

**HOLDING SPACE FOR PEOPLE JUST TRYING TO SURVIVE:
THE INCLUSION OF FAT STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

by

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fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Women and Gender Studies

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ABSTRACT

Fatness is not a part of the analysis surrounding the inclusion of students in Higher Education. Oppression based on body-size, and critical obesity scholarship is integral to understanding how institutions welcome people. Examining support provided to fat students, this analysis provides space for fat students to talk about their experiences using focus groups from a snowball sample of people who self-identify as fat. This analysis deliberately avoids a focus on fatness through the lens of disability or disease. Utilizing primarily lexicon sourced from grassroots Fat activists, this paper expands upon the fat spectrum and how fatness cannot be plotted linearly. With intersectionality in mind, this paper uses Queer theory to challenge binary conceptions of fatness and the shorthand fat people use to discuss inequities. The interviews from this project led to the existence of a “fat ecosystem” which emerges from this project to better describe the fluidity of people’s identities. While participants detailed the rigidity of their opportunities within higher education, their own introspection is dynamic and ever-changing much like an ecosystem. Despite participant’s willingness to adapt to stressful situations, this project also resulted in the coining of the theory “fat essentialism.” This theory acknowledges the rigid path that is set forth for fat people, which includes loss of opportunities and pigeonholing them into labels they do not claim. Most participants had been labeled as fat before they knew what body size diversity meant and for some participants this condemned them from pursuing their life’s passions. Fat students use survival tactics to cope with their determined paths. These tactics includes fight, flight, and appease, these instincts are

used in Adverse Childhood Experiences to explain how survivors of gender-based violence experience trauma but had not yet been applied to fat students. This project examines how fat people's wellbeing and health outcomes are in danger because of the way they are treated and limited by the labeling of fatness. Instead of addressing fatness through a health-centered approach this project challenges institutions to have discussions about the fat student experience in spaces of diversity, equity, and inclusion to encourage institutional restructuring.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

“Just don’t let the Freshman 15 get you,” is a phrase that incoming first-year students are all too familiar with. What happens when you are already fat? Around 19.4 million people attended colleges or universities in the fall of 2020 (*The NCES Fast Facts*). However, to date, little has been known about the fat students attending these institutions. This project fills this gap by exploring the presence of weight-based oppression in higher education and demonstrated that unwelcoming spaces for fat students generate detrimental consequences to their overall college experience. This project examines the physical and societal obstacles fat students face and how their experiences belong in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts.

One of the first feelings a student should have when attending a college is welcome. Offices such as Orientation, Residence Life and Housing, and Admissions work diligently to impress upon first-year and prospective students the welcoming nature of their institutions. Sarah Ahmed explores another sector of this welcome team, the offices of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Institutions across the world declare their dedication to diversity and inclusion through mission statements, Instagram posts, and initiatives that Ahmed argues are done to feign “institutional happiness,” and that staff is not given space to challenge the institution (Ahmed, 2012). Rather, the offices are expected to facilitate change through documents and

friendly exchanges. Through this project, I have had many uncomfortable conversations, and have been “doing the doing” of listening to fat students’ experiences and advocating for them to be heard. There are no avenues to discuss the fat experience.

The fat experience can be understood as the ubiquitous presence fatness has on people’s lives. This has been described as hyper[*in*]visibility, “they are simultaneously hypervisible and invisible, on campus,” (Stevens, 2018) Whether or not they are experiencing weight-based oppression, students have an anticipated stigma that other people are going to devalue or discriminate against them due to their body size (Stevens, 2017). These terms come from the only scholarly study that explicitly interviews fat students about their experiences on campus using fat as a descriptor rather than pejoratively. While combing through articles surrounding fatness, it was almost impossible to find ones pertaining to higher education, and even harder about fat students. Studies on fat faculty and staff are useful but reveal a power dynamic that excludes less powerful and academically credible people from sharing their stories. In contrast, there is an abundance of community-sourced terms and information about fatness through an intersectional lens that may not be legitimized through the academy but are in use in this project to discuss the fat experience. This project gives voice to fat students and centers their experience through a queer lens and intersectional framework.

Giving space for fat students to discuss their experiences is the central aim of this project. The 16 participants in this study spoke with me about their struggles

growing up fat and how those struggles continue throughout their time on campus. These were not easy conversations, many emotional, but overall they were happy to be talking about their experiences, some for the first time in their lives. Another aim is to provide recommendations for institutions by naming specific offices and using direct quotes from students regarding the changes they propose. Equipping institutions with empirical evidence and analysis hopefully will aid in facilitating institutional change. However, since the participants were willing to share their thoughts on changes, I gladly share them with institutions willing to listen.

Chapter 2

POSITIONALITY

Importance of Positionality

Reflecting on my positionality with respect to fatness is a crucial step in feminist research. As a post-modern feminist, I do not believe in any absolute truth. No matter how many focus groups and interviews I conduct, this project will never result in a conclusive answer on how institutions welcome fat students. Rather, the interviews do give insight into possible patterns in people's experiences and provide helpful recommendations for how institutions can begin supporting fat students. Additionally, it is consequential that there is a reciprocal relationship between myself as the interviewer and the participants. Traditionally, the more objective the research, the more factual. However, when doing research with people in identities that experience oppression it is unethical to not reciprocate vulnerability when your participants are discussing the most traumatic moments in their lives. At the beginning of each interview before I asked my questions (see Appendix A), I gave a statement of positionality that includes my gender identity, ethnicity, and racial identity, and that I self-identify as a fat person.

The Awkward Fat Kid

Before I understood what being fat entailed, I found myself with that label. The earliest recollection I have of being labeled as fat is from going to my grandmother's house and having her scold me for eating too quickly. She told me I was too chubby and that I needed to chew my food 60 times on each side of my mouth to

digest it properly. Throughout elementary school, I was fat and experienced bullying both in-person and online for my appearance. I was the awkward fat kid. For most of middle school and high school, I participated in disordered eating and lost a lot of weight. I was praised by my family and began receiving a lot of romantic attention. After going to college I gained about 80 pounds. At first, this devastated me. I spent a lot of time shaming myself and punishing myself for gaining weight. Noticeably, people began treating me differently in social situations and dating became more complicated. Namely, people seemed to not want to be seen with me in public and were always “not ready” for a relationship. It became a personal joke to say that I was good luck because those people would always be in long-term relationships soon after.

Body Neutrality

It was not until the pandemic happened that I began reflecting on how I think about body size. Seeing fat people on Tik Tok practicing non-judgment was incredibly impactful. Tik Tok creator @rynnstar introduced the concept of body neutrality. Body positivity is well known for encouraging people to be confident in their bodies and to embrace their flaws unapologetically. While this was initially helpful, I found this often evolving into toxic positivity. I was exhausted trying to upkeep the appearance of being the self-assured fat person, it was not sustainable. Instead, body neutrality encourages people to focus on a body's achievements rather than their appearance. Rather than placing a complete emphasis on feeling particularly positive and loving towards your body, body neutralists use non-judgment to reach more of a middle ground. Body neutrality is not perfect, focusing on achievements made by someone's

body is rooted in ableism. However, it began my journey to healing the relationship I have with my body. After encountering the fat spectrum I began examining how I benefit from privilege as a mid-sized fat person. I still experience a loss of access because of my body size but not as much as someone who identifies as a large fat or an infinifat. I highlight the fat spectrum and its shortcomings in the literature review of this paper. During my first year of college as I was scrolling on Instagram I encountered the quote “and I said to my body softly, ‘I want to be your friend,’ it took a long breath and replied, I have been waiting my whole life for this,” (Naayirah Waheed). My eyes immediately welled. Befriending the shy, awkward, fat kid from my past has become one of my greatest desires.

Acknowledging my Identities

Considering how my varying identities interact with my fatness guided my interview style and what I prioritize in this project. Aforementioned, I share my positionality statement with participants at the beginning of each interview. Other than my fatness, my most salient identities include being Latine, and Queer. I use they/them/theirs pronouns and do not identify with a particular sexual orientation because I am not sure exactly how I feel but I know that I am not straight, and that is enough for me. Labels can be helpful but for now, I am comfortable with identifying more generally as Queer. My ethnicity is Latine and my race is biracial. In some spaces, I benefit from white privilege as I have lighter skin but in a predominantly white university setting I have found myself intrinsically different from many of my peers. None of these identities exist for me in a vacuum and all of them affect the way

I think of my fatness. Namely, my queerness has a large influence on how I conceptualize fatness. Similarly to how I do not feel I can plot my sexual orientation or gender expression on a spectrum, I feel like fatness exists in a dynamic and fluid space. My body size in particular has fluctuated a lot throughout my life. For a while, I was thin and saw first-hand the privilege that comes with taking up less space. My identities have changed a lot over the past year and I hope that I continue to examine the ways that they impact my life.

Chapter 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

Essentialism, Stigma and Labeling

When people are given the label fat they are put into a category that experiences a lot of labeling and stigma enforced by social control. Although this project uses fatness in a lens of empowerment, many people see fatness as a moral panic or a health crisis (Kwan, 2009). Attaching stigmatizing labels to people is known as labeling theory, which is led by the deviant characteristics of the identity. There is no responsibility placed on the people doing the labeling. Fat people experience personal blame and experience social control as a response to deviance (Kwan, 2009). Labeling theory argues that placing a deviant label on someone creates a self-fulfilling prophecy that the person will carry out after being labeled (Nickerson, 2021). Similarly to labeling theory, essentialism is a philosophical theory positing “that people and things have natural and essential common characteristics which are inherent, innate and unchanging,” (Smith, 2014). Theories like essentialism and labeling theory perpetuate stigma when people deviate from the standards being set forth like when faculty mentors encourage their graduate students to lose weight so that people will take them more seriously, (Hunt, Rhodes 2018). Stigma has lasting health consequences and relates to people’s quality of life (Earnshaw, 2011). Toxic stress and stigma help explain Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which are potentially traumatic experiences that occur between the ages of 0-17 years old. ACEs have been linked to chronic illness, mental health issues, substance use, and can

negatively impact a person's potential to earn money and secure jobs. Across 25 states 61 percent of adults reported having at least one form of ACEs (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Labeling people and restricting their opportunities is proven to decrease their quality of life and fat people are no stranger to the effects of "cultural fear."

The Dreaded "F word"

Language is an integral part of fat scholarship. The specific words that scholars choose to utilize differ, but the overall sentiment is that "O words" are divisive. This includes the words "overweight" and "obese." Fat activists aim to demedicalize obesity and shift from individual blame to systemic accountability (Kwan, 2009). The "O words" emphasize the stereotype that fat individuals lack self-control and personal responsibility. "Obesity" and "overweight" are associated with the medical field, which validates their usage. Contrarily, the "dreaded f word," or fat, is seen as derogatory yet is the increasingly preferred terminology used by activists. Similar to other social justice movements, fat activists have reclaimed the three-letter word to be empowering. Social media activists such as @thefatsextherapist reclaim the word fat in their Instagram username and bio, identifying as a "fat futurist." They encourage their followers to notice "the ways you think about and talk about fatness, fat people, fat bodies, fat futures." Fat is a descriptor instead of being used pejoratively (Stevens, 2017). Specifically, Charlotte Cooper calls attention to how

The body becomes symbolic: we are there but we have no voice, not even a mouth in a head, no brain, no thoughts or opinions. Instead, we are reduced and dehumanized as symbols of cultural fear (Cameron & Russell, 2016).

To restore fatness, scholars are intentional in their usage of the word fat. Additionally, naming the oppression that fat people face is crucial to their activism. Using terms fatphobia, fat hatred, weight-based oppression, and fat bullying give activists verbiage to engage in discourse about fat oppression. However, despite a language shift, there are still people who are uncomfortable identifying as fat. While this project will primarily use the word fat, it is important not to assume that everyone is comfortable with that word. For best practice, ask people for their preferences or pay attention to how they describe themselves. Understanding the importance of language in fat scholarship is crucial to the cultural framing of fatness.

Fat Frame of Mind

According to Kwan (2009), there are three cultural frames of fatness: 1) medical 2) social justice, and 3) market choice. Framing theory explains the way that existing cultural frames enable individuals to make sense of everyday phenomena and attempt to find solutions to problems. Various public policy and social outcomes result from the framing of fatness. Scholars and activists have shown that the medical frame conflates fatness with deviance to instill social control in fat people. Examples of social sanctions include worse employment and financial outcomes (Kwan, 2009). Generally, thinness is “often equated with higher levels of personal responsibility that translates into being seen as more competent and having more personal control while

being fat is associated with little personal responsibility and control,” (Hunt & Rhodes, 2018). The medical frame centers individual blame, which endorses morally judging fat people. For example, people use the medical frame to invalidate fat people’s ability to excel in academia in higher education. A tweet from Geoffrey Miller, a professor at New York University in 2013 says “Dear obese Ph.D. applicants: if you didn’t have the willpower to stop eating carbs, you won’t have the willpower to do a dissertation #truth.” After receiving backlash, Miller claimed later that the tweet was a social experiment. Notice his usage of the word obese in his tweet and his advice about eating carbs despite his lack of medical expertise. Both are examples of the impact of the medical frame on his beliefs about fat people. Miller is not alone in his beliefs surrounding fat people in academia, though he was certainly unusually vocal about them.

The social justice and market choice frames are antitheses to the medical frame. Although they are similar, the social justice frame focuses on the systemic discrimination of fat people and market choice frame takes a personal responsibility approach. Additionally, while the social justice frame according to Kwan (2009) still appeals to medical science and health sensibility, the market choice frame believes in individual autonomy free of government and medical interference. Both frames agree that being healthy and fat are not mutually exclusive.

I will identify the use and salience of each frame in my analysis (see methods section). Examination of the existing literature suggests that social justice and

marketing will be predominant in higher education, while medicalization will be salient in institutional and individual responses.

Fategories

Intersectionality, a theoretical framework conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, analyzes how people's identities do not exist in a vacuum and criticizes the way people with marginalized identities are discriminated against. Intersectionality addresses the discrimination and privilege that affect how people experience the legal system and other institutions. Distinctive from previous ideology surrounding oppression, Crenshaw calls out the inequities that Black women face. Crenshaw critiques people's failure to acknowledge how a person's multiple identities result in simultaneous forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1994). Despite the longevity of intersectionality, this theory is not at the forefront of fat discourse. Twitter user @LOUIEFATTONS poses the question "what's your most cancellable plus size take?" and the responses were indicative of this issue within the fat community.

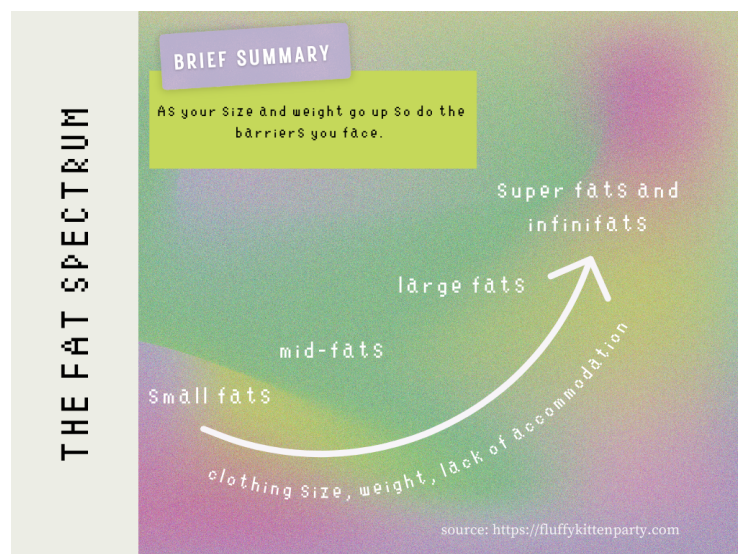


[studwrangler]. (2022, April, 11th). I also wanna say a LOT of platformed plussize girls are colorist/texturist/featurist and it shows in how they clique up and who they uplift.[Photograph]. Twitter.

<https://twitter.com/studwrangler/status/1513623929524477953>

While scholars have good intentions, their theories and discussions on fatness are not done through a lens of intersectionality. For example, the blog post entitled “Fategories – Understanding the Fat Spectrum” explains the fat spectrum as a useful form of short-hand in the fat community. The spectrum attempts to categorize fatness into 4 labels: small fats, mid fats, large fats, and super fats & infinifats. The visualization of this spectrum conveys that the more someone weighs the more barriers they will face. See figure 1 for my visual representation of the fat spectrum.

Figure 1. Graphic of the fat spectrum. Moreno, 2021



While the author has since revised this blog post to be less “inflammatory,” and more of a helpful resource (Laura, 2019) this model still lacks an intersectional lens. Like any theory the fat spectrum has limitations. The author points out that the spectrum primarily uses women's clothing as means of classification, which is not inclusive to gender non-conforming people or anyone that does not identify as a woman.

Additionally, spectrums are still linear and can feel restrictive to people outside of those bounds. Integrating intersectionality when discussing fatness is critical to conceptualizing the fat experience. Mikki Kendall, author of "Hood Feminism," emphasizes that women of color and trans women are left out of efforts to achieve equality. Kendall (2020) explains that inequities such as food deserts and soda taxes prevent people from having access to the nutrition they can afford. Problematizing individual blame while acknowledging the importance of fatness interacting with a person's other identities is a key modality for this project. Combining pre-existent theories like the fat spectrum and intersectionality is a more inclusive way of discussing fatness.

Making Space

Taking up space is a common fear that fat people report. Not only space in the physical sense, but the mental toll it takes on a person also takes up space. One of the few scholars focusing in the experiences of fat students (rather than faculty or staff) in higher education. In their article, professor Corey Stevens identifies four spaces where fat students feel hyper(in)visible: (1) classrooms; (2) dining halls; (3) campus recreation centers; and (4) social drinking spaces, such as parties and bars (Stevens,

2017). Hyper(in)visibility is a term to describe the feeling of getting a lot of attention as a fat person but simultaneously not being acknowledged in social situations. In this piece, Stevens goes on to explore the theory of anticipated stigma, which is the fear that people will think negatively about you due to past experiences with bullying or shaming. People may not say anything outwardly to that person but the fear is still there and is distracting in the classroom. One student from Stevens' study said they did not fit into desks in the classroom and could not focus because they assumed people were judging them for not fitting and looking uncomfortable. The student found it difficult to muster the motivation to go and began skipping classes as a direct result (Stevens, 2017). The existing research is scarce, but it shows that higher education is not a welcoming space for fat students.

Lapses in Literature

Overall, it is difficult to find sociological literature on fatness. Upon the first search, most of the articles are about the “obesity epidemic” and the moral panic toward fat people. Further, there is little to no research on fat people as students. There are articles exploring how fat scholars and fat professors are treated, and a handful about staff, but finding articles about fat students is a rarity. Additionally, the articles about fat students are not diverse, the studies predominantly are written by and focus on white, cis-gendered, and heterosexual people. To fully understand fatness in higher education, studies must include underrepresented communities since weight-based oppression is linked to other forms of oppression. Excluding people of color does not provide adequate information to administrators on how to address the inclusion of fat

students. This project will prioritize hearing from students in underrepresented communities. Moreover, this project will provide recommendations for administrators and staff at higher education institutions.

Chapter 4

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

In this section, I describe how I conducted the data collection, highlighting the ways I center participants' voices. Specifically, I detail the various stages of recruitment, sample demographics, data collection, and analysis. At every opportunity I could I wanted to ensure that the participants felt in control of the interview especially since the conversation required vulnerability.

Theoretical Stances

Postmodern feminist theory is integral to my methodology; my central goals are to conduct non-exploitative and egalitarian research (Ebert,1991). There is no way for a researcher to be completely objective, acknowledging reflexivity allows me to confront my biases and helps manage power dynamics that arise from facilitating research. Consequently, part of my interview guide includes reminders to share a statement about my own relationship with this topic and my identity (see chapter 2). My identities include being fat, Queer, Hispanic, and an undergraduate student. As a fat person myself, I was able to talk about my own experiences with fatness. Another component of postmodern practices is that there is no absolute truth in researching human beings. No matter how many people are interviewed there will never be a point in this research where a conclusive determination can be made. The aim of this project is not to quantify people's experiences but report on them and learn more about this topic.

Institutional Review Board

To conduct this research with human subjects I need approval from the University of Delaware's Institutional Review Board. This project is an extension of a larger research project on inclusion efforts in higher education being conducted by Dr. Chrysanthi Leon and Dr. Corey Shdaimah. With their permission, I used their IRB approval and consent notices to conduct my interviews. One of the parameters I had was that my participants had to be alumni. I explored creating my own IRB proposal to include current students but due to time constraints that was not possible. While the participants had to be alumni, they were asked to speak on their experiences as students attending institutions. Every participant that I scheduled to interview received a copy of the IRB approval and of the consent notice through email and then again before we began our interview over Zoom. See the section on the interview format for more information on confidentiality.

Recruitment

In October 2021 I posted a graphic on my Instagram detailing my thesis and the need for participants and the post was shared over one hundred times. On the graphic, the first slide shared the topic and the link to the Google Form for participants to sign up. The second slide included a picture of me in elementary school and a picture of me now, with the reasons I am conducting this research (See Appendix B). In the graphic, I used my relationship with fatness to draw interest. Further, I used the phrase "people who self-identify as fat," to give participants the freedom to opt-in or out of the project.

I relied mostly on snowball sampling to find more participants (Snowball, 2017). This method of sampling is appropriate because I did not want to assume people's comfort level with identifying as fat. Participants can more appropriately identify people in their inner circle to refer to this project that also self-identify as fat. After each interview, I thanked participants and asked them if they knew of anyone else who may be interested in talking with me. My connection to fatness helps me build rapport quickly and ethically.

Despite my affinity with the word fat I spent a lot of time debating whether I would get anyone to express interest considering the negative associations with the word. Evidently, the only people expressing discomfort with the word were thin people. In an Instagram message, they messaged my friend about the promotional graphic and said the following:

I do not normally do this at all but I saw your post and thought I would reach out. A few others saw it as well and thought maybe I could say something (totally my/our opinion!!) but we were thinking that maybe the word choice in this post would be harsh to some people. The word "fat" may be triggering to some- so like "different body shapes" or even "bigger shaped people" might be less triggering. Also, we were thinking that overweight or -fat- should be more normalized, & this post seems to really make people self conscious or seem to stand out uncomfortably. I really

am privileged to say that I am thin, with a non-existent body shape (lol). However, I thought we were good friends in HS&MS, so I thought I would reach out to you, since I still consider you a friend:) anyway this is just my two cents. I love the implied message though!

This message has great intent. However, as the sender recognizes, they as thin people have the privilege to make statements about the ethics of using the word fat. I include this exchange not to shame the sender but to open a conversation about space. Already fat people are not afforded physical space whether that be a desk or clothing that is comfortable. This is a perfect example of thin people taking space that is meant specifically for fat people to discuss their own lives. Additionally, bypassing me, the originator of the post, and talking to my friend (who is thin) says a lot about how information is validated. I do not want to assume this person's intentions, but the underlying message is that fat people are negligent. They assume that I did not research the word fat before posting about my project.

Interview Format

Initially, the project was planned with the intent to do focus groups of 3 people or more. However, due to scheduling and time zone challenges, I focused on dyad and solo interviews. Eight of the interviewees opted to talk to me individually for privacy reasons and four dyad interviews were conducted for a total of 16 participants. The interviews took place on Zoom and lasted on average 1 hour for dyads and 45 minutes for individual interviews, with a range of 30 minutes to an hour long. To structure the conversation I began by putting the consent form link in the Zoom chat. The IRB-approved consent form was sent prior to the interview via email but this also provided an opportunity for participants to ask questions about the project. After looking at the consent forms, participants chose pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality and I asked them for consent to record the conversation for transcript

recording purposes. Further, I was clear that if at any point they did not want to continue the interview that we would stop and the recording would be permanently erased.

Before asking my longer questions, I began by asking participants three initial baseline questions. One reason for this was to ease into talking about fatness. The three questions are:

What comes to mind when you think of the word “fat”?

How do you define “fat?”

Do you self-identify as fat or as a former fat person?

It became clear that these questions not only helped the conversation begin but surprised me with how diverse the answers were to each question. Consequently, I asked participants what their preferred language was and if “fat” was how they identify. Every participant felt comfortable with using the word fat and some thanked me for using fat. Another way that I gave agency to the participants was by putting the rest of my interview guide in the chat and allowing them to decide which questions we began with.. The interview guide has three foci: general impacts of fatness, concrete examples, and recommendations. Recommendations have two questions the participant can choose from:

If the University asked you to implement an office, program, event, the world is your oyster, what would you want?

OR

What has been helpful support for you?

Due to time constraints, I would offer the option between these two so that the interview did not run over. [The entire interview guide can be found in Appendix A.]

At the conclusion of the recording, I thanked the participants and explained the next steps, which included receiving the fully edited transcript so that they could give me feedback. For example, if there was identifying information or maybe they wanted something they said deleted.

Demographics

After I introduced myself I gave participants time to introduce themselves however they felt comfortable and to use my introduction as an example. Participants most consistently provided information on their gender identities, race, and sexual orientation. Other information was provided but not consistently enough to place into graphs. All of the participants are alumni of higher education institutions. See Figures 2, 3, and 4 below for information on demographics.

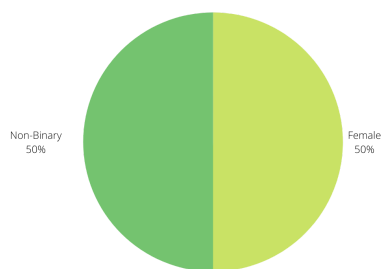


Figure 2. Gender Identities. Francisca Moreno 2022

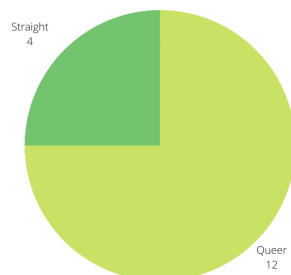


Figure 3. Sexual Orientation, Francisca Moreno, 2022

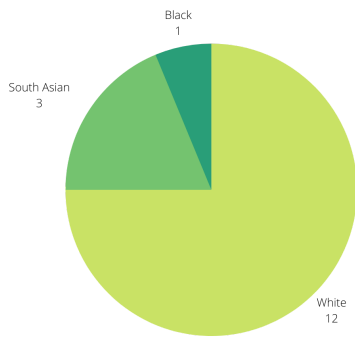


Figure 4. Race. Francisca Moreno, 2022

Analysis

After recording the interview, I took the Zoom transcripts and edited them so that they are easier to read. Zoom has a function that auto-transcribes the recording, which is helpful but requires editing. The editing includes removing time-stamps, correcting typos, and ensuring that the transcript captures the participants true words. To edit the transcripts I put the audio on while scanning the transcript, which is what takes the most time. I send the final transcript to the participants to review for any mistakes or if there is anything they would like removed from the final transcript. After receiving their approval I began using inductive analysis to code their interviews. Initially, in Google docs I began coding them for quotes I found interesting or worth noting. I looked in the other transcripts for any emerging patterns or underlying themes in what participants said. For example, using the raw data from the transcripts I took phrases such as “overcompensating,” and tagged every time a participant described an experience where they overcompensated. Using the same phrases or words as the participants began revealing underlying structures of

experiences (Thomas, 2006). Inductive analysis aligns with my value that there is no one truth or way to generalize a group of people, there is more emphasis on establishing links between people (Thomas, 2006). On one occasion I asked my Thesis Director to help me code a transcript to help motivate me. Between working full-time and having other obligations, it was difficult for me to find enough time to edit transcripts and coding a transcript together re-energized me.

I-Poems

Further, I created I-Poems from the transcripts to help me better understand what the participants were saying. I-Poetry is a qualitative research method that takes the I-statements made by participants to create poetry. These poems help in understanding the participant's sense of self and center their thoughts (Edwards, 2015). During the interviews I took brief notes and wrote down quotes I found compelling. During the transcript editing process I would reflect on those sections and from there I would begin creating the poems. One of the I-Poems is a combination of two different participants' words but both matched a theme of overcompensating in education. When creating I-poems from this project I did not want to edit their words too much, most of my editing was taking out the word "like " so that the poem is not broken up. The I-poems featured in this project are approved by the participants and some were performed by participants at an event. Hearing the participants re-read their words in a stylized way helped facilitate discussions about fatness with the group attending the event.

Chapter 5

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The experiences of fat students cannot be summarized only by discussing their experiences in higher education. Many participants have been fat their entire lives and “it's something that [they] really think about every day now,” says Anne (a straight white woman). Consequently, these findings apply to not only experiences in higher education but also to the overall fat experience; understanding some of the aspects of their childhood and family experiences that fat students are bringing with them on campus should inform how higher education can respond to be more inclusive. Core findings include fat essentialism, the fat ecosystem, overcompensating, and recommendations about physical space, and health sciences. I-Poems begin the sections to introduce findings.

Fat Essentialism

Bestowed upon

I didn't first self-identify as fat,

I was told I was fat but

I'm at my largest right now

I'm also the most comfortable in my fatness now.

I'm not sure if I would have or if I would consider myself to have been actually fat

I don't know a medically

BMI is a whole nother conversation

I have problems with that,

I think fatness a lot of the time,
is something that is bestowed upon you by the people around you

based on how they see you,

I think I was told I was fat before I ever would have noticed it

I definitely wasn't that much
it wouldn't have the associated issues without like everyone else, *telling* me that it's an
issue

One of the first questions I asked in the interview was “how has being fat affected your worldview?” This question puzzled some of the participants as many of them have always been fat, thus, their worldview has always been through the eyes of a fat person. However, fatness was not a label chosen on their own, it was once given to them. Sasha, a Queer, White woman says:

I feel like I've been labeled as fat, even if I didn't identify as fat for, I would say, most of my life, probably, I think, since like first grade.

Participants revealed their lack of agency in being labeled as fat in childhood and that it was not an empowering descriptor for them now. Sasha remembers being bullied severely for her size:

My classroom size was only five kids so if you're in a classroom of five kids and all of them hate you and make fun of you for taking your [breathing]

medicine. They now have these things, called air chambers and that helps spread out the medication, but it would come up my nose so they'd call me a dragon which just makes me feel gigantic.

"Sasha is among several participants whose experiences demonstrated the way labeling theory is a useful tool for understanding the stigma fat people experience. The "premise of Labeling Theory is that, once individuals have been labeled as deviants, they face new problems stemming from their reactions to themselves and others to the stereotypes of someone with the deviant label," (Nickerson, 2021) having the pejorative version of fatness bestowed upon them leads to future loss of opportunities. In the same interview, Sasha reveals that she had to transfer schools because of the bullying she experienced mostly surrounding her fatness.

This rigid path towards a loss of opportunity and ostracization is reminiscent of the theory of essentialism. This philosophical theory is the belief that people and nature have a set of unchanging, and inherent characteristics (Smith, 2014). Fat essentialism is the theory that once a person is given the label of fat they are set on a rigid path that includes loss of opportunities, and it is cumbersome to deviate from that fate. Wanda, a White Woman says:

It's definitely made me feel like, oh I can't do that. You know, like that's my place in the world, it's meant for somebody else.

Wanda grew up wanting to be a dancer and spent most of her childhood in the studio. Her lifelong dream was to dance professionally but because of the stigma she experienced in her childhood she decided to pursue a different profession:

I was never going to be Rockette because the Rockettes are, they need to be six feet tall. You know I see videos of like the dancers on Instagram and every single time that I just see girls and pretty dresses on stage doing the pretty big kicks it always does make me really sad because I could have gone to school and studied dance like that and honestly followed my dreams, but I convinced myself that it's too hard, and they wouldn't respect me. And the sad reality of it, too, is that there is a stigma in that kind of space, where they will discriminate against you: if you are bigger they won't cast you into things.

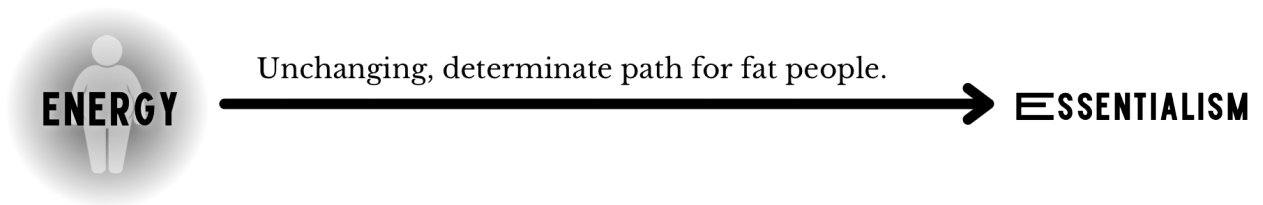
From a young age, adults and other children signal to Wanda that the stage was not a reality for her. Reflecting a similar experience, although on campus and not in childhood, another participant, Leah remembered feeling dread during sorority recruitment: I knew before I walked into this, you know at least 50% of the sorority rooms, that I was already out before I even got... before I even spoke to them or uttered a word. I mean I just noticed the way it works.

Anticipated stigma is “the belief that prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping will be directed at the self from others in the future,” (Earnshaw, Quinn, Park, 2011).

While the participants felt anticipated stigma there are also direct ways that they experience stigma. In contrast, fat essentialism validates how difficult it is to stray from a predetermined path (see Figure 5). After taking a sexuality and gender studies course and learning about essentialism, the theory began fitting the fat experience more every time I did an interview. I flagged fat essentialism when first when participant Leah said “I knew before I walked into this, you know at least 50% of the

sorority rooms, that I was already out before I even got before I even spoke to them are uttered a word I mean just noticed the way it works,” about sorority recruitment. Participants spoke about their experiences as rules that cannot change. However, their identity especially pertaining to gender and their labeling of fatness is fluid and adapts to their experiences in higher education.

Figure 5. Fat Essentialism. Moreno, 2022



The Fat Ecosystem

Imagine a World

You're going in

You're going to the school bus and suddenly there are a lot of people

If you can't like

You can't really squeeze yourself

Fit like five people on it or something.

People are going to look at you,

You're fat because you're taking up more space

Oh God really have to make myself so uncomfortable just so I can accommodate other
people

I think it's a central theme in my life,
Everything revolves around a lot of my experiences
I don't know what it would have been if I had not
I do not know
I can't imagine a world where I'm not fat
This has been *the* experience.

Drawing on themes evident in this poems, in this section, I explain how the people's experiences with fatness are all encompassing and as Bonnie says "a central theme" in their life. Fat students are adapt to their surroundings to survive even if that means experiencing discomfort.

The fat spectrum (see Figure 1) gives helpful verbiage to talk about fatness. However, as the author points out, the spectrum primarily uses women's clothing as means of classification, which is not inclusive to gender non-conforming people or anyone that does not identify as a woman (Linda, 2021). Additionally, the spectrum does not acknowledge race, ethnicity, or ability status. I argue that integrating intersectionality when discussing fatness is imperative to conceptualizing the full picture. Akin to other social justice theories, it is difficult to describe someone's

experiences without placing constraints on them as well. Mike, a South Asian woman pursuing her master's degree says:

I am a woman of color and I do identify as fat or formerly fat. Every time I see Tik Tok of the Scandinavian girls who are blonde and super thin, I know I'll never be that. I can physically do nothing to change, you know my ethnicity, my skin color, my body type is just the way my body type is. I'm never going to look like that. And it's kind of just allowed me to just be more open and accepting to you know people are going to look different from wherever and like I don't always have to conform to what society wants me to be because society is different every like, anywhere you go, geographically, the way that Americans perceive the ideal body type is not like a European look or what somebody, where I'm from, would view.

As Mike highlights, geographic region is another factor affecting the treatment of fat people. Recognizing the lack of intersectionality in the fat spectrum extends the discussion to people who do not feel a part of the fat community. Fatness is not experienced in a vacuum, every identity someone has must be considered when discussing their experiences as a fat person. Asher, a White, and Queer person says:

“I had a lot of my own queer identity being interwoven with being fat when I was starting to be like interested in other human beings both romantically and

sexually and it just really kind of fed into how I navigated like the first part of my adult life.”

Twitter user @LOUIEFATTONS poses the question “what’s your most cancellable plus size take?” and the responses were indicative of this issue within the fat community.



[studwrangler]. (2022, April, 11th). I also wanna say a LOT of platformed plussize girls are colorist/texturist/featurist and it shows in how they clique up and who they uplift.[Photograph]. Twitter.
<https://twitter.com/studwrangler/status/1513623929524477953>

Instead of a spectrum of fatness, these identities are moving and constantly interacting and transforming amongst each other like an ecosystem. The Gender Galaxy is similar in that there are infinite identities and they are not all linearly related (Vade, 2005).

The Fat Ecosystem takes this idea a step further, the experience of fatness cannot be plotted on a spectrum nor on a single dimensional plane. This was another finding that was ideated from the participants experiences. There was not a way to fully describe

how dynamic fat students experiences are. Using People's identities are fluid and if there was a way to represent this visually it would be animated, for now, see Figure 6 for an artistic interpretation, which is meant to convey that fat people's identity grow and evolve with them. The ring is meant to depict the person as a planet and that was done to give power back to fat people, that instead of following the rigid path set for them, they are the rulers of their own lives. This is not to say the spectrum isn't helpful, people should be able to use whatever words best describe themselves. Words such as "small fat" and "infinifat" are helpful shorthand to discuss fatness, but the fat ecosystem and other theories give more space for people to feel included in discussions on fat acceptance.

Figure 6. Fatness Ecosystem. Moreno, 2022



Survival Instincts

Here for your _____

I am more sensitive to other people

I feel like I've grown up knowing

what I was

that it hurts my feelings when other people comment on my body and

I'm not

that's not something I'm ever going to do

It's just not something I've ever felt the need to do

I have a really hard time understanding when other people

even adults

I end up in like the wrong spaces

I see people comment, adults will comment on things that confuse me so much

How do you not understand that concept?

I don't necessarily feel like it's ever like enough for me to show up just like myself if,

I'm not like providing something for someone

I don't trust that, people want...

I'm not providing either like some type of like comic relief

I'm not in a relationship

you know,

carrying other persons like emotions for them,

I think that
I don't trust that
there are people that genuinely want to be around me

Fat students are led to believe that showing up as themselves is not enough. This poem conveys the dread that a fat student feels in social settings. In this example the student is trying to appease her peers in order to gain basic respect. Participants explain feeling the need to closely regulate their reactions and behavior around thin people in order to be listened to or feel they have value. In this case, overcompensation can be understood as trying to overachieve to make up for a perceived failure. Personal blame is already associated with fat people and feelings of inadequacy strain fat people's relationships. This strain extends beyond personal relationships and into the classroom. Molly, a White, non-binary person identifying as Queer says:

[I am not able] to just show up. I think that I kind of tried to prove that I'm smart to, like, teachers, a lot and I feel like I value my academic performance very highly and I really enjoy getting validation from teachers because I'm like, "Okay, you see that [I am smart]. Even if other people like other students in the class don't see me for anything, or they don't see that I'm smart at least [teachers] know."

Going to class is already stressful with exams and assignments, this anxiety to excel in order to counter others' perceptions further demoralizes fat students. On a personal

level, Asher feels the need to overcompensate in a different way to avoid being judged for their fatness:

No it's like a huge like alteration of your personality, like I become a very sarcastic... I've always been a very sarcastic person, but like especially in college, I was an asshole and it was very much like a protective mechanism for people judging me and I'm like, "if you're going to judge me for something I'd rather you judge me for being a jerk than me being fat."

When people are experiencing a crisis, their natural instincts of fight, flight, and freeze are activated to protect them from harm. Recently, scholars have called for using appeasement to explain why survivors of sexual violence may treat their abuser with kindness to decrease victim-blaming (Frothingham, 2021). For Asher, their instinct was to fight, but Rani, a South-Asian, Queer, Mother, has learned to appease others to survive:

The whole concept of [fat people] better have a personality, like if you don't have looks, I took that to heart at a very young age. I was like damn, then I'm going to be like, have the best personality ever. Basically like being funny or being like smart, or trying to like, have like any sort of like, achievement outside of, of course, like my body which could never be it or like my attraction could never be it, and so I need to find something else to like, lure a man.

Rani, Asher, and Molly, all had to find ways to cope with the messaging that as fat people there has to be something extraordinary about them to establish their value.

Research on these innate instincts reveals how detrimental it is to constantly have this reflex activated. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are “potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years).” Although the oppression of fat people is not specifically listed, the experiences of fat students include both verbal and physical abuse and thus I argue should be understood within the ACEs framework. According to the CDC ACEs “ACEs can also negatively impact education, job opportunities, and earning potential,” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). This aligns with research on job outcomes for fat people which finds that “being thin is often equated with higher levels of personal responsibility that translates into being seen as more competent and having more personal control while being fat is associated with little personal responsibility and control,” (Hunt and Rhodes 2018). Students cannot be successful in the classroom when they are on constant alert; these survival mechanisms should only be in use when they are in danger not while they are attempting to learn.

Chapter 6

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

“Shouting ‘self-care’ at people who actually need community care is how we fail people.” (Nakita Valerio, writer, and community organizer)

Other articles offer recommendations for improving fat people’s experiences that focus on fat people and what they can do individually to help themselves.

Grounded in intersectional feminism, I argue that the burden of change should not be placed solely on fat people, especially as personal blame is already used as a tool of oppression against fat people. Instead, this project uses the data and voices of students to generate recommendations for systemic change.

This section is divided into 6 subtopics; physical space, invisibility, making movement accessible, health sciences, creative solutions, and the health center. This section highlights quotes from participants themselves explaining their recommendations.

Physical Space

Focusing in a classroom is difficult enough. Imagine you do not fit in your desk and are not only visibly uncomfortable but leave class with bruises and pain from attempting to fit in that desk for an hour-long class. Fat students report failing classes and not paying attention in class because the space around them is not built to support their bodies.

- I would just like to be able to sit in a classroom and feel comfortable.

- Chairs hold little weight, I have a friend who is studying at the University of Washington, right now, and she is fighting with their student accessibility services to get the college to pay for a chair. The chairs they are willing to send her to have a max of 250 which is not helpful.
- Be mindful of seating you know that's probably one of the biggest problems, also like just more space in general."
- There is that page on Instagram where people submitted anonymous things about the University. Someone was talking about how they are a fat person and could not fit in the desk and like it was really embarrassing to ask for like a different desk.

Invisibility

There is an absence of literature and discourse surrounding the fat experience. If no one is talking about fat people then nothing can change. Whether it be discomfort or lack of space, people find talking about fatness divisive. Participants in my study made it clear that we need to talk about fatness in a variety of places, and engage in a variety of efforts to empower people to do this through the current offices on campus and proposed spaces.

- [We need] representation in academics, classes, units on fatness and not obesity.

- There are no resources available at all, there isn't a conversation in DEI about fat people and their needs.
- I want to create something that [has] funding, that has that support, and you know, [that] will help figure, like help instructors or professors, or you know, whatever, figure out how to help their students that are in larger bodies feel less alienated.
- Support from services like Disability Support Services, being fat is not a disability but that is the best option we currently have.

Make Movement Accessible

One of the most recommended activities for fat people is exercise. Many participants indicated that fitness programs were not made accessible to them, which makes this unwarranted advice even more frustrating.

- I remember my first year going to the gym and not even fitting in some of the machines.
- I would implement some sort of like workout program as a group that was run by a fat person. Give spaces for fat people to move their bodies.
- More modified and accessible ways to move your body

Health Sciences

Fat people belong in the field of health sciences, not as an example but integrated as respected practitioners. Faculty in health science departments have been known to alienate fat students. Professors must be willing to learn about the fat experience.

- I had to take a nutrition class and I was pretty fresh out of treatment [for an eating disorder] at that point I emailed my teacher and I said hey these assignments that we're being asked to do, of counting calories, yeah, and reflecting on the nutritional value of the things that we ate over five days, it's hard. And she was like, "that's the assignment, like you can do it on yourself, you can do it for someone else, but you have to do it." And I explained to her that I had just gotten out of treatment and there was there, I mean she was like "I have a lot of students that have struggled with disordered eating, and you know all of them ultimately have to do with us, or you can drop the class."

This indicates that workshops or other opportunities are crucial to help instructors recognize potential harms related to their assignments and to create inclusive alternatives. A representative from the Health Sciences department at the University of Delaware asked me for recommendations for their first-year student curriculum and are going to revise their assignments on calorie intake. Additionally, they asked for books and materials to integrate into the curriculum. These recommendations are informing the next generation of health sciences professionals and facilitating a shift

from the obesity frame to the empowerment frame (Kwan, 2009) as discussed in the literature review.

Creative Solutions

It is exhausting to think of ways to amend these issues, yet, the participants in this study were incredibly creative with their recommendations on how to better their experiences.

- [I think we should have] the Vagina Monologues, except with fat people and, just like all the different and, specifically, making sure to like include the ways that fat intersects with so many other different identities that we, like, we've been talking about today. Because you know the Vagina Monologues largely leaves out like nonbinary folks...When I think about the things that like really helped me become empowered as a woman, like things like “Take Back the Night.” When I'm performing in the vagina monologues, it's like this gender studies milestones I think most campuses have at this point, I like really wish that we have this for fat folks.
- [I wish we had] fat student's RSOs run workshops and they'll bring in alumni who are fat and talk about like, what it's like to be fat in the workplace and they'll talk about like, how to reach out to disability and get you what you need so it's like part social part advocacy.

- I would be interested in like, potentially sharing experiences or like talking with other people, this has been really awesome that I've never had an opportunity like that before so something like that, and then, just like fixes to the like accessibility problems that I've spoken to. Maybe as an RSO.

The Health Center

Fat people frequently have traumatizing experiences with medical professionals. This has led to death from ignoring symptoms people have. The Health Centers at institutions were cited the most out of other offices for not believing fat people.

- I went to the doctor, for the first time, four years ago because, I had a really, really negative experience again with a medical provider, she told me that the only way that she could actually pay attention to my needs are if I lost like 100 pounds, so I just stopped going to the doctor at all and got no medical attention for like four years. And so, then when I was pregnant, I obviously couldn't do that and I had a doctor and OBGYN tell me, just like casually making conversation as he was hooking me up to like the different monitors that they have to as he's trying to find my or the baby's heartbeat. And, he said, "if you're planning to get pregnant, again, I would really suggest, for your sake

and for the baby that you lose some weight." And I was like whoa like okay like that was just like kind of unnecessary thing to say.

- It was the first time I went so they had to do their weird ass intake shit when they ask you about your alcohol consumption and then also they say "Oh how much do you think you weigh?" Then I had to make an estimate. And they were like "Well yeah, you're actually overweight so here's a pamphlet for the nutritionist" and then also, I guess, I didn't give them an acceptable answer for how much I would drink on a night out so they basically said I need help. I was okay well you just called me a fat alcoholic and I came for strep.
- People in the Health Center should receive some type of education about, I don't know, Health at Every Size, or like something. It doesn't have to be like that but, if they can be more informed on fat acceptance and different body types. I feel like people that have been working there for a long time, and like I feel like these discussions are becoming more mainstream, more recently, and they could just be more sensitive about like, what their protocols are.
- Hire a Health at Every Size or Intuitive Eating dietitian.

These recommendations were graciously provided by the participants of this study. However, it should not be the onus of fat people to constantly advocate for themselves. This project aims to equip faculty and staff with recommendations

directly from participants so that they can improve the fat experience. I invited administrators and office directors from the University of Delaware to an event I hosted on April 5th, 2022 where I provided these recommendations. Unfortunately, few responded and the Health Sciences department was the only group that sent representatives to listen. Recommendations are as helpful as people let them be. At the event I hosted participants spoke about the lack of discussions and visibility of the fat experience on the University of Delaware campus. Use these recommendations to begin discussions in your own circles about the inclusion of fat students and continue listening and expanding upon this list.

Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

Fat students are survivors. They survive through adversity in spaces that should be welcoming. Fat students who experience insecurities, disordered eating, or mental health struggles are not weak, they are coping with discrimination perpetrated by an institution that is supposed to serve their best interests. These survival strategies need to be fully researched and recognized as a cause of toxic stress if applicable. Treatment of fat people in the medical system is poor. Longitudinal studies on the effect of trauma on fat people must be conducted; for years fat people's deaths have been attributed to their weight, it seems that the abuse sustained towards fat people may be a confounding variable that people refuse to acknowledge. At the beginning of this project, I anticipated fat students having more negative experiences with faculty members. There were one or two accounts within my sample but I was surprised to find that most recommendations were for staff and offices instead. Additionally, when I hosted an event to share recommendations made by fat students the only representatives that came were Health Sciences department members, no one from Student Life at UD made an appearance. I cannot draw conclusions about this disparity but further research should be done on staff and faculty perspectives.

At the beginning of my project I hoped to have more diversity in my sample and although I did not have great diversity in race and ethnicity, students of various gender identities and sexualities were eager to participate. Another area that warrants more study is the relationship between fatness and queerness. My project is focused on

higher education and while I was able to learn more about the fat experience more generally from my questions, I was not able to develop findings on this relationship. Out of the 16 participants, 12 of them self-identified as Queer. This could be because of my identity as a Queer person but many of them spoke about their fatness and queerness in close relativity. James, a White and Queer person says that during the pandemic they “started to unpack a lot of the things that [they] had shoved in the back of my mind, since a very young age, about gender. But in terms of like accepting who [they are] and like being comfortable in [their] own body.” COVID was a time of introspection for many of the participants and gave them the opportunity to explore claiming fatness. This may be a result of my own network of people but many participants resonated with queer identities.

In contrast, a drawback of this project is that there is little diversity of racial and ethnic backgrounds. The University of Delaware is a predominantly white institution and though most of the participants were from different states and regions 11 of the participants identify as white. It is necessary to facilitate more research on fat people that includes more voices from people of color. My hope for this study was that more people of color would have an interview but using a snowball sample may have hindered that.

This project is one of few that discusses fatness through the lens of empowerment. It is apparent that more research needs to be done alongside fat people. Whether or not you identify as a fat person you or someone you know has struggled with their body size in one way or another. Coming to college should be a time of

learning and growth and fat students are not getting an equitable experience instead “college is a breeding ground of eating disorders for so many different reasons...I was feeling with all these issues, I was insecure, that hypervisibility, that I felt that 100% of the time,” says Leah. Let’s begin thinking of ways institutions can become grounds for inclusion and acceptance that include the voices of fat students.

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Appendix A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Initial Questions

- What comes to mind when you think of the word “fat”?
- How do you define “fat?”
- Do you self-identify as fat or as a former fat person?
- If they identify as either:
- Before I start getting into questioning, mention that I use the word fat, is this the right language I should be using? If there are people who are uncomfortable with the word “fat”, shift language.

General/Introduction

- How big of an impact has being fat had on your life?
- How has being fat shaped your worldview?

Concrete Examples

- If you are comfortable, describe a time when you felt that being fat affects the way people treat you.
- How has your body size impacted your experience as a student?
- Has staff ever treated you differently because of your body size? Faculty?
- How has your body size impacted your education?
- How has the pandemic affected your experience as a fat student?
- How has your understanding of inclusion changed since going to college?

Reflection and Recommendations

- What has been helpful support for you?
- What does support mean to you?
- If the University asked you to implement an office, program, event, the world is your oyster, what would you want?
- What else would you like to share at this moment?

Appendix B

PROMOTIONAL FLYER

