their physical appearance interferes with their ability to be academically successful. “University students [are] found to have vital worries about self-perception about body image perceptions because they want to achieve or maintain a healthy weight and appearance” (Naz et al., 2017, p. 1).

Latty (2020) found that students with low body image can “suffer from [ . . . ] overall dissatisfying school experiences. Research indicates that body image may influence a number of academic domains, resulting in increased absenteeism, and lower standardized test scores, grade point averages, and college completion rates” (p. 70). Anecdotally, there are many personal narratives of fat students who experience targeting and discrimination in the classroom, which may contribute to lowered classroom attendance and academic engagement. Faculty will single out fat students to be an example for the rest of the class.

Chia et al. (1998) studied the perception of academic achievement as it related to attractiveness. They found that “the highest ability was attributed to unattractive men and the lowest ability was attributed to unattractive women” (Chia et al., 1998, p. 475). The

researchers stated that they found a negative bias towards unattractive women in academics and the workplace. This study reinforces the stereotype that unattractive (fat) women are lazy, undisciplined, and less intelligent.

In the physical class space, fat students are struggling. The physical campus space and furnishings are normative, conforming, and homogenous. Hetrick and Attig (2009) point out that for fat students:

The desks and auditorium seating that represent and enable their very identities as students, for example, are visible but go unnoticed. That ignorance is not without cost. Desks designed for a specific type of body subtly---though often painfully--structure students' academic lives. They seek to restrain and reform those students who, for a want of restraint and docility and an excess of body, overflow the desks and the educational values embodied therein. (p. 198)

Classroom desks, lecture hall and auditorium seating, and even recreational furniture in the dining halls, study lounges, and residential living spaces can be inadequate, uncomfortable, and even painful for a fat person. Brown (2016) conducted qualitative interviews with 13 fat college women who reported feeling shame and embarrassment, due to not physically fitting into spaces and furniture (p. 14). "Their experiences often made them question the validity of their assertions and their right to belong on campus, especially when they felt they were being judged as bodies rather than as learners" (Brown, 2016, p.14).

As part of their research, Hetrick and Attig (2009) taped papers to desks with the question, "does this desk fit your body?" They found that many fat students responded regarding their discomfort, but also left-handed, tall, and short students all remarked on

their discomfort in the standard classroom desks (p. 202). Of course, the desks are designed for average-sized, normal bodies and are comfortable enough for those that fit. Still, for those atypical or body diverse, the inadequacy of the desks is exclusionary.

Homogenous thinness is rewarded with comfort and various other privileges accorded to those granted identification as both students and normal. In these ways, classroom desks control body size and thereby produce the ideal thin student [ . . . ]. Fat student bodies, quite literally, overflow the molds of academia. (Hetrick & Attig, 2009, p. 1999)

Fat students' physical needs and comforts are overlooked or ignored, making them feel unwelcome and marginalized on college campuses.

Chazan (2019) found that allowing fat students more control and alleviating anxiety around weight and appearance could increase academic achievement.

Activities that emphasize students' appearance or give way to body comparison should be reduced. For instance, an option may be for students to have the choice to do their oral presentations at their desk, in front of the teacher before class, or on a pre-recorded audio tape, rather than standing in front of the classroom where the body is on display and especially salient for those with body preoccupations.

(Chazan, 2019, p. 28)

Offering options and encouraging personal agency would benefit all students, not just fat students.

In 2006, Lincoln University in Pennsylvania (a Historically Black College/University) introduced a requirement that any students who entered the college with a body mass index score above 30 would either have to show that they had lost

weight or take a course called “Fitness for Life,” to be approved for graduation (Jashik, 2009; Landau, 2009). The president of Lincoln University at the time, Dr. Ivory V. Nelson (who retired in 2011, believed that “Lincoln is correct to try to identify students whose obesity may be dangerous and to encourage them to learn more about nutrition and health” (Jashik, 2009, p. 1). However, some students at Lincoln pushed back, asserting that it was one thing if every student was required to take a fitness class, but that targeting students with a BMI of 30 or greater was discriminatory (Landau, 2009, pp. 1-2). In late 2009, the Lincoln University administration decided to end the requirement, but the university continues to offer the “Fitness for Life” course.

Fat stigma also impacts faculty and staff on campus. Escalera (2009), Reidinger (2020), and Wann (2009) address the challenges of being a fat professor. In “The Elephant in the Room: A Fat Woman in the Academe” (2020), Reidinger stated that she perceived weight-based stigma in how her colleagues treated her with a lack of respect for her intelligence and competency. “The pressure is there for fat women in the academy to be more: more understanding, more humorous, more intelligent. Ultimately, we’re expected to be more prepared both in and out of the classroom” (Reidinger, 2020, p. 2).

In addition to proving themselves to their colleagues, fat faculty also experience discrimination from university students. Students have significant power in the evaluation of their professors. “Discrimination in student evaluations extends to professors based on their appearance. [ . . . ]. This being the case, a fat professor is going to be considered unattractive, and will likely see the impact of this cultural value in their evaluations” (Escalera, 2009, p. 205). Escalera (2009) studied her students’ anxiety related to stigma threat. Stigma threat is when people who perceive a stigmatized person

to feel anxious and threatened empathize with the stigmatized person and then also feel anxious or uncomfortable. Escalera introduced fat discrimination as a class topic and submitted themselves as the stigmatized person. They found that the students' stigma threat response decreased over the semester.

While fat faculty working in academic affairs struggle against the stereotype that fat people are lazy and stupid with both their colleagues and students, fat student affairs professionals encounter similar issues. In their 2021 dissertation, *Making Room for Fat Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education*, Heath shared that their colleagues in student affairs reported increased stress, low self-confidence, self-deprecating thoughts, and concerns regarding weight versus health. In addition, the physical campus space (elevators, walking campus, campus/office furniture) is challenging for fat student affairs professionals. The study participants reported that fat student affairs professionals experienced prejudice and were often the target of office "diet discourse." Kiernan (2015), a fat student affairs professional, recounted that they were fat-shamed for over three months and that their colleagues looked to them as the fat person in the department to lead the team weight-loss and Weight Watchers groups.

Students observe the experiences of fat faculty and staff, contributing to the anti-fat bias and weight discrimination on campus. If it is acceptable to treat fat faculty and staff as less worthy of being a part of the campus community, then it is also acceptable to treat fat students as inferior. Anti-fat bias and discrimination are not only permissible, but also embedded in the campus culture.

Many studies on college students (particularly woman-identified college students) and body image show that body weight and fear of fatness impacts self-esteem and self-

confidence (Buckley, 2011; Cash et al., 1997; Chazan, 2019; Choate, 2005; Forbes & Donovan, 2019; Forrest & Struhldreher, 2007; Grossman et al., 2018; Javier & Belgrave, 2015; Knightley & Whitelock, 2007; Latty, 2020; Levitt, 2004; Miller et al., 1990; Schrick et al., 2012; Thomas & Warren-Findlow, 2020; Thomas et al., 2010). People who struggle with self-confidence take fewer risks, especially concerning interpersonal relationships. For example, Schrick et al. (2012) found that college women strive to appear perfect and that if they are uncomfortable, they silence themselves and withdraw.

This theory suggests that the dynamics of a woman's interaction with new peers in college, as well as her experiences in the academic setting, may group together and lead her along a path of distress. The theory focuses attention on the component of impression management in which women may silence themselves, with potentially distressed consequences, particularly in circumstances in which they have strong concerns with body image and they adhere to a culture of romance. (Schrick et al., 2012, pp. 594-595)

Fat people have been excluded and bullied; it may feel psychologically unsafe for a fat person to initiate personal relationships. "Many early adults are college students and, therefore, negative body perceptions have important implications for how they conduct themselves there, for example, by impacting their social life through the avoidance of social activities that highlight the body" (Chazan, 2019, p. 1)

Fat college students also experience social exclusion. Solovay (2000) shares that: A college freshman at a prestigious university reported being excluded from membership in all of the school sororities because of her weight. [. . .]. Several University of California at Berkeley students reported being excluded from the

cheerleading program because of their race and appearance. They offer as proof one of the judge's scoring sheets which complained that the cheerleading contestant was "large" and had "big hips." (pp. 56-57)

At DePauw University in Indiana, the sorority Delta Zeta was experiencing recruitment issues and battling a reputation as the sorority for the socially awkward (Dillon, 2007, p. 1).

Worried that a negative stereotype of the sorority was contributing to a decline [ . . . ], Delta Zeta's national officers interviewed 35 DePauw members [ . . . ]. They judged 23 of the women insufficiently committed and later told them to vacate the sorority house. The 23 members included every woman who was overweight. [ . . . ]. The dozen students allowed to stay were slender and popular with fraternity men — conventionally pretty women the sorority hoped could attract new recruits. (Dillon, 2007, p. 1)

The rejected former sorority members experienced lowered self-esteem and depression; some even withdrew from classes.

The current research shows that fat students are experiencing discrimination and unequal treatment in college. Anti-fat bias impacts academic achievement and interpersonal interactions for fat students on campus, and the physical environment can be confining and uncomfortable. Yet, while the National Education Association's 1994 "Report on Discrimination Due to Physical Size," raised awareness of these issues (and more) for fat students in the United States, there are no reports of anything being done to address these concerns.

### **The Big, Fat Fight**

There are two approaches to “fat”; one is encouraging the fat person to employ change strategies to lose weight and the other is body acceptance/body positivity. As previously mentioned, the medical and weight loss industries have pushed for fat people to change. The Health at Every Size (HAES) movement appeared in the 1960s and has helped to end the war on fat by promoting an alternative public health model that champions healthy behaviors for every person, rather than prescribing weight loss (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Brady et al., 2013; Bruno, 2013; Burgard, 2009). “The HAES approach differs from a conventional treatment model in its emphasis on self-acceptance and healthy day-to-day practices, regardless of whether a person’s weight changes” (Burgard, 2009, p. 42). HAES focuses on enhancing health, size and self-acceptance, the pleasure of eating well, the joy of movement, and an end to weight bias. The HAES movement is important, but also forces a divide between healthy fat people and fat people who are superfat, unfit, unhealthy, and chronically ill (Cooper, 2016, pp. 185-187). HAES moves us from “fat equals bad” to “fat people who are healthy are morally good, ” creating problems within the body positivity movement.

The body positivity movement began in the 1960s with the first wave of fat acceptance and awareness. In 1967, Louderback’s article, “More People Should Be Fat,” was published in *The Saturday Evening Post*. The article marks the first defense of fat people in the mainstream media (as cited in Kight, 2014, p. 1). Fabrey, a young engineer with a fat wife, read Louderback’s article and they teamed up, with Louderback researching and publishing his book *Fat Power* and Fabrey founding the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (formerly the National Association to Aid Fat

Americans; NAAFA) in 1969 (as cited in Bruno, 2013, p. 3). The body positivity movement aims to change societal and individual perceptions of weight, size, and appearance to be more accepting of all bodies, regardless of their diverse characteristics. The body positivity movement's second wave rose in the 1990s, due to the push of diet culture and the increase in disordered eating diagnoses. The International Size Acceptance Association was founded in 1997. In August 1998, "around 250 of America's angriest civil rights protestors descended on Santa Monica, California, to demand equality. [ . . . ]. They came to demonstrate not because of their race, gender or sexuality – but because they are fat" (Burkeman, 1998, p. 1).

The third wave of the body positivity movement started in 2012 and is ongoing. This wave focuses on social media and the inclusivity of people of all sizes and shapes. Plus-sized models and fat activists are trying to "maintain a culture in which it is safe to be fat" (Cooper, 2016, p. 165). For fat people, claiming their fat identity can be revolutionary. "Coming out as fat involves a person who is easily recognized as fat affirming to herself and others her fatness as a nonnegotiable aspect of self, rather than as a temporary state to be remedied through weight loss" (Saguy & Ward, 2011, p. 65). Harrison (2021) points out that the challenge with body positivity is that it only shifts the individual's view of their body, not society's response.

This means that whether or not you love on, show up for, and transform how you view *your* body, the structure of the world does not shift. This is, again, the harm of "body positivity." It cannot produce anything more than quasi-self-confidence, and even that is conditional because it---for a long time now---has not been asked

to. Body positivity individualizes something that is bigger than the individual.  
(Harrison, 2021, p. 7).

### **Is “Big, Fat” also a Disability?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023) define disability as “any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions)” (para. 1). The article goes on to state that there are various types of disabilities that can affect a person’s movement, mental health, and social relationships, among other variables (para. 2).

Disability rights activists point out that clinging to the norms and not being aware of differences in needs and abilities maintains environments and systems of oppression.

One of the most crucial factors in the deconstruction of disability is the change of perspective that causes us to look in the environment for the source of the problem and the solutions. It is perhaps easiest to change perspective by thinking about how people who have some bodily difference that does not impair any of their physical functions, such as being unusually large, are disabled by the built environment—by seats that are too small . . . doors and aisles that are too narrow. . . the unavailability or expense of clothing that fits. (Wendell, as cited in Herndon, 2002, p. 121)

This reframe of disability as a socially constructed inequity rather than a physical trait can be applied to those with fat bodies, as the stigma and discrimination faced by fat people is socially constructed.

However, disability is an identity category that is protected by non-discrimination policies and laws in the United States and on college campuses. Body diversity and weight are not protected categories. There are 21 colleges and universities in the United States with non-discrimination policies that include weight, and 18 of those are in Michigan.

There is no federal law that protects fat people from the effects of fat prejudice specifically, so protection falls to state and local statutes. Only a few places, like Santa Cruz, California, Washington, D.C., and the state of Michigan, have laws to prohibit discrimination against otherwise qualified people on the basis of weight or appearance. (Solovay, 2000, p. 129)

Because fat people have limited legal protection, they “often rely on disability law and the premise of ‘accommodation’” (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009, p. 5). Disability law only offers protections for fat persons whose substantial weight keeps them from being able to participate in major life activities. There is controversy about adding fatness or weight to the protected category of disability. Aphramor (2009) pointed out that there are many commonalities between fatness and disability, including a medical diagnosis, (possible) impairment, social exclusion, psychological distress, and discrimination based on physical ability and appearance (pp. 897-899). Those who see fatness as controllable do not favor including weight as part of disability, and many fat activists are resistant to a “double stigma.” In *Revolting Bodies*, LeBesco (2003) summed up this tension, stating:

According to disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, “disability . . . is the attribution of corporeal deviance---not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do.” Fat people, in their

excessive refusal to be disciplined into culturally “acceptable” body shapes and sizes, are then as corporeally deviant as those others considered, without a second thought, to be disabled. For some, the difference lies in the perceived ability to control the conditions of one's disability. Many fat activists have resisted political affiliation with disability activists, despite significant commonalities, because of the double whammy of stigma that such a liaison might incur. (p. 74)

Many fat people have fought for so long to be included in “normal” that they reject the idea that fatness is a disability.

### **The Big, Fat Intersection**

Body diversity and fatness are aspects of identity, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, spiritual identity, and ability.

Social identity development [ . . . ] is the process by which people come to understand their social identities (ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, and others) and how these identities affect other aspects of their lives. What makes these aspects of identity “social” is that other people, as well as the individual involved, evaluate a person and make judgments based on those identities. (Patton et al., 2016, p. 67)

It is important to note that fat people do not experience their fatness as one isolated component of identity, but that their body identity intersects with their other identities. “Intersectionality involves examining multiple, interconnected categories (e.g., race, gender). Advantages and disadvantages associated with each social category interact at individual and structural levels” (Himmelstein et al., 2017, p. 422).

A fat person does not experience the world through just one identity. “Prejudice that does not single out only one characteristic, but instead attacks and fragments each aspect of a person’s identity, can prove not only more complex to fight, but also a much more devastating, isolating, and alienating experience” (Solovay, 2000, p. 126).

Intersecting identities are challenging for the fat person, but also for anyone wanting to isolate and attribute a person’s experience of stigma to perceptions of their body.

“Sometimes fat people are not discriminated against just because they are fat. They are the victims of discrimination because they are fat *and* something else, like fat and Mexican or fat and homosexual and Mexican” (Solovay, 2000, p. 123). In 2021, Harrison’s work, *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*, they point out how rare it is to have access to work about the intersection of multiple identities.

In this book [ . . . ] we will talk specifically about the fat Black masc body---how it has been imposed on, forgotten, and dismissed within fat studies. This book doesn’t exist anywhere else in the library canon. There are many books on Black people, and there are many books on fat people, but there are so few that focus on fat Black people, and there are none that center on fat Black masc people’s bodies. (p. 1)

While it can be frustrating to be unable to isolate the identity that is being oppressed, it is important to reflect on how experiencing multiple identities enriches and diversifies our experiences but can also compound our experience of bias, stigma, and discrimination.

Obesity in the United States disproportionately affects women and racial minorities, who experience the oppression of their other identities, as well. According to researchers,

“age-adjusted prevalence of obesity exceeds 50% in black women and 44% in Hispanic women compared with 33% in white women” (Himmelstein et al., 2017, p. 421).

Today’s ideal of thinness is both sexist and racist, intersecting gender identity and race with body diversity.

***At the intersection of “fat” and “race”***

Black women are the subgroup with the highest BMI. Medical professionals will often attribute the health issues of black women to their excess weight without scientific data or testing.

This heightened concern about their weight is not new; it reflects the racist stigmatization of black women's bodies. Nearly three centuries ago scientists studying race argued that African women were especially likely to reach dimensions that the typical European might scorn. [ . . . ]. In the eyes of many medical practitioners in the late 19th century, black women were destined to die off [ . . . ] because of their presumed inability to control their "animal appetites"—eating, drinking and fornicating. These presumptions were not backed by scientific data but instead embodied the prevailing racial scientific logic at the time. [ . . . ]. Valorizing voluptuousness in black women, these physicians claimed, validated their unhealthy diets, behaviors and figures. Today the idea that weight is the main problem dogging black women builds on these historically racist ideas and ignores how interrelated social factors impact black women's health. (Strings & Bacon, 2020, p. 26)

The white, European standard of beauty values thinness and is another tool for racism and the oppression of black bodies.

In their study on “Racial Identity and Body Image Among Black Female College Students Attending Predominantly White Colleges,” Hesse et al. (2010) found that Black women at white colleges were impacted by white beauty standards and therefore had higher levels of body dissatisfaction than their peers at historically Black colleges and universities. This research shows the impact of white beauty standards on Black women; however, studies reinforce the belief that “body dissatisfaction rates are lower in [B]lack women than for Asian, Hispanic, and white women” (Himmelstein et al., 2017, p. 422). Black women who do not internalize the dominant culture's messages of beauty and thinness have more positive attitudes about weight.

Studies examining black and white women report significant differences between these 2 groups. Black women often choose a larger ideal body type, appear to be less affected by thin images, and assume that their partners prefer larger bodies than whites. Even during adolescence black women view higher levels of body fat as acceptable and attractive, whereas white women are more dissatisfied with their weight and more likely to diet. (Baugh et al., 2010, p. 105)

Fat people experience stigma and discrimination through the additional lens of race.

Combined with race relations in the United States, the history of enslavement, and the use of black bodies as a commodity, this is a complicated topic.

### ***At the intersection of “fat” and “female”***

Gender is the most salient intersection of fat identity: women, particularly those in the United States, experience daily messaging about appearance expectations and body standards.

Many researchers and feminist scholars have argued that cultural norms and expectations encourage girls and women to be attentive to and psychologically invested in their appearance, which can undermine their well-being and contribute to eating dysregulation, depression, and other psychological difficulties. Relative to men, women are considerably more psychologically invested in their appearance. (Cash et al., 1997, p. 434)

For many women, being considered fit and attractive is a priority. Women who do not meet societal beauty standards can develop body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem.

Distorted body image is normative among women. For that reason, development of a woman's identity is very likely to include aspects of body image disturbance such as self-monitoring and internalization of unrealistic expectations of thinness. Women are many times more likely to experience body image disturbance than are men. (Schrick et al., 2012, p. 593)

While women's experiences in the United States regarding appearance are well-known, especially with the push for media to be more body inclusive, women receive more anti-fat bias and discrimination than men. "Women were at a greater risk for weight/height discrimination than men, especially women with a BMI of 30-35 who were three times more likely to report height/weight discrimination compared to male peers of a similar weight" (Puhl et al., 2008, p. 992). In addition, as discussed earlier, being fat reduces education and employment opportunities. Solovay (2000) shares Nancy's experience with job discrimination:

Nancy Parolisi was denied her substitute teacher license because she was too fat. No man was ever refused a position because of his weight. When the court

expressed concern about this disparity, it was touching on a complex type of prejudice. [ . . . ]. Even if discrimination against Nancy Parolisi because of her weight was legal, the judge seemed to suspect that she was being singled out not just because of her weight, but because of her “sex plus her weight.” (Solovay, 2000, p. 123)

Sex plus weight is an intersection with many layers, including the feminine standard of beauty, expectations for women’s bodies, and the perceived correlation between attractiveness and other positive attributes (i.e., intelligence). ). Herndon (2002) sums it up by stating, “I am a large woman and [therefore I] have sinned not once but twice” (p. 121).

#### *At the intersection of fat and queer*

Body size and type is an essential aspect of appearance, especially as it relates to masculine and feminine standards of attractiveness and beauty. It is particularly salient in heterosexual dating and romantic relationships.

Do attitudes and expectations about heterosocial relations have any bearing on women’s body images? Our results suggest, as hypothesized, that women who espouse feminine role enactment in their social interactions with men similarly emphasize conformity to personal and societal standards of feminine beauty. (Cash et al., 1997, p. 442)

The pressure of societal beauty standards is not limited to those who identify as heterosexual; body image and attractiveness are also important in the LGBTQ+ community. “I realize that the gay and lesbian community is not free from fat-phobia; indeed, those especially interested in assimilation are often even vociferously fat-phobic”

(Levy-Navarro, 2009, p. 15). Likewise, people who are transgender experience a lot of pressure to conform to a traditional expression of gender and appearance.

People who are transgender, fat, or both encounter significant obstacles to full participation in mainstream U.S. society. These obstacles include attitudinal, physical, and policy barriers that affect ordinary, daily activities like using bathrooms, going to school, and finding or maintaining employment. (Vade & Solovay, 2009, p. 167)

At the intersection of “queer” and “fat,” LGBTQ+ fat people receive messages that they are further isolated and outside of the norms of conventional appearance standards.

### *At the crossroads*

There is hope that considering each person’s intersecting identities will help to deepen understanding and connection.

Dr. David Kallen, of Michigan State University, agrees that focusing on size as one facet of human diversity can help diffuse prejudice against the overweight. “Talk about variations in skin color, cultures, religion, but don’t neglect body type,” he says. “Point out that most children who are overweight were in all likelihood born that way, that being heavy for most of human history and prehistory was a survival mechanism. Confront the false stereotype of the lazy overeater---get kids to realize that weight is just one more characteristic that makes us variable.” (Aronson, 1997, pp. 22-23)

### *In the Big, Fat Margin*

College students leave their homes and previous experiences to assimilate to college campuses and college life. They are seeking a sense of connection and belonging

to their institutions of higher education. Students need to feel welcomed, valued, and safe (physically and psychologically). The sense of belonging is an important measure and predictor of students' academic success and persistence. However, many students do not feel like they belong, and those belonging to marginalized groups are most likely to struggle. University staff tell students "you belong here," but if a student does not belong the message is that it is their fault, since the institution is welcoming them. This is true for fat students who are welcomed to college but do not fit into desks, do not receive collegiate apparel in their size, and do not receive support for their needs.

For a college student, having a sense of belonging also means feeling like you matter. "Mattering is a motive: the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension exercises a powerful influence on our actions" (Rosenberg qtd. in Schlossberg, 1989, p. 3). Schlossberg's (1989) theory on Mattering and Marginality focuses on college student transitions. A person wants to know that they matter; that they are important and appreciated.

"Mattering is a motive and does determine behavior--we need to make sure our programs, practices, and policies are helping people feel they matter" (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 5).

Mattering is "a precursor to students' involvement in activities and academic programs that facilitate development and learning" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 37).

Marginality, or the sense of not fitting in with the majority and existing in the margins, "can lead to self-consciousness, irritability, and depression. For members of minoritized groups, marginality is often a permanent condition" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 36). Fat people are often marginalized, their challenges minimized and ignored, and they are treated like outsiders. Fat college students experience the stigma of being fat in

addition to the transition to college, which may increase feelings of uncertainty and loneliness. "Appearance becomes very salient during emerging adulthood as individuals transition from home to college environments, in which peers are influential" (Javier & Belgrave, 2015, p. 579).

In "Creatively Re-Defining Fat: Identification Predicts Strategic Responses to Stigma, Ingroup Attitudes, and Well-Being," Lindley et al. (2014) examined the relationship between fat group identification and self-esteem using a sample of 50 fat women, including 12 college students. The researchers found that fat group identification combatted marginality and helped create a sense of belonging.

Our results indicate that fat identification predicts greater use of collective strategies for coping with stigma (promotion of social change and body affirmation) and less engagement with individualistic strategies centered around weight loss among fat women. [ . . . ]. Fat identification also predicted less internalization of stigma or fear of fat as well as less prejudice toward fat people, greater desire to affiliate with fat people, and greater recognition of the discrimination experienced by fat people. Finally, fat identification was a positive predictor of psychological well-being among the women who participated in our survey. These findings suggest that positive social identification may play the same role for fat people as for others who are stigmatized because of disability, minority race, and other socially devalued group memberships. (Lindly et al., 2014, pp. 189-190)

Fat people need peer-to-peer support to come out of the margins and feel like they matter.

**Summary**

Fat people experience varying degrees of discrimination, bias, and exclusion throughout life. Research shows that discrimination can occur at work, school, home, and the doctor's office. Fat college students are also experiencing the same types of discrimination on campus. While efforts have been made to correct misinformation, combat discriminatory practices, and create more equity and inclusion for fat people, there is still a long way to go. Intersecting identities and the overlap of disability accommodations with fatness further complicates an already complex issue of weight-based stigma and discrimination. One strategy to assist fat people is to create and maintain a safe space for fat-identified folks to find community and belonging. Fat people are normal and typical. There is a call for society to adjust to address fat stigma and work diligently towards including fat people. There should also be a call for colleges and universities to address weight stigma and bias and increase campus acceptance and inclusion.

### **Chapter Three: Research Method and Design**

#### **Introduction**

There is limited research with data-driven recommendations for improving the college experience for fat students. The purpose of this research study is to investigate the experiences of fat students to better understand the undergraduate college experience of a person of size. In addition, this study examines the common themes of the experiences of fat college students. Finally, it provides data to college administrators who can affect the culture and policies that impact fat students on campus.

The study comprises a combined qualifying survey, demographic and exploratory questions, and qualitative interviews of current and recent college graduates. The initial assessment was a Qualtrics form shared via email and social media, resulting in eighteen viable survey participants. Of those participants, six consented to proceed with qualitative interviews. The interview questions investigated the experiences of fat students during college, focusing on their experiences of discrimination, the physical environment at the university, and campus resources and support for students of size.

The results of this study will be available to assist student affairs professionals and college administration in supporting and advocating for students of size on their campuses. In addition, college administrators can utilize the data to suggest changes to campus environments and influence changes in campus support for students of size.

#### **Research Design**

Eighteen survey participants responded to an online survey that provided quantitative and qualitative data. Email and social media (Facebook and Instagram) recruited current college students and recent graduates to participate in a qualifying

survey, demographic and exploratory data survey, and a consent form (as one document) via Qualtrics. Participants could stop and exit the survey or withdraw participation at any time. Six participants were interviewed for additional qualitative data. Interview participants could pause or end the interview at any time. I conducted this research with a small group, allowing me to establish themes and patterns without overwhelming the researcher with data.

Qualitative studies [ . . . ] aim to map out the qualitatively different patterns observed in a data-set rather than to quantify magnitudes. [ . . . ]. The main goal [ . . . ] is to ensure that the sample size is small enough to manage the material and large enough to provide “a new and richly textured understanding of experience” and this is always a matter of subjective judgment, i.e. guided by researcher experience and assessing the data as it is analyzed in relation to the goals of the research. (Fugard & Potts, 2015, pp. 670-671)

The first eight survey questions served to qualify the participant for the rest of the survey and the optional qualitative interview. Once a participant completed the first section and was qualified to continue the survey, the next section was presented. The second section of the survey consisted of eleven demographic questions to look for trends and six exploratory data questions regarding the participants’ experiences as students of size on college campuses.

### **Research Questions**

*Research Question 1:* How have students of size experienced weight-based stigma and discrimination in college? What impact has this had on their overall college experience?

**Research Question 2:** How have fat students been challenged, if at all, by limitations within the college environment?

**Research Question 3:** What support, if any, have fat students received relating to their college experience as a person of size? What are the perceptions of weight-based campus resources, if they exist, by fat students?

**Research Question 4:** How do demographic factors impact the fat student experience on campus?

### **Participants**

I shared the survey via email and social media (Facebook and Instagram). I utilized the snowball sampling method by using my social media network, acquaintances, and referrals to get the initial *Qualtrics* survey and consent form out to participants. Then, I identified the need for a second round of participant recruitment and sent the survey to all students at my current institution. To qualify for the survey, participants verified that they were currently attending or attended college in the United States, that they were between the ages of 18 and 25, that they were currently enrolled or graduated from an undergraduate degree program within the previous three years, and that they self-identified as fat/obese/overweight or a person of size.

The survey was open from July 2021 to July 2022. Eighty-nine people accessed the survey; sixty-four did not complete the survey, seven did not qualify for the second survey portion, and eighteen completed the entire survey. Six of the eighteen participants who completed the survey also participated in a qualitative interview.

Seventeen survey respondents indicated they were willing to complete an interview, but one did not provide an email contact. The remaining sixteen were

contacted via email and asked to respond with their availability. Six people responded with their availability and were then sent video meeting invitations via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The demographic questions included asking the respondents to identify their age, gender, ethnicity, household income while in college, and first-generation college student status, as well as their body size.

**Table 2: Fatness Spectrum Table and Terminology - Restated**

Small fat	1X-2X and size 18 or lower; Torrid clothing sizes 00 to 1; you can find clothes that fit at mainstream brands and can shop in many stores	XL-1XL
Mid fat	2X-3X and sizes 20-24; Torrid clothing sizes 2 to 3; can shop at some mainstream stores, but mostly shop dedicated plus brands and online	2XL-3XL
Super fat	4X-5X and sizes 26-32; Torrid clothing sizes 4 to 6; wear the largest sizes at plus brands; can often only shop online	4XL-5XL
Infinifat	6X and higher and size 34 and higher; Some Torrid clothing size 6; very difficult to find anything that fits, even online; often require custom sizing	6XL and higher

I did not ask participants to share their BMI, as that is an inaccurate body size measurement. Instead, participants self-identified as fat or a person of size. Though there was some initial concern that average-sized people may perceive themselves as fat, that population will experience fat stigma differently, if at all. That will become obvious in their responses to the other survey questions. Table 2 (Transcripts, 2021, para. 2) indicates how the participants identified their body size.

Most participants identified as “small fat,” with two participants identifying as “mid-fat” and three participants selecting the option “my body size is not represented here.”

I posed additional demographic questions to establish the kind of institution the participant was attending or did attend for their undergraduate degree; these questions related to institution type, size, and geographic region.

### **Data analysis**

Once I collected the data, it was reviewed and analyzed for key themes and patterns. Most participants (94%) said they experienced weight-based discrimination in college. Many participants considered the physical campus environment uncomfortable, including seating, classrooms, and bathrooms. Most participants were unable to identify any campus support for weight-related issues or to address their needs as students of size. The data describes students' experiences as larger than average bodies on college campuses, from feeling powerless in physical spaces, being on the receiving end of bias, and finding community and self-empowerment as fat persons.

### **Positionality statement**

The researcher's identity and experiences impact qualitative research as they connect to the study questions and participants. As defined in Chapter One, identity development and social identity development are critical factors to understanding the discrimination of students of size.

Social identity development [ . . . ] is the process by which people come to understand their social identities (ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, and other) and how their identities affect other aspects of their lives. What makes these aspects of identity "social" is that other people, as well as the individual involved, evaluate a person and make judgments based on these identities. Time and place influence social identities, which are constantly shifting. The concepts

of privilege and oppression underlie interpretations of social identity. Some identity groups are privileged in the United States and others are oppressed. Social identities influence how people see themselves, how they interact with others, how they make decisions, and how they live their lives. Ideological, social, and economic decisions are also contingent on how various social identity groups are perceived. (Patton et al., 2017, p. 67)

I hold privilege in many of my identities as a cis-gender, white, able-bodied, third-generation college student from an upper-middle-class Christian family. However, I was an outlier during my undergraduate college experience at a conservative Jesuit institution. I had pink hair and tattoos and worked at the radio station and on establishing the Gay-Straight Alliance student organization. Though I identify as bisexual, I believe that I “pass” as heterosexual. However, after I graduated, I discovered that my college classmates perceived me as a lesbian due to my appearance and interests. I believe that my weight and being a person of size also contributed to my being outside of the social norms shared by my undergraduate classmates. As a fat person, the experiences of my study participants resonated with me.

I strongly believe that education, including higher education, should be open and accessible to all students. Many barriers exist to attending and completing a college degree, including bias and discrimination. I strive to make a difference for students by advocating for them and assisting them in meeting their goals. This work includes minimizing or eliminating the barriers to college student success.

My experience as a student of size and my commitment to creating learning spaces that are inclusive and accessible informs my work on this research study.

## Chapter Four: Analysis

### Introduction

Eighteen study participants completed a web-based survey through *Qualtrics*, and of those 18 participants, six also completed 30-minute interviews via the online video conferencing tools, Zoom or Microsoft Teams. After the online surveys closed, I downloaded the results and removed any identifying characteristics from the responses; I coded the participants by alpha letters, using letters A through R. I coded the six interview participants via color: blue, green, yellow, purple, red, and teal. I use the term “study participants” when referring to survey and interview data.

### Research Question 1

*How have students of size experienced weight-based stigma and discrimination in college? What impact has this had on their overall college experience?*

The data collected from the 18 survey participants and six interview participants provided insight into the frequency and locations of fat discrimination on college campuses. The information also answered whether or not the participants perceived that weight-based stigma and discrimination impacted their undergraduate experience overall.

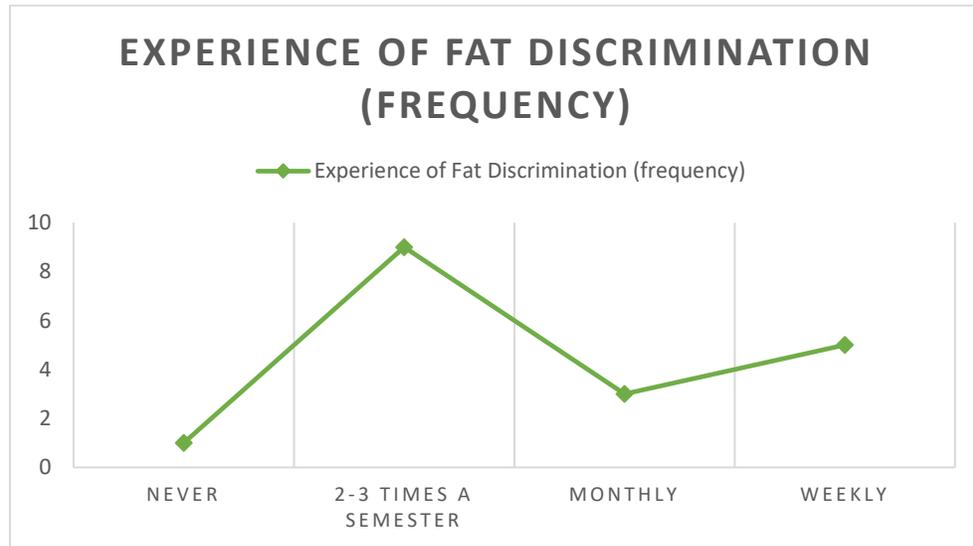
***Theme One: Most fat college students have experienced discrimination on campus.***

It is important to establish the scope of the problem to address the issue of fat discrimination on college campuses. With that in mind, research question one examines the frequency at which college students experience weight-based discrimination.

Ninety-four percent of survey participants indicated that they had experienced weight-based discrimination during their college experience. Fifty percent of all survey

participants stated that they experienced weight-based bias or discrimination two to three times a semester, and 28% of participants reported experiencing discrimination weekly.

**Figure 2**



Survey Participant G (SPG) reported that they never experienced discrimination on campus; this participant identified as male and had a body-type not described by the survey. SPG stated they believed themselves to be a student of size, because of “how [they] look in clothes.” I surmise that this participant perceives themselves as overweight or fat but may not be identified as fat by others. With the exception of SPG, the survey participants reported that they experienced fat discrimination two to three times a semester at minimum. This high average shows that fat college students experience a memorable incident of fat bias or discrimination almost monthly.

***Theme Two: Fat stigma and discrimination on college campuses occur in and out of the classroom.***

It may be easier for university administration to believe that fat bias and discrimination occur for students only in social settings, such as residence halls or student organizations. However, fat bias and discrimination occur in the academic classroom and

extracurricular settings on campus. Study participants described experiencing discrimination both in and out of the classroom.

When asked about classroom experiences, Interview Participant Blue (IPB) and Interview Participant Red (IPR) shared examples of being targeted when discussing health or medical issues. IPB shared,

There was a point in time where we were doing venipuncture, and so my teacher looks at me because I was the biggest person in the class and goes, ‘Yeah so, [student’s name], if you want to come up and show people how you can feel on a larger person or, you know, someone with larger arms. Like, ‘oh you are bigger, so let’s use you for an example.

IPR stated that when discussing making healthy lifestyle choices, their professor and classmates turned to them to ask what they were doing to be healthier and then offered additional suggestions. Interview Participant Purple (IPP) and IPR both believed that their classmates avoided them and that no one would want to work with them when the time came to work in groups. IPP shared, “there was this one time where we got to pick our partners, and I felt like nobody really wanted to work with me.”

Study participants described discrimination outside of the classroom, including at the Health Center, the Recreation Center, the dining facility, and during extracurricular activities. Four survey and two interview participants shared that they had difficulty getting college apparel in their appropriate sizes. For example, IPB described attending an on-campus event, asking for a size 2X t-shirt, and being told, “Oh, I’m sorry, the largest we have is a large.” Another survey participant mentioned not being able to rock climb at the Recreation Center because they did not have equipment in larger sizes

available. The University's failure to provide clothing or equipment for students of size signals to fat students that they are not valued or that their body size is not welcome.

Interview Participant Green (IPG) experienced what they perceived as ridicule for ordering cheese fries in the university dining hall.

One time I got made fun for what I was ordering. [ . . .]. The guys in the kitchen just would not stop making fun of my order and so I never ordered that again [ . . .]. It definitely felt like it was because of my weight that they were making fun of me.

Regarding extracurricular activities, three interview participants (Green, Red, and Purple) did not share any specific incidents of exclusion but did express that they did not feel accepted or welcome. IPG stated, "I haven't tried for anything but, like, even with the sports, I would be scared to, and I know that that's because I feel like they wouldn't exactly be accepting." IPG shared that they did not have anyone to attend on-campus events or activities with, so "what's the point of going?" Interview Participant Yellow (IPY) shared a particular experience of being targeted by a sorority, due to their weight. IPY stated that they were provided a shirt by the sorority and instructed to tie it up in a particular way; IPY could not tie up their shirt due to their larger size, and later found out that only the recruits with tied shirts were approved to join the sorority. IPY said, "I felt kind of discriminated against just because of my size. And now that I look back, that makes sense, because there was only one other girl who was plus sized in their sorority."

***Theme Three: Weight-based stigma and discrimination did not impact the students' overall college experience.***

A student's perception of their overall college experience is essential, because student satisfaction is related to retention and future engagement as an alumnus. Students with an overall positive experience on campus are more likely to persist to graduation. They are also more likely to speak highly of their alma mater and assist in supporting the institution.

The experiences described by survey participants in the previous theme show college educators the opportunities to welcome and include fat students and how we fail to do so. This failure to include fat students impacts the students' feelings of marginalization and belonging. Though the students indicate that fat discrimination does not impact their overall college experience, they maintain memories and feelings regarding the experiences of fat discrimination at their alma maters.

Despite the high frequency of fat discrimination reported in theme one, the six interview participants did not indicate that weight bias or discrimination significantly impacted their overall college experience. Instead, they described their overall experiences as ranging from "okay/normal" to "fantastic." Those with more positive overall experiences attributed that to having a wonderful, body-positive friend group at their college.

### **Research Question 2**

*How have fat students been challenged, if at all, by limitations within the college environment?*

Data collected from the survey and interview questions revealed information on fat college students' challenges with the physical campus environment. The information is sorted into two themes.

***Theme One: Inadequate classroom seating is the most reported concern for fat college students.***

The transition to a new environment, such as college, can raise concerns and anxiety about belonging, fitting in, and feeling comfortable in the new space. For people of size, a new environment can also raise concerns regarding fitting into the physical space and being comfortable in the classrooms and residence halls. While universities are required by law to provide physical accommodations to those with documented disabilities and may be able to offer larger beds to taller students, there is no precedent for meeting the physical needs of fat students.

More than half (61%) of survey participants stated that seating on campus, particularly in the classrooms, is a problem. Five of the six interview participants (Green, Yellow, Red, Blue, and Teal) discussed seating options on campus; Interview Participant Purple stated that they were rarely on campus, due to the global pandemic and the option to take courses online.

Participants described campus seating as “small,” “uncomfortable,” “hard to get in and out of,” and “noisy.” Interview participants stated that they would struggle to focus on learning if they were uncomfortable in the classroom seats. Interview Participant Green shared, “I’m very self-aware of how my body is instead of, like, being fully focused on the material being taught because I’m, like, all of my body is hunching over weird and is, like, my stomach going over the table.” Participants stated that seats with desks attached or auditorium-style seating with attached chairs were the most uncomfortable, with individual desk chairs placed at tables as the most comfortable. Several interview participants mentioned the rows of seats in the classroom as being too

close together and worrying about “putting my butt in someone’s face” and “fitting through as best [I] can.” The fat students try to space themselves in the classroom, sit at the end of rows or in the back, and generally try to make others comfortable with their size. For fat students, this concern about seating creates anxiety and takes away from their ability to focus on the class content and learning.

***Theme Two: Fat college students experience physical discomfort with the beds, baths, and beyond.***

Discomfort in the physical environment on campus extends beyond classroom seating and into other spaces on campus. Fat students also struggle to be comfortable in bedrooms in the residence halls, bathroom stalls, and recreational spaces on campus. Unfortunately, college administrators overlook these needs as they design and remodel campus spaces.

Four study participants mentioned the beds in their on-campus residence hall rooms as a concern. Two people mentioned being concerned about the strength or quality of the bed, and two people discussed the actual size of the beds as being insufficient. According to Interview Participant Green, “[The bed] just feels a little uncomfortable sometimes, and I can't truly sleep how I want because of my size.” Three study participants also mentioned the on-campus bathrooms as uncomfortable, specifically that the stalls were very small, and they would need to turn sideways or straddle the toilet to close the door.

Several participants touched on other issues when considering the physical campus environment, including the size of the campus, the number of hills on campus, whether a building had stairs or ramps/elevators available, the use of tiny turnstiles, and

uncomfortable seating in the dining halls and recreation areas. Overall, the physical campus environment can be challenging for students of size to navigate comfortably.

### **Research Question 3**

*What support, if any, have fat students received relating to their college experience as a person of size? What are the perceptions of weight-based campus resources, if they exist, by fat students?*

It is essential to know whether fat students receive appropriate support from college faculty and staff or if the lack of resources (real or perceived) for fat students contributes to the students feeling like they do not belong. Therefore, I gathered data from survey and interview responses to examine this issue more closely.

***Theme One: Most fat students cannot name a campus resource to support their weight-based needs.***

Colleges and universities have developed various student support services, including university centers, faculty, and staff, to serve as mentors/coaches for specific populations, summer programs, and educational and social activities throughout the year. These resources are to support students and help level the playing field, so all students experience equity and inclusion.

Most study participants could not identify a campus resource to help them with weight-related issues or needs. Furthermore, when participants did name a campus resource, it was tied to change strategies and weight loss, not to create equity and inclusion for fat students.

When asked, “What support/resources have you reached out to for support around weight-related issues while attending college for your undergraduate degree,” 10 of the

survey participants (56%) reported that they were either not aware of any weight-based campus resources or that they believed that no weight or size-related resource did exist. When asked how they have navigated weight-related challenges, Survey Participant J stated, “I just exist and hope that people don't notice what I perceive as flawed.”

Five survey participants reported that they used the counseling center. Two participants mentioned that the counseling was to help with weight loss and managing disordered eating behaviors. Five survey participants and two interview participants cited the Recreation Center (or “the gym”) as a resource for fat students. These participants discussed recreation centers as a place to lose weight and get healthier. Two study participants mentioned that the Recreation Center was not inclusive enough to students of size by not providing appropriately sized equipment and having instructors that do not offer modifications for larger bodies. Interview Participant Purple took a yoga class on campus and said,

There were some things, some positions, that I just couldn't do just because, you know, I'm bigger, and I don't stretch that way; [ . . . ] so that was kind of embarrassing, actually quite embarrassing that I couldn't do it. [ . . . ] I don't think [the instructor had] ever been a bigger person, and therefore didn't really understand why I couldn't really get to that position.

When asked if they talked to the yoga instructor about appropriate modifications for their body, IPP indicated they were uncomfortable making that request.

***Theme Two: Fat students do not ask university employees for weight-related support or accommodations.***

Faculty and staff should strive to create living and learning environments where all students can succeed academically, personally, and socially. Undergraduate students are generally encouraged to seek help and support at their institutions. Unfortunately, the students in this study do not identify any resources for fat people on campus, as either allies or advocates for them. Instead, they express discomfort in asking for weight-related support.

When asked if they had requested size accommodations, study participants stated that they had not, either because they were ashamed, did not think they deserved accommodations or did not think that the request would “do any good.” Interview Participant Green shared:

I haven't just because I feel like those are for people who have [documented accommodation needs]. Whereas I don't necessarily see myself as needing to because I can fit in those spaces. It's just uncomfortable for me and, like, I know it's not shameful but, in my head, it's still fairly shameful to ask for those accommodations.

Overall, fat students state they must determine weight-related accommodations for themselves. For example, when confronted with not having university apparel available in their size, they request larger clothing options or “wait” for the bookstore or organization to carry their size. In addition, students will use the campus shuttles, public transportation, their vehicles, or even Uber to get around campus when struggling with mobility issues. Finally, when facing weight bias from an on-campus counselor, nurse practitioner, or doctor, students will request a different provider or stop going.

***Theme Three: Fat college students want more peer-to-peer support.***

One best practice to determine what students want and need is asking them. Student satisfaction surveys and other assessment tools, including focus groups, help college educators gather data on students and work to meet the needs expressed. Fat students need to be addressed directly and asked what resources they would utilize.

When asked, “what other resources would you want?”, one interview participant stated that having a specific counselor to help address weight-related anxieties would be helpful; another participant said “accommodations, but I don’t know what it would look like.” Three interview participants (Blue, Green, and Red) stated that having a student-led group or club for fat students would be very beneficial. They believe the group would provide peer-to-peer support, implement body-positive events, educate others, and advocate for the needs of larger students on campus. IPG said,

I think it is important for people to be able to have that support system. [ . . . ] In my experience, a lot of people didn’t have that support growing up and typically felt like they were the ‘out-group because of their size, so being able to have those connections with other people who understand you is so important.

In regards to educating the campus on students of size, IPG stated that campuses should be “informing more people about [fat] phobia,” and IPY stated,

I think [adding more resources to campus] would be just more education on how, you know, you can’t always control your size. I think ableism is a problem. [ . . . ]

They always tell you to lose weight, and it’s very frustrating and dehumanizing. IPY further stated that universities should teach body positivity. Study participants shared that they wanted their instructors and classmates to have a better understanding of

fatphobia and fat bias. In addition to that education and prevention, the study participants want to see their bodies accepted and their fat identities celebrated.

***Theme Four: Fat college students want university faculty and staff to know they experience increased difficulty compared to average-size students.***

Only a fat person truly knows what it is like to be fat and experience bias and discrimination. Fat students can tell educators what it is like to be a fat student on their campus, but educators need to be respectful and open-minded. To impact campus culture around fatness and discrimination, we must ask and listen.

When interview participants were asked what they would like university faculty and staff to know about what it is like to be a student of size on campus, they wanted them to be aware of the physical needs of fat students. IPY said, “it’s hard to get around sometimes.” IPP stated they wanted exercise classes to be more accessible to larger bodies. IPG asked faculty to consider that standing up to make presentations can be a physical hardship.

It can just be uncomfortable, especially [ . . . ] if you're forced to stand up in front of the class. [ . . . ] I have not seen anyone be able to sit down during the presentation, which again would go to the disability thing as well. [ . . . ] I’m very aware that how my body could be perceived at that moment just, like, speaking to my peers, so I think that would be a good thing for [the faculty] to keep in mind. IPR wants university faculty and staff to know that being a fat student is “certainly difficult; nobody really talks about it. You kind of just get, like, body signals and people giving you weird looks. And a lot of faculty kind of just overlook it because it doesn't matter to them. But can that affect that student for the long run? Yeah.”

**Research Question 4**

*How do demographic factors impact the fat student experience on campus?*

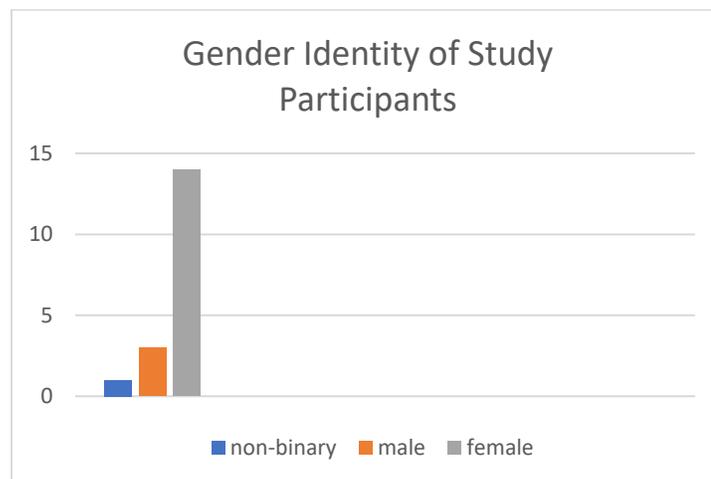
As body diversity is one aspect of identity, it was important to consider that fat students may be getting support for their weight-related challenges from other student support centers on campus. It was also valuable to learn more about the participants' intersecting identities and how that may impact their experience of fatness and fat discrimination.

***Theme One: The biggest intersection of identities is fat and woman-identified.***

As discussed in chapter two, fat people experience their fatness through the lens(es) of their other social identities, including gender, race, and sexual orientation. One of the most prominent intersections is that of fat and female. American women are compared to an idealized standard of beauty and experience stigma and discrimination when they do not meet that standard and stereotyping when they do.

Fourteen of the eighteen survey participants responded that they identified as female, three as male, and one as nonbinary.

**Figure 3**



All six interview participants identified as female. Seven study participants, all female, discussed their appearance and desire to be perceived as “cute” or attractive to others. Several survey participants mentioned difficulty finding clothing options that they felt attractive wearing. Survey Participant O reported a “constant awareness of how my body looks in all situations.” Interview Participant Purple stated

Everywhere I [went], I felt like people would be, like, looking at me, and I have caught a few people just kind of looking, and, you know, like, people talk really softly, and they look at you, and you know they're talking about you. I am bigger, and I liked to wear stuff that I think makes me look cute, and eventually, I stopped wearing that kind of stuff, and I just started wearing t-shirts and sweatpants because I was so uncomfortable.

Interview Participant Teal directly connected the pressure they feel to meet a standard of appearance to being female.

I know my gender is [ . . . ] very salient when it comes to, like, the way I look and the expectations of what has been put on me. But [ . . . ] what I'm supposed to look like is not what I look like. [ . . . ] I am not the quote-unquote ideal woman.

Study Participants mentioned feeling awkward and having social anxiety due to their body image and weight-related concerns. Interview Participant Green talked about making friends and dating in college, sharing that “my one friend really branched out because she was pretty; when I would be, like, standing next to her, I would be completely ignored. [ . . . ] So [one challenge is] just kind of being ignored, specifically by men.”

The female study participants discussed the pressure to meet the ideal standard of beauty as it related to their bodies and weight. They also pointed out how they felt socially isolated and had difficulty forming romantic relationships.

***Theme Two: Students report that their LGBTQ+ group membership impacts their experiences of fatness.***

Fat activism and queer history intersect and overlap. How one identifies their sexual orientation, in addition to their gender identity, is closely tied to personal appearance and expression, which, in turn, is closely tied to body identity. Students report that their LGBTQ+ group membership impacts their experiences of fatness.

Four of the six interview participants (Green, Purple, Yellow, and Red) identified themselves as non-heterosexual, using terms such as “bisexual,” “queer,” and “figuring it out” as their descriptors. For example, interview Participant Green discussed how being bisexual and fat is challenging for them, and that they have found judgment from inside their community. They shared:

Being bisexual, I'm definitely more aware of, like, how queer identities have a tendency to be hypersexualized all the time. So, if I am in a space where it's that queer identity, it tends to be a lot more about my body. I have found that, like, I'm not exactly, like, the standard for beauty or whatever, and that can be really harmful in that community because things get brought up a lot more, like, honestly. [The judgment is] really tied into how I've perceived myself as a fat woman, like, being attracted to men, but them not exactly being attracted to me all the time. I've found that femme people, at least, are more open to being with a

plus-sized partner. But, men typically have some kind of, like, either fetish for it or they're just like, "You have a cute face, but that's it."

Interview Participant Purple shared a different experience from within the LGBTQIA+ community.

[The queer community] is much more supportive. Let me tell you, my friends are amazing, like, my queer friends. They're just amazing, [ . . . ] they're just so supportive they said, "No, you don't need to change, you're beautiful," and you know they're just so much more supportive. And since being involved with those friends, I am much more confident with my body than I used to be.

One obvious difference between IPY and IPP's experiences as people of size in the queer community is that IPY is seeking romantic partnerships, and IPP is seeking supportive friendships.

Overall, study participants discussed receiving support from friend groups and did not mention receiving support from on-campus centers or groups aligned with their other identities, i.e., Women's Center, LGBTQ Center, or Multicultural Center.

### **Summary**

While 17 of the 18 (94%) study participants experienced weight-based bias or discrimination, none indicated that these events impacted their overall college experience. Four of the 18 study participants stated that they did not experience any physical challenges or limitations on campus. However, 39% of the participants identified themselves as first-year, sophomore, or junior students, indicating that they have not been on campus much (if at all), due to the global pandemic. Interview Participant Green stated that their college experience has been "atypical because of COVID." Some

participants are not having an in-person college experience and, therefore, are not encountering physical challenges on campus. The other 14 participants noted various environmental challenges on campus, from classroom seating to residence hall showers to recreation center turnstiles.

Students of various identities are encouraged to find support through on-campus resources. However, 10 study participants indicated that they had not sought support or did not believe support exists when it comes to weight or size-related issues. Five participants cited university counseling as a resource, and five participants noted the recreation center or campus gym. Participants discussed these resources concerning losing weight rather than developing a positive fat identity.

In terms of intersectionality, the identity shared by most of the participants was their female gender identity. Having a majority of women-identified participants aligns with other research data that shows that women experience weight-related bias and discrimination more frequently. Study participants have not found weight-related support in other student centers (i.e., LGBTQ+, Women & Gender, Multicultural, etc.), and it was suggested by three interview participants that a peer support group for fat students would be a beneficial addition to their campus resources.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

### Introduction

The results of the study support the previous research that shows that people of size experience discrimination and that fat bias does, indeed, exist. According to the survey responses, fat students on college campuses experience discrimination approximately 12 times during an academic year. This data reinforces the research and historical data regarding fat discrimination. It is incredibly discouraging that there was a call to address fat discrimination in the United States as early as 1967 (Louderback, “More People Should Be Fat” (as cited in Kight, 2014), and fat students’ experiences and needs were highlighted in 1994 (National Education Association Report on Discrimination Due to Physical Size), and yet there is limited awareness and little to no action; either the decision-makers are ignorant of the issues of fat students, or they have determined that it is not important.

And, for their part, fat people have learned to cover and hide; they have learned to take their physical fatness, which is hyper-visible to others, and become invisible. This practice of covering or hiding fatness is both literal and figurative. Fat people learn to be ashamed of their fatness and to try to hide it as much as possible. They dress in ways to cover and disguise their “offensive” bodies and do not speak up for their needs, because they do not want to call attention to themselves and their fatness. They have internalized the message that someone with a fat body is less deserving, less worthy of kindness, and, in this case, less deserving of equity and inclusion in higher education.

**Research Question 1:**

**How have students of size experienced weight-based stigma and discrimination in college? What impact has this had on their overall college experience?**

University administrators are very interested in the student experience related to retention and graduation. The targeting or discrimination of any subpopulation adversely affects the overall campus environment and climate. A college campus reflects greater society, and social inequities and discrimination are embedded in campus culture.

University decision-makers need to understand how fat students experience college. Study participants stated that they did experience both direct and indirect discrimination on campus due to their above-average size. While they recalled specific examples and the negative feelings they experienced, they reported that these events did not impact their overall college experience.

Most college students of size are in their larger bodies before beginning their college experience. Previous research shows that weight-related bias and discrimination begin very early and that people are made aware that their bodies do not meet the societal norm or standard of beauty at a young age. Interview Participant Yellow stated that they have been overweight since they were five years old. It is very likely that a person of size has become desensitized to the negative bias and discrimination they receive and that they do not consider the challenges they face as noteworthy or impacting their specific life experiences, including their time pursuing their undergraduate college degree. It is also quite possible that a person of size can compartmentalize the bias or discrimination they have experienced as a fat student and view their overall college experience as positive.

One of the most significant issues raised by this study is that the challenges experienced by fat students are largely overlooked or ignored, including by the fat students themselves. The participants agreed to participate in the study, because they wanted to help foster more awareness of fat phobia, fat bias, and fat discrimination amongst their university classmates, faculty, and staff. Several of the interview participants expressed gratitude for this study. While one's identity as a fat person is hyper-visible to others, fat students can feel invisible.

**Research Question 2:**

**How have fat students been challenged, if at all, by limitations within the college environment?**

The campus's physical environment can be challenging for students, faculty, and staff. For example, fat people have difficulty fitting into clothing, recreational equipment, furniture, and spaces designed for average-sized people. In addition, fat students struggle to comfortably exist in the spaces on campus because their physical needs have not been considered in the design.

Fifteen out of 18 survey participants (83%) shared some concern about the physical campus environment. Adequate and comfortable seating, bathroom size (too narrow), and bed size (too small) are the top concerns, alongside overall mobility and transportation issues. Participants remarked on challenges walking around campus (hills) and using stairs to access buildings and the classrooms and offices within buildings. One study participant remarked that even though there is elevator access in many buildings, they felt shame if they used the elevators instead of taking the stairs.

**Research Question 3:**

**What support, if any, have fat students received relating to their college experience as a person of size? What are the perceptions of weight-based campus resources, if they exist, by fat students?**

Fat students are a marginalized group on college campuses. Fat students should receive protection and support as a subpopulation that experiences bias and stigma to help create more equity and inclusion on campus. It is essential to understand where fat students seek advocacy and support so that improvements can be made and best practices are imitated.

Survey questions asked the participants if they reached out to campus resources for support regarding any size-related needs and, if so, what the response was to those requests. Despite wanting the college environment to “fit” them better, not one participant responded that they requested accommodations for their larger bodies. Survey Participant E stated that they had dealt with size-related challenges long before they entered college. One survey participant and one interview participant (perhaps the same study participant) mentioned utilizing the university access services office for accommodations unrelated to their size. Overall, study participants expressed a lack of comfort in requesting support regarding their specific needs as fat students.

When survey participants were asked to identify support systems for students of size on their campuses, they responded either that there were no resources or that they were unaware of any resources available for fat students. The two resources mentioned were the counseling center and the gym or recreation center. However, these resources were mentioned as support for managing weight loss, not as support for fat students in

their current bodies. This perspective of campus resources for students of size reinforces the idea that fat bodies are less welcome on campus and need to be changed, not that there is campus support for all bodies as they currently are.

Interview participants stated that they would like a student-led group for fat students and that this group would serve as a peer support group for them. They hoped this kind of group would also advocate for students of size and educate the greater campus community regarding fat phobia, fat bias, and body positivity.

#### **Research Question 4:**

##### **How do demographic factors impact the fat student experience on campus?**

This researcher thought that students of size might be finding adequate support through campus resources that serve their other identities, i.e., Multicultural Centers, Women and Gender Centers, LGBTQ+ Centers, Black Student Unions, or something similar. The participant sample was not ethnically diverse, although one interview participant mentioned multicultural events. Most participants (78%) identified as female, but not one participant stated that they found any community support through other women or a Women's Center on campus. Sixty-seven percent of the interview participants identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community but did not connect with the resources available to the queer communities on their respective campuses. Due to the global pandemic, students' access to on-campus resources and campus activities was limited, and students have spent minimal time physically on campus. While the global pandemic can help explain why students have fewer interactions with campus resource centers, it may not occur to students of size to find support for their body identity in those

spaces. If fat students feel apprehension or shame seeking accommodations, they may also shy away from finding support within their other identity communities.

### **Further Discussion**

Students of size are marginalized on college campuses, and they find that their institutions are not addressing their challenges. Fat students believe that no accommodations or resources are available to them and that they should manage their needs independently. This lack of support has often led to social isolation and physical discomfort on campus. I believe that faculty and staff do not know how to respond to the needs of fat students appropriately and that they need to be educated on the topic to raise awareness and sensitivity. A small step forward would be for university staff to be aware of the seating needs of community members representing all body types. Outfitting campus spaces with wider chairs without arms, tables instead of desks, and wider rows would be a positive step toward creating a more welcoming physical space for all faculty, staff, students, and student-supporters.

Size must be included as a topic in diversity and inclusion training. Faculty and staff are required to participate in training offered by their institution's Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ODEI); topics include the "Big 8 of Diversity" (Center for Academic Excellence, 2021), which are ability, age, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status. Body diversity is an essential facet of identity and affects how every human experiences the world around them. Offices of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion need to bring awareness to the bias and discrimination that people with non-average body types experience on their campuses. It is important to raise awareness and visibility for the challenges of fat students, as it will help to validate

their experiences, create a welcoming space, and implement positive changes on campus. Shifting the campus community's response to fat students to being more positive and supportive will improve the campus culture and increase student retention.

The data gathered in this study disproved the hypothesis that fat students have negative weight-related experiences on campus, negatively impacting their overall undergraduate college experience. Reflecting on my college experiences as a fat student, I saw my challenges on campus as an extension of my previous experiences (i.e., "more of the same") in terms of being physically uncomfortable, experiencing mobility issues, and being socially isolated. The survey respondents also indicated that they had learned to manage their own needs and accommodations as fat people and, therefore, did not raise concerns to their university faculty and staff. If anything, I have found that college campuses strive to be more inclusive and politically correct. Unfortunately, college administrators do not recognize fat students as a marginalized group, for fear of not being sensitive or correct. This tactic of ignoring the problem of fat bias and discrimination, both on campus and in society, leads to the false belief that there are no problems for fat students at higher education institutions. We are taking a hyper-visible body identity and making it invisible by not acknowledging it.

I expected that students would find support for their fat identity through their other identities or that the intersection of multiple identities would play a more significant role in their college experience as a student of size. Instead, study participants expressed finding support through their friend groups, but not specifically through involvement with on-campus resource centers or student organizations. Again, this may result from fewer on-campus experiences, due to the global pandemic and campus COVID restrictions.

My results did mirror data gathered from the literature. Study participants experience fat discrimination and bias on college campuses similarly to how fat people experience fat phobia and fat bias in greater society; either by becoming invisible, becoming targets of ridicule, or becoming people that need their fat bodies to be “fixed.”

One interview participant talked about being asked to model how to perform venipuncture on a larger arm. This example struck me as the singling out or targeting of a fat person in the classroom, not unlike asking a student of color to represent their race or the one woman-identified student in the classroom to speak for their gender. Putting the spotlight on the student in this manner is inappropriate and unprofessional, further marginalizing the student by making them “other” in an educational environment that should be inclusive and welcoming. Study participants also shared that when the topic of health is brought up in the classroom, they are targeted as a problem to be fixed. These experiences support the false narrative of the medical community regarding “the obesity epidemic”; that overweight or obese people are unhealthy and should be targeted for weight-loss initiatives to increase their health and wellness.

Studies on weight bias and being fat in the United States have shown that fat people are less accepted and supported and that there are barriers to education, employment, and upward mobility for people of size. Michigan is the only state that explicitly prohibits employment discrimination based on weight, and therefore Michigan institutions of higher education also prohibit weight-based employment discrimination. Although study participants did not directly discuss employment discrimination, one student brought up an example of being treated differently in an on-campus job, due to their weight and medical needs.

The study participants also spoke to fat students' need for more self-authorship. They discussed the need for social acceptance and in- and out- group support for those with a fat body identity. Three interviewees stated that having a body-positive fat student group on campus would significantly impact their experience as a fat student on campus.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Institutions of higher education need to make the campus more inclusive of all community members. In addressing the specific needs of community members of size, campus leaders should start by looking at the system. Researchers and activists should challenge higher education institutions to examine how they support fat students. Human Resources and the University Board of Directors must make weight a protected category in employment policies and practice. As part of this change, Human Resources would train faculty and staff regarding this policy and instruct employees that pictures, physical appearance, and other weight-related assessments cannot be used as criteria for hiring, raises, professional development opportunities, or promotions (for faculty, staff, and student-employees). Admissions and academic departments should also receive training regarding weight bias and ways to avoid weight discrimination during student recruitment, selection, and enrollment. Faculty and staff must be aware of appropriate modifications that should be made (or at least offered) to students, regardless of size.

New student programs, student involvement, Greek life, residence life, and other student support programs that help foster belonging need training and education on the needs of fat students and modifying their programs to be more inclusive (i.e., consider challenges of campus tours, offer clothing in larger sizes, provide social activities that

include and celebrate all body types, etc.). In addition, a student-led fat bodies/body-positive organization needs to be created and supported.

Campus leaders should collaborate closely with the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to raise awareness of fat people as a marginalized group on campus. ODEI would lead the charge in educating the campus community on the issues of fatphobia, fat bias, and the need for body positivity and inclusion as part of their inclusion efforts.

Health Services and the Recreation Center need to receive training on accepting, supporting, and including fat bodies and be granted the resources to purchase appropriate recreation equipment and other materials for students of size to use and enjoy campus resources. Finally, those with oversight of the physical campus (i.e., facilities management, student housing, and campus interior designers) should receive training and resources to change the campus environment to increase the comfort of students and community members of all shapes and sizes.

### **Limitations**

Concerning the trustworthiness of the data, I am relying on the participants' recent experiences and memories of being undergraduate students. Some participants were experiencing college at the same time as taking the survey and completing the interview; other participants were a year or more removed from their undergraduate college experience.

Another challenge of working with this data is that we have been experiencing a global pandemic since March 2020. This pandemic has had most students learning remotely and away from college campuses, making it difficult for them to have (and therefore, share) typical college student experiences. If this study were repeated in five

years, fat students might report more experiences (both positive and negative) on campus concerning their size. If this were the case, it would be easier to collect information, and we would have more data to support the research questions.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Study participants did not indicate that weight discrimination had a negative impact on their overall college experience. I believe this is because the participants have already learned to hide or minimize their challenges as fat people in the United States. To further understand this dynamic, I would add some questions to the survey and interview tools regarding the participants' experience of weight discrimination before college and ask them to identify any behaviors they learned to adapt to the normal-size student experience. I would also expand the interview question "have you requested any accommodations related to your size?" to something more like "have you confided in any university faculty and staff regarding your size and any weight-related issues?" Study participants heard the question about accommodations as directly related to ability and access. I would have received more information if the question had been worded differently or framed more broadly.

There are further opportunities to take a closer look at the impact of fatness in regards to body diversity and other intersecting identities, including race, gender, and sexual identity. It would be beneficial to continue research efforts on body diversity and identity development related to the body. Human development and student development theory is lacking in this area of identity development and the impact of body identity on the sense of self.

## Summary

Weight-based bias and discrimination continue to be the last acceptable discrimination in the United States. People of size develop body identity and attitudes about their bodies in direct relation to how others treat them. College campuses are extensions of greater society, and fat discrimination is reflected on college campuses. Students of size on college campuses have found that faculty and staff at their institutions are unaware of their challenges and needs. The student's identity as a fat person is either avoided or targeted. As campuses push to increase access and retention, university faculty and staff must examine whether they are doing enough to welcome, include, recognize, and celebrate students of size.

This dissertation study explored the experiences of fat students on college campuses, examining their experiences of anti-fat bias and discrimination. Additionally, this study explored policy and practice implications for improving the experiences of fat college students and supporting body diversity on campus. This dissertation had four overarching research questions that focused on the following topics: fat students' experiences of weight-based stigma and discrimination in college, the limitations of physical space on college campuses, perceptions of available resources for fat students, and the impact of demographic factors on the fat student experience in college.

For this study, data was provided by 18 survey participants and six interview participants. Participants stated that their experiences of stigma and discrimination did not impact their overall college experience, which was reported as positive. However, they discussed that they were fat before college and had learned to adjust to stigma and make their own accommodations before stepping on campus. Study participants

expressed the need for a greater understanding of the needs of fat students and the need for increased opportunities to feel like they belong.

This dissertation outlines several policy and practice implications for colleges and universities wanting to improve support for fat students (and other community members). These opportunities for change include: (a) adding body diversity to the campus nondiscrimination policy, (b) including body diversity as a diversity, equity, and inclusion training required of all campus employees, (c) providing resources to improve the physical environment for fat students (and all students), and (d) supporting a student-led initiative to have a student organization focused on body diversity, fatness, and body positivity. This study has shown that higher education institutions are not doing enough to protect and support fat students. “We can make our campuses better for fat people, and we should” (Stewart, 2018, p. 33).

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## Appendix A

### Online Survey Questions

The following online survey questions were included to gather information on the study participants' experiences as students of size on college campuses:

*Survey Question 1:* How often would you say that you have experienced challenges (e.g., limitations, bias, discrimination, or other forms of oppression) related to your body size while attending college? (multiple choice)

*Survey Question 2:* If you are comfortable, please describe some of the weight-related challenges that you have encountered. (open-ended)

How have you resolved/overcome these situations? (open-ended)

*Survey Question 3:* What challenges, if any, have you noticed with physical space on campus? (academic, residence halls, recreation areas, dining, etc.) (open-ended)

*Survey Question 4:* Have there been any activities that you were excluded from because of your weight? Please explain. (open-ended)

*Survey Question 5:* What support/resources have you reached out to for support around weight-related issues? (open-ended)

**Vita****Andrea Marie Melrose**

Andrea M. Melrose (she/her/hers) earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Secondary Education with a minor in Teaching History from Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 2002. She received her Master of Science in Higher Education from the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas, in 2004. Andrea was admitted to the Doctor of Education in instructional leadership program at Lindenwood University in the summer of 2018.

Andrea joined the Division of Student Affairs at the University of Missouri – St. Louis (UMSL) in October 2021 as the Associate Director for Student Conduct and Academic Integrity. In this role, Andrea focuses on risk prevention and education. Andrea's previous roles include the Director of Student Development and Engagement at the University of Health Sciences and Pharmacy in St. Louis, Coordinator of Student Staff Selection and Assessment/Leadership at the University of Central Florida, HNU Experience Coordinator and Assistant Director for Campus Activities at Holy Names University, Assistant Resident Dean at the University of California, San Diego, and Residential Life Coordinator at Sonoma State University. She has also taught several courses, including first-year experience seminars and leadership development.

Andrea is an innovative problem-solver who embraces challenges and finds creative solutions. She takes the initiative to coordinate, plan, and organize events, activities, training and development. Andrea enjoys taking risks and pursuing learning. She is deeply committed to service and social justice.