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Realities of First-Generation, Low-Income Scholars at Predominantly White Institutions:

The Emory Experience

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Abstract

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In recent years, the first-generation, low-income (FLI) community has grown at top universities. In response to this increase, institutions must adopt new strategies to better facilitate the transition to higher academia that their parents did not have access to. Universities cannot claim equal access to education until the inequities that face the FLI student population are addressed. This thesis explores the obstacles that are associated with the FLI experience at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), as it relates to classism and racism, particularly at Emory University. This study identifies how financial disparities manifest throughout the community at Emory, beyond the academic sphere. By conducting ethnographic research at a PWI with a significant percentage of FLI students, this research can shed light on how racism and classism inform one another to further perpetuate these inequalities within this marginalized student population.

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Additionally, I would like to thank all of the participants because in the little time that they have in between work, school, and life in general, they willingly sat with me for an hour and a half - and even four hours - so that I could truly grasp the first-generation, low-income experience at Emory. This meant the world to me and speaks volumes to the issues at hand here.

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This last one is a bit of a tough one: a general thank you to Emory. Thank you for admitting me into this institution four years ago and giving me the opportunity to experience the highs and lows of higher academia. In writing this thesis, I may give the impression that I hate Emory, but I promise I do not. I am so appreciative of all of the life lessons Emory and its community have given me, and this thesis is out of hope that Emory will be a kinder place for the next generation of FLI students to come.

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Introduction

“Congratulations!

It is with our great pleasure to inform you that you have been selected for admission to Emory University with a QuestBridge National College Match Scholarship. We applaud you for your dedication to achieving academic and personal excellence, and we are delighted to welcome you into the QuestBridge Scholars Network. This year, 1,674 Finalists were selected as Match Scholarship Recipients at our college partners, with a total of 61 students matched to Emory.”

With trembling hands and flushed faces, thousands of high school seniors open their QuestBridge portals to read their application statuses. For these 61 students, it seemed like their luck had turned for the better as they read, *“with a QuestBridge National College Match Scholarship,”* just in time for Christmas. It seemed like a miracle - a gift from God himself - since private institutions like these were perceived to be intangible for first-generation, low-income (FLI) scholars. Historically, college admissions prove to yield good results for those of higher socioeconomic statuses, even if it was not earned.

In March of 2019, one of the largest college scandals was unearthed: a ring of wealthy individuals had paid for their children’s spots in top universities, forging their resumes to elevate their merit because they had the means to do so. The investigation, Operation Varsity Blues, indicted over 30 parents, who paved the path for their children through bribes. On the other hand, FLI students across the nation have had to navigate the pricey college application process alone with little to no money. Bethel, a National College Match from the Class of 2023, never thought that higher education would be possible, much less at Emory University. During Bethel’s senior year of high school, she had applied for the QuestBridge National College Match. Finalists for

this program could apply for a full-ride scholarship to any of the more than forty partner schools for free, setting them apart from the regular applicant pool by letting admissions officers know these students were low-income but high-achieving scholars. Hence, when Bethel learned of the scandal, she was heartbroken that people could buy a spot that she had worked against all odds to achieve.

This privilege that higher socioeconomic classes enjoy in higher education extends beyond just admissions, serving as a reality check to a broken system, one that clearly values money over scholarly merit, and must be addressed. Additionally, with the growing community of first-generation, low-income (FLI) scholars at universities throughout the nation, their survival is crucial in creating the image of equality and diversity that college campuses advertise.

Conducting research on FLI communities at predominantly white institutions, like Emory, is important because universities ostensibly allow for the growth of such young adults into well-knowledgeable citizens through the resources they provide. However, current research fails to encompass the college experience beyond the academic scope: many reference academic performance without taking into consideration other factors and the narratives of these students, a completely non-holistic approach which necessitates my own anthropological approach to this important topic (Stebbleton and Soria 2012). Therefore, I will be exploring and analyzing FLI students' perspectives on what it is like to be an undergraduate student at Emory University, where statistically a majority of its student body classify as white and upper-middle class.

Ultimately, I hope to shed light on the struggles of FLI students and how it affects their college experiences including, but far beyond the classroom. This study will incorporate in-depth, semi-structured interviews with FLI scholars, participant observation in FLI meetings and events, and will triangulate pertinent social media posts and commentary written by these communities to

uncover how financial disparities within the FLI community manifest in domains beyond academics while attending an elite, private university like Emory University.

1.1 Researcher's Positionality

Growing up, I never experienced the white-picket fence, neatly-trimmed lawn that is often imagined in the mainstream American social construction of the *home*. In fact, I think the instability I experienced mostly stemmed from my home life, so I put my heart and soul into school because I thought that it would magically cure all of the hardships that I was going through at the time.

My senior year of high school was filled with unknowns and induced so much stress. I did not know what lay ahead for me, and I was riding on the QuestBridge National College Match Program to get me to where I wanted to be. While other students had their *Friday Night Lights*, I sat in the backseat of my makeshift home, writing my life into 650 words, hoping and praying that it would be enough.

Then, April rolled around. Decisions were released, and when I received my acceptances, I broke down crying, relieved because I saw it as a huge turning point for me. I could have my chance at the American Dream, something that my family never had the time for as they tried to support me in achieving mine. In that moment, the mentality that *working hard would be enough* was ingrained into me. While I knew my time at Emory would be by no means easy, I thought it would be less difficult than the past eighteen years of my life. However, as I reflected on my first two years at Emory, I could not help but remember the stress that filled the air. I mean these were Emory students; we would not be here if we wanted anything, especially our grades, to be less than perfect. Thus, many of us traded our physical and mental health for those beloved

grades that we were so used to in high school. But, even with that sacrifice, I still could not attain the grades that my peers seemed to so easily manage alongside their countless internships and experiences.

As a first-generation, low-income student, I struggled with my identity at Emory. I felt like an imposter - underqualified and undeserving to be at such a highly regarded institution. I went through a really rough patch my second year, and I had never felt so alone than in that moment. Yes, I was surrounded by peers, and there seemed to be resources in every nook and cranny of this campus. However, it was hard to reach out for help, which sounds like an excuse, but I truly did not know where to begin. Even more foolish was the fact that I further isolated myself because I thought something was wrong with *me*.

Themes of resilience and independence often seep into the mindset of first-generation, low-income students. Navigating the college application process – and so much more – alone is a common experience that ties us together, and with that, comes a notion that we must continue to do things on our own even if that means suffering in solitude. While resilience must be applauded, it can transcend to a toxic level and impede these already vulnerable FLI students from seeking the help they need and deserve. This revelation took me almost all of my college career to realize, and I am still coming to terms with what this means for me, which is what inspired me to conduct this research and write its findings into this narrative-based ethnography. Higher academia has been painted in such a positive light for communities like these for so long. And while I wish this research can spark thought-provoking conversations and evoke the necessary change, what I truly hope for this thesis is for an accurate account of the FLI experience to be written into existence - one more than just statistics and beyond the traditional academic research that we are used to.

Chapter 2: Scholarly Literature & Methodologies

2.1 *A Review of the Literature on First-Generation, Low-Income Students*

The influence of socioeconomic status on higher education enrollment and persistence has remained a popular topic of study well before the twentieth century. Various studies dating back to the 1960s suggest that social class and college graduation are significantly related (Eckland 1964), and with the significant increase of FLI students on college campuses, research regarding these students is ever more pressing. In understanding how financial disparities affect the experiences of first-generation, low-income students, it is imperative to contextualize these narratives in response to current literature on these students. Identity and belonging, the value of higher education, and student retention and persistence were significant themes that I found in literature review on this topic.

2.1.1 *Identity and Belonging*

Although the definition of the first-generation, low-income identity should come across as straightforward, much confusion lies in who exactly should be included in this identity (Toutkoushian, Stollberg, & Slaton 2018). In much of the research completed on FLI students, there are conflicting definitions. First and foremost, the inclusion or exclusion of students whose parents have completed an associate's degree, have completed a degree outside of the United States, or have attended some of a four-year degree program is where some of the debates over the definition of a first-generation college student (FGCS) centers around. In response to this, various studies have sought to help define FGCS. For instance, "binary and multinomial logistic regression analysis was used to examine how first-generation college status, as well as other overlapping characteristics, were associated with whether a student took a college entrance exam, applied to college, and enrolled in college" (Toutkoushian, Stollberg, & Slaton 2018).

While “students with one college-educated parent were less likely than students with no college-educated parent to enroll in a four-year institution”, the results demonstrated large deficits between FGCS and non-FGCS, leading to conclusions where mostly “it does not appear to matter how a college-going parent is defined when simply determining whether FGCS and non-FGCS have similar predispositions and likelihoods of going to college”. More importantly, the first-generation condition is derived and shaped by other characteristics, including but not limited to socioeconomic status, gender, and race (Nguyen & Nguyen 2018). For the purpose of this ethnographic study, I define first-generation as any student whose parent(s) have not completed a four-year degree program in the United States.

Secondly, the other complication in defining first-generation, low-income is a result of the ambiguous nature of social classes. Class has been used loosely by Americans in relation to their surroundings. In mainstream American culture, social groups often place themselves on a continuum of being worse or better off than others. Because of this, it is hard to pinpoint the exact definition of low-income. Because of the vague definition of FLI, students remain hesitant to seek help in order to avoid using resources that they believe are not designated for them.

Even though there is no universal specification for the FLI identity, students who identify as such share a commonality. While they may have a social support network of parents, friends, and relatives (social capital), these networks lack individuals that have prior knowledge regarding higher academia, and therefore, students do not possess the same knowledge of academic upbringings (cultural capital) that their continuing-generation peers do (Berg, 2010; Walpole, 2011). This lack of cultural capital can make the transition to higher academia much more difficult for FLI students as these students try to find their sense of belonging on campus.

2.1.2 Student Retention and Persistence

Increasing accessibility to first-generation, low-income students has resulted in an increase in enrollment among these populations. Now, much of the research regarding these students relate to retention and engagement in order to ensure that institutions - and society - are keeping and supporting the students they admit.

When the issue of student retention first appeared on the higher educational radar screen, now some 40 years ago, student attrition was typically viewed through the lens of psychology. Student retention or the lack thereof was seen as the reflection of individual attributes, skills, and motivation... Students failed, not institutions. This is what we now refer to as blaming the victim. This view of retention began to change in the 1970s. As part of a broader change in how we understood the relationship between individuals and society, our view of student retention shifted to take account of the role of the environment, in particular the institution, in student decisions to stay or leave. (Tinto 2006)

Student retention and persistence go hand in hand, and more recent studies reflect this shift.

Student retention is “concerned with trying to ensure that students, once enrolled, remain and successfully complete their studies”; on the other hand, engagement, also known as persistence, refers to when “the student is involved in the higher education as deeply as possibly” (Tight 2020). Student retention measures the number of students who re-enroll from one year to the next, an institutional metric. However, persistence, an individual metric, seeks to evaluate the determination and activities that keep students committed to their studies. In other words, larger engagement results in an increase in retention.

Retention and engagement are important when discussing first-generation, low-income scholars, especially since graduation rates are significantly lower when comparing FLI students with continuing-generation students. Additionally, research has demonstrated that FLI students are still at risk of failure in postsecondary education even after taking their backgrounds into consideration (Berkner & Chavez 1997; Chen 2005; Choy 2000, 2001; Horn & Nunez 2000; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin 1998; Warburton et al 2001). These results indicate that high failure

rates and low retention rates are just as likely due to the experiences FLI students have during their collegiate career (Pascarella & Terenzini 1991; Tinto 1993).

2.1.3 The Value of Higher Education

Previous literature suggests that first-generation students may suffer from a sense of guilt from achieving a higher level of success and opportunities to pursue their interests in comparison to their families and communities. Additionally, it is extremely difficult to balance “the demands of being a student with being an active member of their family” (Moreno 2016). Students have also reported having to choose between their familial and collegiate cultures—which can be vastly different (Rendon 1993; Rodriguez 1974). Students who are among the first generation in their families to attend college may feel negatively perceived by their family members for participating in collegiate activities (O’Keefe 2013).

Some FGLI students have stated that the crushing pressure of the entire family’s future well-being adds to the stress of performing outstandingly in classes (Orbe 2004). As these students are often the only ones in positions of escaping poverty in their families, the responsibility of delivering academic success takes priority over maintaining good physical and mental health, putting them at higher risk of dropping out (Orbe 2004).

2.2 Methodology

My research methods relied primarily on interviews that were conducted with FLI students attending Emory University, as well as with three Emory graduate students and alumni who identified as first-generation, low-income. These interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, averaging around 90 to 120 minutes in length, which allowed me to “direct the conversation as discreetly as possible so as to ensure that interviewees conveyed as much

relevant information as possible” (Morris 2015, 3). Research participants were able to tell their stories in their own words, which allowed me to “obtain an understanding of the social reality under consideration” from their perspective in regard to the topics of one’s life history, finances, academics, COVID-19, and others (Morris 2015, 5).

In total, 30 interviews were conducted, 27 of them being current undergraduate, FLI students. These interviews were transcribed into written text for analyses with pseudonyms assigned to ensure participants could properly speak on their experiences without any ramifications. These participants were recruited through various first-generation, low-income student groups via purposive sampling. Snowball sampling was also used to recruit new participants from past interviews. All necessary approvals were applied for and granted by the Emory University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Year
Hazel	24	Emory College of Arts & Sciences ‘20, Emory School of Medicine ‘22
Jane	23	Emory College of Arts & Sciences ‘21
Olivia	21	Emory College of Arts & Sciences ‘22
Tricia	22	Emory College of Arts & Sciences ‘22
Francine	22	Emory College of Arts & Sciences ‘22
Tina	21	Emory College of Arts & Sciences ‘22
AJ	22	Emory College of Arts & Sciences ‘22
Jali	22	Emory College of Arts & Sciences ‘22
Courtney	22	Emory College of Arts & Sciences ‘22
<u>X</u> _____	21	Emory College of Arts & Sciences ‘22
Phoenix	21	Emory College of Arts & Sciences ‘23
Bethel	20	Emory College of Arts & Sciences ‘23

Vanessa	21	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '23
George	20	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '23
Bertha	21	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '23
Lola	20	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '23
Jack	20	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '23
Spencer	21	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '23
Isabella	20	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '23
Natalie	21	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '23
Lisa	19	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '24
Rue	20	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '24
Hope	20	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '24
Ashley	20	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '24
Emma	20	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '24
Marilyn	18	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '25
Carla	19	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '25
Ansley	18	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '25
Elizabeth	19	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '25
Harry	19	Emory College of Arts & Sciences '25

Table 1. Interview Participants

Seeing that my goal was to better understand first-generation, low-income students, I chose to triangulate my qualitative analysis by analyzing relevant social media posts with permission shared by FLI students, in order to acquire a more holistic account of their point of view. The informality of these platforms allows students to comfortably voice their opinions and find support within their community, which gives these sources unique value. Lastly, I took extensive notes at various FLI events and meetings, using the methodology of participant

observation. When analyzing these various forms of data, I looked for common themes in the participants' diverse but shared experiences. I chose to include relevant issues, many of which are centered on specific events, in addition to common threads found in other scholarly literature to bring to light issues that FLI students have regarding Emory University and higher academia in general.

More importantly, this thesis contains vernacular that is uncommon in what I would consider a traditional academic paper. In considering my experiences with academia, I wanted this paper to be accessible and relatable to the populations that we often ignore when it comes to research. Ultimately, this - the end product in whatever shape it may take - is for them. It felt necessary for me to then have these narratives be reflective of how FLI students express themselves, even if that meant sprinkling in some expletives and eccentric phrases here and there. For far too long, higher academia papers - at length - have been made for people of means to consume, and for once, I wanted this to be made in mind for the people who have and will continue to survive against all odds.

Chapter 3: A Far Misrepresentation of Full-Ride Scholarships The Romanticization of Need-Based Aid for FLI Students Creates False Hope

First-generation, low-income (FLI) college students enroll in higher education institutions at a lower rate, as they are faced with the daunting challenge of navigating the American university system alone. These students struggle with the decision of whether or not to enter the workforce for fast cash or to enroll in post-secondary programs for the social mobility that they desire (Engle and Tinto 2008). Many FLI students simply cannot afford higher education, which has deterred many away from highly esteemed and expensive private universities that are labeled as the cream of the crop. However, national scholarships like QuestBridge have put a plethora of first-generation, low-income students through the doors of prestigious, top-tier institutions such as Vanderbilt University, Yale University, Emory University, and the likes. With scholarships like QuestBridge and financial aid provided by universities to finally pursue a degree that their parents could not, these students should be set up for success, but that might not be the case (Warburton et al. 2001). Those very *scholarships* reinforced inequitable access to resources and opportunities that the university tried to balance out but instead exacerbated with systems like federal work study and health insurance.

“I thought I wouldn’t have to juggle school and a job, that I could focus on my classes [when I matched to Emory].”

Jack, a QuestBridge Scholar, recalls getting his acceptance to Emory through the regular decision round of QuestBridge. By being admitted, Emory promised to meet 100% of his financial needs. In the same way, Bethel also shared similar sentiments when she received her Match scholarship: a supposed full-ride that would cover her tuition, room, and board among other things. However, when their scholarship packages appeared through Emory’s online

student portal system, they were not aware that scholarship packages included a work-study component: a fact that is often glossed over.

These *scholarships* include federal work-study (FWS) for amounts up to \$2,500 in a given semester, incorporated into financial aid packages before tuition is due. However, this money is not given to students at the beginning of the semester; instead, it is earned by the hour. While this ensures that students perform their jobs, it causes an overwhelming amount of stress as students scramble to come up with the \$2,500 prior to tuition deadlines. The University is fully aware that this particular group of students does not have these kinds of funds readily available, which is why they were awarded scholarships in the first place.

When Jack arrived on campus, he could not enjoy the festivities of his first-year orientation. Instead, he was glued to his computer, hunting for any on-campus job available because certain deadlines for securing employment must be met at the risk of losing federal work-study for the semester. He attended the federal work-study fair, held during the first week of classes, and noticed that there were a limited amount of opportunities and none related to his field of study or career interests. He could only find jobs as a student center worker or a library assistant.

When he started working at the student center, he did not expect it to be as labor-intensive, thinking he “*had pretty good stamina since he worked two jobs during his high school career in the food industry*”. However, his responsibilities included setting up room layouts for student organizational events, which could have upwards of 100 attendees at times. To earn the full \$2,500 awarded to Jack, he - like others before him - had to pick up extra shifts in addition to his 15-hour-per-week schedule, where he without a doubt had to weigh the costs of this trade-off: financial stability versus academic success. Because while he spent hours moving chairs and

tables for students to throw their events, other students of privilege enjoyed the ease of hosting various affairs that polished their resumes, in addition to the extra time to focus on their academics that would secure them high-profile internships and employment.

First-generation, low-income students are forced to tradeoff between financial stability and academic success, and this is a very difficult burden. Most available jobs often find FLI students serving other students in different capacities and tend to preserve the very class inequalities and reproduce them, even if higher academia is associated with reshaping one's socioeconomic status. Similar to Jack, AJ, a QuestBridge Match, runs between buildings setting up the AV equipment and resolving any technical issues for events hosted by student organizations and the greater university. In their best customer service voice, they pick up the hotline given to students and employees who reserve these event spaces and quickly make their way over to serve the needs of those who can afford to host events. While these events are student-focused, students like AJ are unable to attend these activities because they themselves are facilitating events like these to ensure they run smoothly and efficiently for their more privileged peers.

While upsetting, FWS students have come to terms with their fate, serving those in positions of power, which situates them as inferior. These reproductions of class structures are further reinforced by the university which expects these students to run buildings around the clock and/or employers who demean these students as lowly workers, not bright scholars like their affluent peers.

Francine, another QuestBridge scholar, worked as a library assistant during her first year for federal work-study. She recounted an on-the-job accident. She was traveling between floors of the library and took a fall down the stairs, which resulted in an immense amount of pain and a

swollen ankle. She had reported it to her supervisor, who had asked if she needed a check-up, but Francine thought she was fine. However, some twenty minutes later, she started to experience excruciating pain and was unable to walk, leaving her to call a friend frantically for help.

Out of worry for Francine, her friend called EEMS, Emory Emergency Medical Services, to transport her for a check-up. When Francine's manager got wind of what was happening, she approached Francine, who sat on the stretcher. Not only did she scold Francine and her friend,



Figure 1: Students using an office chair to transport injured classmate back to the dorm

but she belittled the two for not following *the procedures put in place*, claiming that they had never worked in *the real world* and further degrading them. Francine proceeded to get off the stretcher, embarrassed and still unable to walk. Ridiculous as it may be, her friends returned some ten minutes later with a desk chair from their dorm and rolled her across campus back to their residence hall (*Figure 1*).

Francine never got her ankle looked at.

“She showed pictures of when she got a sprain a week later and was like look at this. I went on a hike with my spouse this one time. I sprained my ankle, and it was much worse than yours. It’s because you sprained your ankle for the first time. You just don’t know what it feels like so that’s why it felt really painful.

sprain] was nothing.”

She basically was like yours [Francine’s

FLI students tend to believe that they have to do everything themselves, and instances like these only enforce that belief and lead to distrust of the institutions meant to help them.

With the emergence of the catastrophic COVID-19 pandemic, the number of work-study jobs severely declined. Students struggled with finding jobs, and many experienced financial insecurities at the same time that COVID-19 wreaked havoc on their families and communities. When in-person work-study returned for students a little more than a year later, many students were relieved. However, they did not expect to be forced to become the campus' mask police.

“You consented to keep the community safe by abiding by the COVID mask mandate, and we will give you three warnings, or we have the right to ask you to leave the area.”

AJ found themselves blaring these words every twenty minutes or so. And every hour, Jack would see himself repeating this exact statement to dozens of students who were mask-less in the student center during his rounds. With snarky remarks and rolled eyes, students would reluctantly put on their masks to only remove them when he turned his back. He could hear the faint whispers of college students mockingly mimic his voice followed by a string of profanities. Over the course of the night, Jack covered the last section of his nametag so that disgruntled students could not track him down via the Emory directory. He constantly looked over his shoulder before leaving his shift at 11:00PM.

In seeing these interactions take place, FLI students are tasked with managing spaces, and they constantly remind students to wear masks within these areas, characterizing these students as the *bad guys* and *joy killers*. By doing so, FLI students are further ostracized by the community, and these socioeconomic divides are further strengthened.

While FLI students understand that *nothing is free in this world*, a notion that is stressed through many of their financial upbringings, the federal work-study component of their financial aid packages often comes as a shock. Preconceptions of the word *full-ride* and/or *100% need-*

based aid, especially as advertised through programs like QuestBridge, portray an expectation that these students will be supported in their endeavors financially, which romanticizes what the true FLI college experience entails. Such situations are more common than not because financial aid is unclear among these students, who can only turn to their financial aid advisors for questions when their packages are released.

One Emory financial aid advisor remains notorious among first-generation, low-income students. Bertha, a QuestBridge Scholar in her third-year, describes this financial aid advisor as being “*so unhelpful for real*” because “*even if the response you need is hidden inside all that [an email], it makes you not wanna read it because you know it’s copy-pasted*”. When these scholars learned that this advisor also was the point of contact for study abroad programs regarding financial aid, many students were visibly upset. The question of “*LMAO is there anyone besides [advisor A] that advises for summer study abroad financial aid?*” was met with “*Oh, my fucking God. Nooooo. I was debating on doing summer study abroad but learning that makes me not wanna.*” by Bertha. This, in conjunction with questionable financial aid packages, adds another stress to these students.

FLI scholars, even up until their last year at Emory, experience discrepancies with their financial aid package. For Tricia, she reached out to other students via text message in the public FLI chat: “*Anyone know financial aid advisors who are actually helpful?*” since “*They got me and my aid fucked up truthfully. Senior year, and they cut my aid by eight racks. Lol. I hate it here.*” In some instances, it can be a yearly chore as with Sophia.

“I’ve had to appeal literally every year, and every year, they’ve been a pain. This year, they told me I couldn’t appeal, so I contacted [advisor A]’s supervisor, and they helped and said they’d talk to [advisor A] because [Advisor A] was wrong. I ended up getting the additional 10K in aid I knew I was supposed to have in the first place. Like they literally just copy and paste responses from the website

instead of answering the unique questions students have based on the context given. They're absolutely terrible and rude.

Last year, Sophia relates that *“her financial aid had pushed her past the loan limit cut-off, which meant her financial aid is essentially preventing her from getting more financial aid, which just felt wrong”*. In response to this, she reached out to her financial aid advisor.

“I contacted her asking to appeal because my work-study put me over the Emory Advantage cut-off for loan replacement grants. She basically said I wasn't eligible and that I couldn't appeal.

I then went through some people and got into contact with [advisor B].

They actually looked at my situation and were able to increase my aid by 10K.”

While this seems to be a specific case, many students, especially ones with advisor A, shared similar difficulties, where loans were added to students' packages, even when they qualified for Emory Advantage. This program “gives students the opportunity to graduate debt-free as part of the university's commitment to make an Emory education accessible to all qualified students regardless of their financial resources” by replacing need-based loans with institutional grants for undergraduate students (Emory University n.d.). While the generous financial aid is what attracts many FLI students to attend Emory, it is with instances like Sophia that make it difficult to focus on academics and the end goal, graduation, which counteracts the fundamental reason for the creation of Emory Advantage.

Furthermore, countless cases of students have emphasized this confusion regarding finances, adding friction between students and the office. For Spencer, his financial aid package included loans, which he felt he had to take because his advisor made it seem imperative.

“I think the one worst experience I've had came from my first semester where I was slightly pressured into adding federal loans to my aid package to cover potential external expenses which didn't end up occurring to the extent that the school says [something like \$3-4k of incidentals], after which I was told to go and get money from the textbook scholarship when having the actual textbook for so many of my classes was not entirely necessary. It made this huge back and forth where I was seemingly going between the financial aid office, student concerns,

and bookstore for about a week over and over because there would be some issue with the money at every turn—it honestly made me a lot less willing to even ask for that kind of help going forward [I haven't since] given the hassle and feeling that I really didn't need/deserve the book assistance.”

Many experienced similar situations of having loans in their packages that ultimately resulted in refunds to these respective students and added even more questions for the purpose of the loans. There is an apparent miscommunication, where students feel unheard since their questions and needs are not being addressed. Because of this, students find support in fellow FLI peers, asking questions and clarifications from them instead of the pre-existing offices that are supposedly there for students. And so, students like Sophia feel they have no choice but to save their frustrations with these offices and the university until the mandatory exit surveys that graduating students complete.

Anyone who is upset with their financial aid advisor and not graduating this year: when you do eventually fill out your graduation exit surveys, they ask for anything else you want to share about your experience. I talked about all of the problems I had with my financial aid advisor, named them by name, and said she should not be working at Emory because students deserve a better person. Idk if it will do anything, but hopefully, that's one way you can review your advisor.

In the end, this results in a strained relationship between the university and its FLI students, and it is unfortunate that the financial struggles these students have faced in their pasts, issues revolving around inadequate health insurance, food insecurity, and homelessness, continue to haunt them in other aspects during their duration at Emory.

3.1 Only the Wealthy Can Enjoy Being Healthy Emory University Health Insurance Policy Reinforces Structural Violence in FLI Populations

“Taking seventeen credits hours and also working at least twenty hours a week as a freshman is the worst fucking thing in the entire world, and I don't recommend it to anyone.”

Students like Francine share similar attitudes, as they set aside almost all of their federal-work study earnings to pay for the Emory University Student Health Insurance Plan (EUSHIP). In

order to enroll each school year, students must have EUSHIP or a comparable health insurance plan. However, the cost of attendance (COA), which “is an estimate of the total amount it will cost to go to school for an academic period and determined using rules established by law”, does not include health insurance as part of the COA. COA only includes direct costs like tuition, fees, housing, and food, for which students can receive aid in the form of scholarships and grants if they fall within a specific income bracket.

For many low-income populations, the concept of health insurance is foreign, as the cost of coverage is too high for their families. Therefore, many students like Francine come to Emory without a health insurance plan and are compelled to enroll in EUSHIP. *“I didn’t know that like everyone had health insurance, like that wasn’t a concept I was familiar with. Working [to pay for it] took a lot out of me. I had to work even when I sprained my ankle.”* Francine recounts.

The cost of EUSHIP for one annual term is \$4,018, which is equivalent to approximately \$2,000 a semester, a little less than the amount earned if a student is a part of work-study.

Katrina recalls, *“I came in using Emory insurance, but I borrowed \$3,000 from someone. Emory definitely gives a considerable amount of aid. At least, the first year is good, but it is kind of silly that there is no aid for the health insurance when Emory owns all the healthcare in Atlanta.”*

While health insurance is considered a personal expense, it is one that is required to attend Emory. More importantly, it is not included in the cost of attendance, so many students like Jali end up blindsided when they realize this condition.

“I get it, but some of us don’t have \$3,000 to spend on possibly getting sick and kind of getting dumped with that bill is like fuck. I still gotta go here.”

It’s another thing I shouldn’t have had to think about, an every year stress, but I lucked out.

I don’t want to lie and say that is how it is for everyone.

Although this is a required fee for students, there seems to be a lack of justification for not providing financial aid for EUSHIP besides the fact that it is not included as part of the COA. For these students, it is a significant amount of money, accounting for 10% of their household income for many. Messages of *“the amount of chaos in this group due to inaccessibility of healthcare breaks my heart”* continue to be issues that FLI students must deal with.

Meanwhile, many students do not seek out these health services because *getting sick is a luxury*. These health appointments require time, and many FLI students use their time to work to pay off EUSHIP, ironic enough as it is. Instead of visiting physicians, they work through their ailments. However, in some instances, the pain is too much to bear. Realizing that they do in fact have health insurance, students will decide to use this resource if and only if it is an emergency. To see a \$600 bill for visiting the ER, even though they were in the waiting room for sixteen hours and only seen for twenty minutes, was discouraging. In response to this, Jali could only muster up, *“they really be punishing us cause we poor.”* Students feel that this is not only a coerced cost, but also a forced cost with little to no care provided.

These policies create a system (Figure 2) where FLI students are further marginalized from accessing available healthcare resources that they pay for and contribute to the structural violence committed (Underground Emory, 2021). The broad social forces at play - classism - create violence perpetuated in healthcare at Emory that is



Figure 2. Student meme account addresses the insufficient standard of Federal Work-Study wage.

structural since it is "embedded in the political and economic organization of our social world" (Farmer, Nizeye, Stulac, and Keshavjee 2006). These forces - and the institutions that sustain them - mirror oppressions in society that work to disadvantage and harm marginalized populations, which can further negatively impact the health of these populations. It is with frameworks like federal work-study and the health insurance policy that reproduce class disparities and remind FLI students that they are at a disadvantage despite university claims that would suggest otherwise.

Chapter 4: Recollections of What I Would Call a Lack of Direction in Our Academics The Absence of Academic Support for FLI Students

Academics make up a huge component of the college experience, as these institutions store and spread an immense amount of knowledge to new generations of students. For many, Emory is their top choice in learning and exploring their academic interests, considering “Emory is leading the way in research across many disciplines with \$894.7 million in funding awards in 2021 and is designated one of the highest research activity universities in the United States” (Emory University n.d.). However, many FLI students have seen how academics are inaccessible due to the unequal distribution of resources and lack of advising, further intensified with the pandemic, which illustrates how institutions like Emory are failing FLI students.

After understanding the reality of the situation in dealing with Emory’s offices, these students knew that financial instability, to an extent, would continue to be an issue that they would face. Oftentimes, it - and so much more - felt out of their control, as they waited to hear where they stood financially with the university. But, the one aspect that they felt they did have power over was their academics.

Or, so it seemed. Jali, now a fourth-year on the pre-law professional track, called upon her first-year experiences, where she almost withdrew from Emory. *“Emory did not support me. I was underprepared for classes, and I couldn’t do anything except maybe try harder. At that point, I was like, ‘Oh, damn. Am I going to get in anywhere?’”* This was especially common in the larger introductory classes: QTM 100 (Introduction to Statistical Inference), ECON 101 (Principles of Microeconomics), CHEM 150 (Structure and Properties), and BIOL 141 (Foundations of Modern Biology I), to name a few.

Many introductory classes were discouraging experiences, as students struggled with the content, even on the very first day of classes. For Mina, a recent FLI alumna of Emory, her transition to academics at Emory was grueling.

“So as far as I was concerned, I had no friends, which was okay in a sense because I worked hard to get into a good, accredited institution so my most important focus should be my schooling anyway.

But even then, I was at a disadvantage. You see, I came from a poor family, meaning also a very poor school system my entire life. This meant there weren't tutors available, teachers were spread thin as it was, our textbooks were outdated, and the administration cared more for minimal graduation than preparing students for school beyond the twelfth grade.

The academic upbringing of these FLI students influenced their academic careers at Emory. FLI students came to realize that the high schools they attended could not have prepared them for elite, private institutions. Instead of seeing this as a systemic issue of unequal educational resources and support in their respective communities, these students thought their struggles were due to a personal flaw of theirs - that they were *dumb*.

I used to think I was smart, or at least bright enough to learn things on my own. But then I came to Emory, and I realized I am always the dumbest person in the room - no matter where I go. I remember walking into chemistry the first day we started classes. The professor skipped around and kept saying, ‘You guys should know this, we’ll skip it, and you can review on your own.’ But the problem was, I didn't know anything!

It felt as though my entire time at Emory I played catch up and every time I thought I was close to the finish line; it was moved further away from me. It was a vicious and endless cycle of trying to teach myself and not understanding and if you did not understand the basics, you wouldn't understand the bigger concept.”

While their classmates enjoyed the review, easing back into content that they were already familiar with, many - if not all - FLI students were simultaneously teaching themselves concept after concept, all while juggling the new material which was built upon fundamentals that they were still trying to learn.

This vicious cycle of attempting to reach the academic level that their professors wanted was more often than not met with disappointment. In preparing for midterms, FLI students used every resource available and still failed to get passing marks. For Mina, it was a discouraging ordeal knowing that she could not have done anything more to perform well on her exam.

My first ever big exam, I got a 27/100. I remember walking into it feeling as though I did everything humanly possible to learn everything I could as fast as I could. I stayed up in club libs every night for a week and a half – only showering when my hair started to feel oily. I only ate if I felt I had studied enough to reward myself, and the amount of caffeine I consumed could have kept the United States Army awake for weeks. It was overall the most terrible experience I had ever put myself through.

And don't assume it's because I procrastinated and didn't try to continuously study. I really did. I never skipped a lecture. I went to all the evening tutor sessions. EPASS saw me religiously, and office hours were my third home. But even after everything I could give was given, it was not nearly enough. I saw the 27, lit up bright on my laptop screen. And you know what I did? I crawled under my desk, and I sobbed for 20 minutes until I was dry. It's a different type of pain to completely fail a test that you made every effort to pass. And you know what's entirely saddening? There are too many students who feel this way. It was one of the loneliest experiences I have ever felt in my entire life. Being poor made me feel stupid. And I am grateful for my time at Emory, but at what cost?

Like Mina, students have drawn on similar experiences, trying to act on their failures by reaching out for advice from academic advisors, which proved to be futile. *Have you tried studying in advance?* or *Have you tried EPASS?* were the only comments that advisors could provide. While these advisors meant well, these interactions suggested that these students did not try their best - that the grade reflected their study habits - and more could be done by these students. Perhaps, more effort could be put forth by these students if they were not already extremely exhausted - mentally and physically. Simply put, these interviews demonstrated a worn-out group of students trying to stay afloat but drowning even more so in their efforts. Asking more of them would result in catastrophic issues revolving around mental health that are already so prevalent at Emory.

These scenarios draw similar parallels to individualistic explanations of poverty, where “the poor have personal problems and deficiencies that are responsible for their poverty” (University of Minnesota Libraries n.d.). These explanations reduce the struggles of those in poverty to the belief that they are in these particular positions because they are lazy. This implies that they are not working hard to better their conditions, and if more effort was put on their part, they could achieve success. What explanations like these ignore are the systemic issues, such as unequal access to resources in their academic upbringings, that impede these populations from flourishing.

In the August leading up to her first-year at Emory, Courtney, a psychology and African American Studies double major, purchased a laptop at her local Best Buy. She needed the laptop to complete school assignments; that was the sole intent for this \$300 investment. All she needed was to access the Internet and to be able to write essays. After asking which laptop was the cheapest option that met her little specifications, she was pointed in the direction of the Chromebooks.

Entering Emory with a brand new Chromebook, Courtney thought she was ready for college. However, this was not the case. Her laptop was incompatible with what needed to be done in order to graduate. While Chromebooks are one of the cheapest options that have writing capabilities, they cannot run software. Unfortunately for Courtney, she needed to take QTM 100, an introduction to statistics class, that is a requirement for graduation for most of the majors at Emory.

One of the components for QTM 100 is the lab portion, which teaches students to code in R. Unlike other science labs that act as a separate class from the corresponding lecture, the lab

for QTM 100 is a part of the lecture course, contributing to the overall grade for QTM 100. It has been observed that the vast majority of students perform poorly on the exams. The average for the first exam Courtney took was approximately a 74; her professor confirmed that was the highest average in comparison with the other sections of QTM 100. Seeing that most QTM students are receiving a C average on their exams, which is reflective of the quality of education and learning occurring, is the reason why many students depend on the lab component to raise their grades and pass the course.

For Courtney, she remembered having issues downloading the software. She went to her TA, her professor, and every other resource available. Eventually, she found herself at the library's IT desk. IT services asked to restart her computer - a simple on/off act - that ended up deleting all of Courtney's files. She still was unable to download the software, even after installing an additional program, Linux. Eventually, Courtney spoke with another TA, who notified her that Chromebooks could not download R because they are not suitable for coding and cannot process software. She then relayed this information to both her TA and her professor, who were unsure of what to do in this situation. They left it up to Courtney to figure it out herself.

I did a lot of research. I really tried to figure out if you can check out laptops from the school, and all that I found was like in the theology library, you can check out laptops, However, the only laptops that they offer you to check out are also Chromebooks, so that does not solve the problem. The other thing was something in Woodruff. You can check out a laptop but for a week at a time, and there was a massive waitlist. So like, I signed up to check out a MacBook, but I would have had to wait a month to get that. That does not really work for a semester-long class.

So, there were a few times where I went to the library and tried to do the code. The homework on the desktop that didn't really work for a lot of reasons like that was just that like I didn't learn from that. So, every week was just difficult. Every week I was like failing the QTM lab quizzes every Friday. My grades just suffered.

Courtney struggled in QTM 100. However, a friend tried to help her as best they could; together, they worked on the coding. After completing many of the assignments, Courtney was yet again faced with the issue of being unable to complete her assignment: the course called for a final coding project that was to be done individually.

When it was time for the QTM project, I went to office hours, and again, I communicated all these issues to both my TA and my professor. My TA told me to update the professor on my situation. In October, when the QTM project is due, I go to office hours, and it's a TA who's different from my TA. I'm like, "I don't really know what to do. I am doing the project by myself, like I'm not doing it in a group. Blah blah blah." They're like, "Oh, can I see your code." And, I was like, "I don't really know how to do that because this is a Chromebook." She said, "Oh, have you been using R online?", and I said, "What?" She told me, "Oh, there's an online version of R right now. It just came out within the past two or three weeks," and I was like, "Oh, no. I did not know that." Wow, yeah, nobody told me, and she's like "That's interesting that they didn't tell you," and I was like, "Yeah, I know I've been this whole semester without this information, and so I'm kind of surprised they didn't update me."

The TA explained, "It's really unfortunate, like we've had lots of students dropped the class because they didn't have a laptop that will work with the coding, whether they had a Chromebook or other things. It was really unfortunate because people who have Chromebooks, or if they have older laptops, that's typically students with lower socioeconomic status."

They told me this, and then, the TA asked, "Like, wait. If you haven't been able to code this whole time, how have you been taking the quizzes on Friday?" I was like, "Oh, my friend has been like showing me the code as they do it. Blah blah blah." The TA said, "Oh, that's an honor code violation. I do have to report it. But, I will like, let the professor know that it was very much not intentional. It seems like you and your friend were trying to collaborate. I don't want to know any more information about like who this person was or things like that. You're like very visibly distressed. You were not trying to cheat or whatever." So that was terrifying.

QTM 100 serves as a prime example that college courses were created without students like Courtney in mind. It is assumed that all students will have adequate access to resources, and

professors will develop syllabi off of these presumptions, which limits the access to education the university champions. These normative assumptions prevent students from learning the material and will continue to impact them, even when the course is completed. Because for Courtney, the *D+* remains on her transcript, permanently. And instead of illustrating the institutional failures that led to this mark, it reflects poorly on Courtney, adding to another set of hurdles that she must overcome when thinking about her future and applying to graduate programs.

Likewise, Tina shares her experiences with introductory courses at Emory, many of which are considered weed-out classes among the student body.

This school is hard. I like almost failed chemistry and biology. It fucked up my GPA, which made it really difficult for me to do specific programs through the college. Talking about that was the first time I had gotten below a B in a course.

I think QTM also. And, it's a lot of students. I had to take that hard ass course. Legitimately a waste of time. QTM can go burn in hell. One of my friends switched to a philosophy major because she did not want to take QTM because why is that class so difficult for no reason. I didn't take stats in high school. I didn't know the fuck what stats was. My school only offered 7 AP courses. People were coming in with, "I had private tutors and took this in high school," and I was like, "Bruh, what are these equations?"

Courses at Emory further highlighted the differences that divide these students and their more affluent peers, who in addition to having adequate tools, attended prestigious high schools and studied with private tutors. Academic upbringing has had major implications in the success of students, especially during their first year. Because of this, many FLI students struggled with courses and felt that they were catered for the more affluent populations of Emory.

For many FLI students, navigating the higher education terrain consisted of trial and error in determining how to study to perform well on exams, read in preparation for discussions, and ask questions during office hours. Olivia, a fourth-year chemistry major from metro Atlanta,

encountered many difficulties because she was not adequately prepared or supported in comparison to her more comfortable peers.

My first few semesters at Emory, I was so fucking lost. It felt like I was navigating a whole new world by myself. None of my family members knew anything about the college process, nonetheless about scheduling classes. It felt like I was always one step behind, clueless as to what was the next step. I felt like I was doing everything wrong. I could not figure out what I truly enjoyed or even how to properly study, and I thought that it was something that I needed to figure out myself. It was hard for me to bring myself to study for classes when I knew that I was already behind and could not catch up with the rest of my peers.

These difficulties that Olivia experienced can be attributed to the differences in academic background, which facilitated an easier transition for students who came from elite, private schools in comparison to local, public schools that many FLI students attend. This hidden curriculum is “an amorphous collection of ‘implicit academic, social, and cultural messages,’ ‘unwritten rules and unspoken expectations,’ and ‘unofficial norms, behaviors and values’ of the dominant-culture context in which all teaching and learning are situated” (Boston University n.d.).

More specifically, with the introductory chemistry classes, many FLI students felt uncomfortable in the group settings that the infamous large, whiteboard tables in Atwood 260 encouraged. While great in theory, the concept of in-class group work stressed the hidden curriculum that hampers FLI students from excelling in their academics. While their peers seemed to grasp concepts with ease, claiming to have *learned it in high school*, they - nevertheless - had professors confirm their answers, walking them through their thought processes. When - and if - these students were wrong, they would proceed with follow-up questions, building up a rapport with professors. At the same time, other students sat in silence, clueless as to what to say because they did not know what they knew. *Not wanting to ask dumb questions or being unsure of how to phrase their questions the right way* were common

justifications that prevented many first-generation, low-income students from seeking help from peers or professors during class. Seeing peers who sat right next to them interact with each other and the professor made students feel inadequate as students and further precipitated imposter syndrome within these populations. Reflections on classes like chemistry, Tina was convinced that these classes were created for “*only the affluent populations of Emory*” and had her question why these courses were so hard if “*Half of them go to the business school anyway, so who the fuck were they weeding out? No disrespect to the B [business] school kids.*”

Attempting to get through chemistry unscathed, Tina sought out various resources like many before her. She attended an EPASS session, a private tutoring service with a student who must have previously made a B+ or higher in the course, which is provided at no cost by the university. While tutors may differ, a slew of students do not utilize these resources due to bad experiences, where they often feel degraded.

He called me stupid, and he told me to drop the class. First of all, you're the same age as me, so fight me. I never used it [EPASS] after that.

I went to office hours, went to learning assistants. I did everything that I possibly could. The grad student was a TA [teaching assistant]. I was out here having personal meetings with him and everything. And, I still got a fucking D+ . I've gotten A's in all of my other classes, but BIO, CHEM, and QTM.

For Tina, she scored better in biology because of one distinguishing factor: her TA. More specifically, this TA was an FLI student, who helped her go through the questions and learn how to study. However, in the larger introductory courses, it is not all that common to see FLI students in these positions. Because “*if these students are not getting good grades in classes, professors are not going to pick them as TAs*”, creating this never-ending cycle that is ineffectual in making way for FLI students in higher academia.

“The student body was more helpful to me than staff members, and I wish that wasn’t the case you know,” Francine related. Not knowing what classes to take added a lot of confusion and stress for FLI students, who had no support systems to ask. Similar to how Tina gained knowledge - and therefore strength - in her biology class from a peer, these students found solace in peers, especially upperclassmen to guide them in processes like these because advisors had either failed to communicate and/or told these students that it would be impossible. In one instance, Alice recalls meeting with her pre-major advisor on her first day at Emory.

I wanted to be pre-business and pre-medicine because there are so many intersections, especially in the States since healthcare in America is literally a business. But, my pre-major advisor referencing the quantum realms crushed my dreams and how I would ultimately be destroyed by the two worlds. I started taking classes out of spite and was determined to see it through, but the whole time, I couldn’t help but think that he was right. So, I ended up dropping pre-business.

While this advisor might have given her the reality of the situation, he ultimately crushed her aspirations in one fell swoop and instances like this steer many away from seeking help from professionals.

4.1 Fed-up with Pre-Meds Absent Post-Graduation Preparation for FLI Students

While Emory is considered academically diverse with more than eighty majors and over sixty minors, in addition to sixteen pre-professional programs, students who are not considering pre-health tracks have shared in their lack of support. For Tina, she has had to navigate the graduate school application process alone, yet again.

If I don’t get into grad school, I’mma just blame Emory cause they’re supposed to be a top university that has everything. But like no, like Emory hasn’t told me what else I can do besides like going to med school or going to grad school. But even with going to grad school, I had to figure it out on my own.

I didn't talk to any advising, anybody whose job it was supposed to help me. First of all, they don't even exist. That's why I started the club I started. No, I didn't talk to a single person because if you are not pre-health or in the business school, Emory does not give a fuck about you, respectfully.

This failure to guide students in their post-graduate plans extends well beyond graduate school applications. This is especially detrimental to FLI students, who cannot turn to their families for guidance.

Similarly, but to a lesser degree, the pre-law advising office lacks the capabilities to advise FLI students applying to law school. Jali, who applied to law schools this cycle, wished that there was “*more direction on the financial aspect like applying for different things*” since she had “*spent \$500 already on law school, and she isn't even in it yet*”. The extra hurdle of searching and understanding the application process for fee waivers - for either the LSAT or law school applications - in addition to filing the waiver itself is intimidating because it is unfamiliar, especially when there is no guidance. While these students remain hopeful for their future aspirations because that is all they have to cling to, their circumstances contribute to a sense of hopelessness. It is hard for them to see their futures when the day-to-day trials and tribulations of trying to attain their goals are that much harder because of their backgrounds.

Students who are not considering pre-health professions have related in the lack of direction provided by Emory, and this absence of support has culminated in anger towards students on the pre-medicine track, students who are receiving more instruction on their future career plans. However, even within the highly regarded pre-med professional track, FLI students are still stumbling in their efforts to apply to medical school.

Jane, who recently was accepted into the prestigious NYU Grossman School of Medicine, mentioned how, “*She suffered from imposter syndrome all the time, especially when she was in classes with people who you know went to schools that offered organic chemistry or*

people who did research in high school. She didn't even know it was a thing. It was a huge learning curve for her to learn how to do research." She did not overcome her imposter syndrome until after her medical school acceptances.

The learning curve that Jane mentions is what deters a plethora of students away from continuing on the pre-health track. While Emory University is a prime location for students, especially for those pursuing healthcare professions, the opportunities to get involved in clinical settings and research projects seem limited. Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, Emory University Hospital, Winship Cancer Institute, The Center for Disease Control, the list goes on and on, yet FLI students remain unsure in how to apply for these opportunities. This has made it difficult for these students to pursue healthcare careers when they do not have the necessary experiences needed for medical school applications.

This lack of confidence among FLI students on the pre-medicine track is even further heightened with advisors in the pre-health advising office. Comments like "*You need at least two gap years.*" or "*You need to do more.*" are intimidating when these students are already stretched thin in between their job and academic responsibilities.

During their second year, students are required to meet one-on-one with their advisors to discuss their progress. It is at this point in time where advisors label these students' experiences with green, yellow, or red, indicating how competitive they were as a candidate. In comparison with their peers, FLI students tend to find themselves on the red end of the spectrum because their experiences are not comparable to their more affluent peers, who can pursue opportunities that do not provide financial compensation. On the other hand, FLI students must prioritize financial stability above an additional supplement to their resume. Students, who held multiple leadership positions and worked in a research lab, were told that they did not have enough, even with a 3.8 GPA. How could they be expected to *do more* when they needed to work in order to

survive? Advisors could not propose any solutions to how to be a strong candidate when navigating the demands of being first-generation and low-income. The requirements were too much to endure for a lot of FLI students, leading to many dropping the pre-medicine track.

These difficulties that FLI students face are - however - validated during the application process of medical schools. *“I wish I had those obstacles to write about in my supplements.”* are remarks often stated by non-FLI students at Emory. While the struggles of FLI students are authenticated for the first time by students, these hardships are reduced by both their peers and FLI students themselves as they turn their experiences into application materials.

While academic advising fails to support - and even acknowledge - the disadvantages that FLI students face, their hardships are highly sought-after by peers who fall short in demonstrating empathy, a characteristic imperative for their future occupations in areas like healthcare. This, in turn, dissuades FLI students from pursuing their academic and career goals, knowing that their efforts will remain futile in comparison to their more affluent peers and for which academic advisors do not recognize.

Chapter 5: Mad Mac Donald at Emory Controversial Guest Speaker at Emory Undermines the FLI Identity

“If those [Black] students that are being put into that bottom decile because they are being catapulted into a school that they are not competitively qualified for, they would do better at a school where they are in the same conditions as everybody else.”

Within a lecture hall located on Emory University’s campus, speaker Heather Mac Donald addressed the masses of over a hundred Emory students on January 28th, 2020. It was so well attended that organizations had streaming parties for students to tune into the event if they could not make it past the doors. Surprisingly, her appearance had garnered a large crowd. But, what was more shocking was the contents of the event, the ideas of her book, *The Diversity Delusion*. As she spewed her racist remarks, the university proceeded to do nothing because they were upholding their definition of diversity: a “different” perspective. Notwithstanding freedom of speech being crucial on college campuses - and an undeniable right upheld by the Constitution - Mac Donald’s words came as a rude awakening to this campus and its students.

Unfortunately, the “Diversity in Education” talk that Mac Donald led represents ideologies that many Americans share. And while her discussions are heavily anti-Black, it must be considered when discussing the experiences of FLI students as classism and racism are interrelated and inform one another. In particular, lectures like these mainly paint a picture that places like Emory University are perfect, illustrating that college campuses are nothing but equal, especially towards groups that have been traditionally mistreated.

“I was so worried about moving into Emory my first-year. I wasn’t sure my mom’s beat-up, old van would survive the drive or if they would even let her car on campus, but I remember even while we were pulling our car around the circle, they [administrators and resident advisors among others] were cheering for every

single car. It was so welcoming and super wholesome, and I was proud of being a scholar at Emory.”

Now a third-year, Bethel recounted the beginning of her days at Emory. She had arrived early for one of Emory’s pre-orientation programs, STEM Pathways, exclusive to students who were the first generation in their families to attend college and/or in an identity group that was underrepresented in the natural sciences (“Pre-Orientation Programs” ND). Diversity programs saw a select number of students arrive on campus four days earlier prior to their first-year orientation, giving them time to become acclimated to Emory’s campus and build connections with faculty and upperclassmen.

[STEM Pathways] had a profound impact on me. I made most of my friends during that program. My STEM Pathways group was so diverse, and even though we had different perspectives, we all shared common experiences. It was just a nice environment because everyone understood the struggle. We were all so lost, even trying to find a building. Before coming to Emory, we all died through the [college application] process, and it was nice to share that sentiment with others for the first time.

Emory admitted a record number of QuestBridge Scholars that year: 152 first-generation, low-income (FLI) scholars (Williams 2019). There are more FLI students outside of the QuestBridge Scholars Network at Emory. For the Class of 2023, 11% of the student body were first-generation college students (Williams 2019).

To Bethel, coming to Emory meant that diversity would be celebrated, considering it had “enrolled one of the largest QuestBridge cohorts in the country - a response to the university’s commitment to diversity and an effort to ensure that an excellent liberal arts education is accessible for qualified students” (Williams 2019). Fourth-year Olivia echoed similar sentiments. “Right off the bat, I felt like I was fulfilling a quota because I didn’t believe I was going to make it to this point. Then, I got my acceptance package in the mail. I was grateful for the opportunity to have a future different from my family.” What Bethel - and others - did not expect was having

to prove to herself and others that she belonged, especially as she kicked off her second semester at Emory with speaker Mac Donald.

When student organizations from both the Undergraduate College and Law School decided to invite speaker Heather Mac Donald to campus, there was an uproar from the FLI community and other identity groups on campus. Emory had presented itself to be progressive, a community that “has a history of doing things differently” (“Diversity” ND). They claimed to be at the forefront of social justice, even renaming buildings this past year to remove honorifics from slave owners, Confederate soldiers, and others who did not deserve them (CITATION HERE). But, some building name holders of a white supremacist legacy still remain. In particular, there is a subset of buildings named after a prominent family who did financially sponsor Mac Donald’s lecture on campus, and it still remains to this day despite student protests. Ultimately, this demonstrates the University’s commitment to fulfilling its own needs, which may mean catering to white people who have the means to sway the values of a college with their large donations and spread racist, classist ideologies on campus.

For Courtney, who is a QuestBridge Scholar, she did not realize how much of an impact Mac Donald’s speech had on her: *“It was affecting my academics and my learning. As I was trying to emotionally recover from what was said, I didn’t get any work done. I went to therapy. Mac Donald basically said that if they [Black students] don’t want to be dumb, they need to value education like Asian parents.”*

Mac Donald continued to stereotype Black students as incapable, reducing their academic struggles to another flaw of their skin color and cheapening their admittance into these elite universities all while alienating these students from their own college campuses. What she failed to understand was that a large number of these students identify as first-generation, low-income

students. Rather, she encourages first-generation, low-income students to attend institutions that are more *fit*, community colleges. Additionally, she continues to place blame on Black people and insinuates that they do not value education. What student perspectives show is how access to education is limited for those in lower socioeconomic classes. Courtney shares how her *“mother didn’t know about college until she was a senior in high school, so she came to America to Kansas with her children to go to a community college. She ended up having to unenroll because she couldn’t afford it.”*

For Bethel and other FLI scholars, having Mac Donald in a lecture hall where they regularly attend classes was traumatizing. Mac Donald would continue to add insult to injury by stating how *“Any student who thinks of himself as oppressed on a college campus is in the grip of a terrible delusion. There has never been an environment more tolerant towards history’s traditionally marginalized groups than a college campus”*. All of the struggles that these students faced were delegitimized by Mac Donald in a single sentence. What was even worse was the fact that a QuestBridge scholar helped bring her onto campus; a fellow student, who the FLI community thought understood the struggles of the lack of financial security and support that brought the community together.

However, these instances are not anomalies in history; they are reiterated throughout time on various campuses as the Right continues to challenge the idea of political correctness. Since the 20th century, free-speech claims have been prominent in the U.S. Supreme Court (*“First Amendment Timeline”* ND). These free speech claims have made their way onto college campuses in response to political correctness, *“a term used by conservatives to oppose the perceived rise of liberal curriculum on college campuses in the 1990s”* (Roper 2020). Universities are situated as institutions that are radically liberal in that they overtly use political

correctness (PC), which is “intended to give the least amount of offense, especially when describing minority groups” (Roper 2020). Throughout the nation, certain people like Mac Donald have claimed PC is inadvertently “killing higher education” and hindering dialogue (Reynolds 2016). The general consensus from those who support inviting speakers like Mac Donald on campus is to create an atmosphere of open dialogue: *“People didn’t like Mac Donald because what she was saying was controversial, and she was talking about things that are uncomfortable. But if you can’t have these challenging conversations on a college campus, then where can you have them? It is preparing them for society.”*

What these students choose not to understand is the fact that conversations like Mac Donald’s are not challenging in that they are thought-provoking. They are inherently racist and have origins in the Eugenics Movement. Mac Donald claimed that these students are not academically capable to be at institutions like Emory because their standardized testing scores are below average but that the University admitted them regardless because of their skin color.

It’s reverse discrimination. At Duke, a much greater percentage of black male students entering Duke intend to major in STEM than white male students. Duke admits its Black students with a standard deviation of difference in SAT scores and that means that the students that are admitted with those lower qualifications in science and their math scores struggle in their freshmen chemistry classes and those gateway courses.

While Mac Donald may claim that she is not a racist, her constant support of the SAT as a prime metric to academically compare students ultimately is, in addition to being classist. In 1923, psychologist Carl Brigham wrote that “African-Americans were on the low end of the racial, ethnic, and/or cultural spectrum and testing would show the superiority of the Nordic race group” and made claims that the education system was in decline” and “will proceed with an accelerating rate as the racial mixture becomes more and more extensive” (Rosales 2021). These ideologies are a key characteristic of the Eugenics Movement: to maintain racial purity and

defend white superiority. Brigham was then commissioned by the College Board to develop the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), and while it may have been *a long time ago*, the SAT still maintains a legacy of defending white superiority and elitism.

Having standardized tests like the SAT is especially difficult for communities of color. These students live in areas that have underfunded and substandard educational systems in comparison to communities that are predominantly white and have proper funding due to differences in class. For Mac Donald, Black students are not capable simply due to their skin color, not because of the unequal distribution of necessary resources.

Mac Donald's words have ties to the "anthropological concept of race as independent of culture" and an "idea of race providing theoretical purchase for punitive policies to reform putative bad behavior" (Baker 2010, 6). To clarify, she insinuates that Black, FLI students are lower-achieving because they are fundamentally inferior to whites without taking into context other influences. And therefore, their punishment, symbolized as a lack of support, is justified according to this logic. What this does is undermine the struggles that first-generation, low-income scholars on campus face because it suggests that the FLI community did not struggle from the inequalities that result because of the constructs of class.

In that way, universities are not politically correct despite this popular belief among other student groups at Emory. Even if universities do put PC into practice, it is with good intentions but bad applications. Francine recalls her freshman writing seminar, where a professor said that it was politically incorrect to label herself as poor. "*I'm just poor. It's not a slur or something that I should have to hide with flowery language.*" Francine was told to fix it if she wanted a better grade. On the other hand, the words that Mac Donald spoke were offensive to minority students, but Emory allowed her to continue her *discourse*. At the end of the day, the people who suffer

the most are minority students, especially first-generation, low-income scholars, who still do not have access to equal opportunities.

The fact that Mac Donald was brought onto campus without resistance from Administration and escorted by two officers from the Emory Police Department speaks volumes. But more than anything, it was just disappointing as Emory hid behind their Open Expression Policy:

The Emory College Republicans and the Emory Law chapter of The Federalist Society sponsored a discussion Tuesday with Heather Mac Donald, a political commentator. Private funds paid for this event.

Student groups often invite speakers to campus for programs open to the Emory community. Other student groups held a counter-event at the same time as the Mac Donald program.

Emory University values, promotes and encourages the free expression of ideas and these beliefs are affirmed in our Respect for Open Expression Policy. Through this policy, Emory creates an environment where the expression of ideas and open, vigorous debate and speech are promoted and encouraged, even if the speaker challenges our values. (Lance, 2020)

While this policy was used to justify this event's existence, the event itself did not put the policy into practice. While questions were answered by Mac Donald, they were pre-submitted and hand-picked by the hosting organizations. As Mac Donald made these claims, students posed questions to only be dismissed. One student, in particular, started asking a question to only be cut off. As he started speaking, the moderator of the event stood and raised her voice to propose a question out of bias, killing any chance of vigorous debate and speech. The audience was reminded that these questions alone would be discussed with one follow-up question given to the person who submitted the question. Audience members had no choice but to listen to her ideas or leave this supposed *open expression environment* that Emory made a space for.

It was hard for students of color to digest Emory's response because the University seeded ideas of diversity and belonging throughout the community. And the presence of Mac Donald at Emory seemed to go against every single notion of what Emory stood for. The Administration continues to talk about how diverse the University is, parading around numbers showcasing the student body, especially its first-generation and Black students. Throughout each section of the admissions website, prospective students to Emory see statements for welcoming diversity, supported by pictures of smiling students of all ethnicities:

We do more than simply recognize the differences among our students, faculty, and staff. We celebrate them—because individuality is what makes us a stronger community. The Emory community is open to all who have a commitment to the highest ideals of intellectual engagement, critical inquiry, and integrity. We welcome a diversity of gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, disabilities, ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, religious, national, and international backgrounds, believing that the academic and social energy that results from such diversity is essential to advancing knowledge, addressing society's most pressing issues, and attending to the full spectrum of human needs in service to the common good. (Emory University, 2021)

But, how can the University *welcome diversity* when they bring speakers like Mac Donald on campus that disrupt that atmosphere? How can the University claim integrity when it cannot even uphold the values they promise students?

Simply put, these institutions are not radical, a disillusionment to many FLI scholars like Bethel, Olivia, Courtney, and countless others who moved heaven and earth for a chance at completing a degree at elite universities that their parents could not. These institutions are full of empty promises who depend on the student body to fill in these extensive gaps that first-generation, low-income students experience as they struggle to find their sense of belonging on a campus that simply does not welcome them.

"I'm not even mad she came. I'm mad about how Emory responded." Courtney stated to her peers following the event.

In response to outcries and student petitions, the Administration continued to neglect the student body, who left it to student groups to create safe spaces in reaction to the havoc that Mac Donald caused. Students organized events and protests that the Administration failed to provide - and even support. On top of juggling fiscal responsibilities that come with the FLI territory, students were tasked with providing each other with support for something that could - and should not - be acceptable in any way. The FLI narrative is plagued with a recurring theme of resilience as scholars have overcome the impossible. And now, they “carry the dual burdens of advancing a social agenda and achieving academic success” (Verghese 2016).

Events like Mac Donald’s lecture highlight the lack of support that the University provides to its students, whom they supposedly take pride in. Students were visibly upset during the event with one student even needing to leave the room, as she sobbed into the hallway. Yes, FLI students are resilient, and they will persevere, but at what cost? These students are already susceptible to imposter syndrome, as they navigate the college scene alone. To have Mac Donald



Figure 3: A student-created meme in response to Mac Donald.

then fuel this mentality that these students in fact do not belong is not healthy. *“I was an SA [Sophomore Advisor for a first-year hall], and there were two residents on my floor. At different instances, both of them were like ‘if Emory is going to have a speaker like that, there need to be trained professionals there from CAPS’ [Counseling and Psychological Services],” Courtney recounts.* Students have to deal with the mental health repercussions of having Mac Donald on campus, even if that means understanding her presence by making a meme (*Figure 3*), a coping

mechanism when no support is in place for students following instances like these. While funny, it holds validity and a burden that these students carry amidst their job, academic, and familial responsibilities.

What Mac Donald illustrates is the classification logic of subjective understanding that Black Studies scholar Sylvia Wynter highlights in her article, “No Humans Involved,” when writing about the masses of poor, young, and jobless Black males in Los Angeles, and the ways that Americans are taught to see poverty and pathological behavior as characteristics deeply rooted in racialized groups of people (1994). This racist worldview feeds into the ways that Black, FLI students face the discrimination that Wynter discusses in her piece and where Mac Donald’s discourse falls flat. By allowing Mac Donald to come speak on campus, Emory has certainly opened up more dialogue, albeit one-sided, which the Administration wanted. This is yet another representation of how the university continues to prioritize the voices of white, affluent students at the expense of FLI students when it is the latter who need their voices to be amplified in this space. However, it has added more grievances to an ever-growing list by FLI students.

5.1 Social Scene Samples Rhetorical Attacks against FLI Students

In the following month, Mac Donald released an op-ed in response to her visit at Emory entitled, “The outrage mob came for me at Emory University and here’s how to stop it”, in which she discusses how higher education has perpetuated the victim ideology among minority students and that “those alleged preference ‘beneficiaries’ are then encouraged to interpret their academic difficulties as proof of their college’s institutional racism allowing the victim cycle to pick up steam” (Mac Donald 2020).

While students at Emory would - hopefully - disagree with Mac Donald's claims, microaggressions from the more affluent populations of Emory on FLI students reinforce this inferiority that Mac Donald claims is inherent to certain students. While walking out of class, Francine was told by a peer, "*You know if there was a parking pass to park anywhere, I would pay whatever it takes to get one, and you know you should be grateful because it would go towards your scholarship.*" Or for Olivia, who is a part of a sorority on campus, bore witness to conversations that emphasize stratifications in class.

This person's car was totaled and was like, "I'm going to start a GoFundMe page to get a new car." That did not sit well with me because I knew they were fairly well-off, considering they could afford rent for a single in one of the most expensive complexes near campus. Like GoFundMe is supposed to be a crowdfunding platform to address critical needs.

And then, they ended up going to a car dealership a few days later. They told people how they dressed like a poor person today, so they wouldn't charge them extra. And, someone's response was you should slap dirt on your face to really sell it.

It is as if poverty can be a convenient accessory to the more lavish lifestyles of Emory's affluent populations, whereas it is the lived reality of FLI students on a daily basis.

Olivia, who comes from a low-income household, chose to remain silent in order to avoid victimizing herself irrationally.

In trying to find their social footing, FLI students oftentimes hear antagonistic remarks that ridicule lower socioeconomic classes. These condescending comments that maintain classism on campus place these students in subordinate positions, where they find it is better to say nothing at all. There is no right response. *Thanking their peers* for paying fees to the university or *playing along with poor people humor* is wrong. However, these students do not want to be labeled *as being too sensitive since it was just a joke* or feel increasingly ostracized from a community that they will spend four years in. Too speechless as they stumble over the

words of their peers, many FLI students choose to remain silent, and in doing so, allow their more affluent peers to hold some superiority over them.

At a recent student organizational meeting hosted by one of the FLI student groups, FLI Emory alumni were invited to network with current FLI students, as well as share their experiences on a panel. One alumna, who served on the executive board of this student group, shared, *“We [Emory QuestBridge Scholars] barely existed like ten years ago. People were like closeted FLIs, so I’m happy to see that being first-generation and low-income is a bigger thing now.”* While the university has certainly come a long way, certain communities on campus remain unaccommodating and inconsiderate towards these marginalized students. Natalie, a third-year nursing student, shared her experiences in Greek life.

In a social setting, it’s hard to fit in with Emory students because of our different experiences. In Greek life, we are often the token members, or we aren’t even considered because of finances.

It’s just hard to be a student here because we have to put in more effort, and sometimes, I have to pretend I’m not broke.

Class exclusion is still prevalent on campus as many other FLI students share similar struggles. Communities like Panhellenic sororities and fraternities remain a source of stratification of class. Natalie continues to share how she exists in these spaces by *“never mentioning what her mom does for a living”* or *“how she financially can’t spend a certain amount of money”*. Instead, she finds it better to omit her identity as a QuestBridge Scholar to prevent alienation from an already gate-kept social group.

This sort of alienation is only heightened when more affluent peers create posts and articles satirizing lower socioeconomic classes. On November 6th, 2021, The Emory Spoke, “the official humor magazine of Emory University”, released “Tips for Emory students: How to interact with a poor”.

It's happened to all of us. You're having a mundane conversation with a peer and suddenly they give you some quizzical look at the mention of a one million dollar bill, or vacationing in space, or hunting man for sport. One awkward moment can make one thing abundantly clear: you are now consorting with a poor. How fascinating! Conversing with "poors" can actually be quite delightful, but it's important to know the Do's and Don'ts of poor culture; here are a few hot tips to get you started. (The Emory Spoke 2021)

While the article was intended to mock the wealthy, it somehow seems to isolate low-income students, further alienating them from the community. The constant reference to the less affluent students at Emory as *a poor* rather than a poor person dehumanizes and pigeon-holes people who are low-income. FLI students echoed similar opinions since *"they thought we realized turning marginalized identities into nouns was bad like...20+ years ago"*. It was further dispiriting since the article was released at the beginning of Emory's First-Generation Week, which was intended to celebrate the FLI identity on campus for the first time in person.

In response to The Spoke piece, one FLI scholar, Mabel, wrote a response article for The Wheel, the student-run newspaper.

It should be noted that most Emory students aren't in the 1% like the character in the piece (so no butlers wiping their noses or owning a private jet) but most can comfortably vacation, afford the Tide laundry service, and have never had to face the real issue of food insecurity. Instead of this article highlighting the disconnect between the lower class and the upper-middle class, it simply manages to highlight the disconnect between the 1% and the rest of us. And, controversial opinion, the middle class should not get to feel as if they can relate to the lower class over the shared absence of a butler.

It's almost impressive how they have managed to insult poor people and simultaneously exclude the upper-middle class from the narrative of propagating the isolation low-income students face in the first place.

Try putting yourselves in our shoes and identifying things you say or do that might further that gap of isolation. I am glad you have never worried about eating or affording healthcare or keeping your grades up while you work. I am glad you get to go on vacation and relax and experience so many cool things. But when you try to make yourself seem like you also face the isolation from those who make hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, it becomes a problem. When you feel like you can afford to be performative because it doesn't affect you, it becomes a problem.

In her response, Mabel continues to record instances where the article delegitimizes the issues that FLI students face. Throughout the piece, The Spoke seems to have excessively satirized the rich and poor populations. However, making jokes about “the type of stories they probably tell as they heat up a single can of beans around a fire or something” is not a parody when these are experiences that many students have faced.

Mabel’s article would bring to light the inherently classist tones of The Spoke’s article and create a space for FLI dialogue. However, the editor responsible for her piece pushed it to

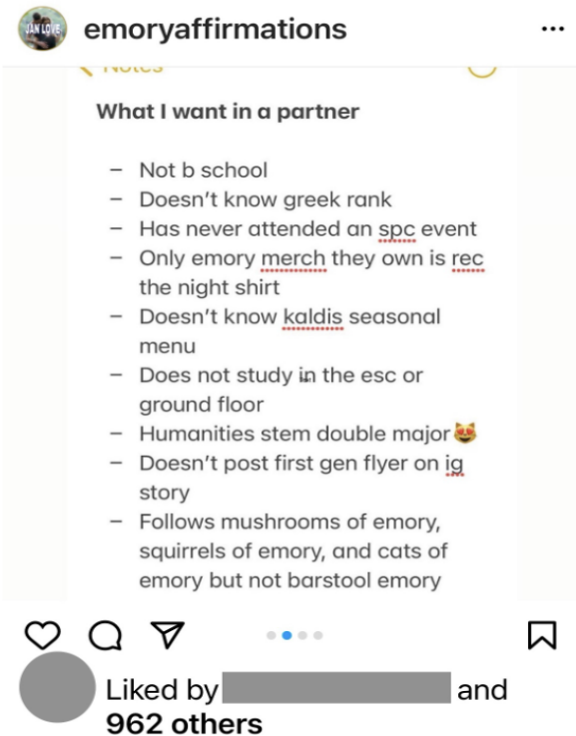


Figure 4: A student-created meme that ridicules first-generation advocates

affirms the social alienation that FLI students relate, embodied in an Instagram post (Figure 4) for all to see (Emory Affirmations, 2022). “Doesn’t post first gen flyer on IG story” is an oddly specific qualification for “what they want in a partner”, and one can only question where this

the side, citing that she was unable to understand Mabel’s point. This, in itself, was problematic considering that The Wheel had made a call for first-generation, low-income perspectives since there previously was so little of it. This lack of empathy from students of means remains an important basis for why first-generation, low-income students struggle in forming relationships with students outside of the FLI student populations. Similarly, other student groups create similar content. While intended for comedic purposes, it

point stemmed from, except from the classist ideologies that have been embedded within the community and exacerbated by campus events like Heather Mac Donald's lecture.

The social scene at Emory, whether it be a casual conversation with a classmate or a highly publicized event like Mac Donald's, demonstrates the uncomfortable class-based situations that FLI students find themselves in. However, many students do not want to *play the victim card* because in doing so they would validate Mac Donald. But in keeping quiet, these classist ideologies endure.

Chapter 6: 2036...The Future Does Not Start Here Rumors of Misallocated Funds as a Result of Anger and Mistrust

Dazzling lights cascaded on the towering geometric domes as they glistened against the lively greens of the Main Quadrangle on Emory's Atlanta campus. It was quite the flashy affair, attracting hundreds of students, parents, staff, and visitors to witness the stories - and envision a future - that the pristine white structures housed.

But, the domes that kicked off the 2036 campaign came as quite a surprise. It seemed to appear out of nowhere. In as little as a week, a whole new world had been built from the ground up, and its purpose was unclear among FLI students.

On the morning of October 22nd, 2021, a message was sent to all of the first-generation, low-income group chats, many of which included 200+ students.

I don't want this to go unnoticed so I will give this info to all of you. Emory had left over government funds from the past few semesters of COVID relief funds. It has been confirmed that this "left over" money intended for our low income population was used to fund the 2036 event happening on the quad today. It is clear as day on their website that not all of their emergency financial aid was distributed to low income students. In three semesters, they accrued over \$3,000,000 of access funds. Instead of distributed this remaining money to us and OUR FAMILIES they decided to fund this 2036 event, which "invests" in our future. If you have any time today, please bring some chalk to the quad. Write something, anything please. Get them talking about this. I need help getting this message out.

Attached with this message included screenshots of Emory's Office of Financial Aid website, where outlines of disbursements of federal funding to aid students could be found and were annotated by students (*Figure 5*) to bring to attention inconsistencies. With a quick glance, it is clear that the funds the university received did not align with the amount distributed to students.

This did not sit well with students, who were balancing their course loads with federal work-study, and yet still experiencing food insecurity. To see what could have

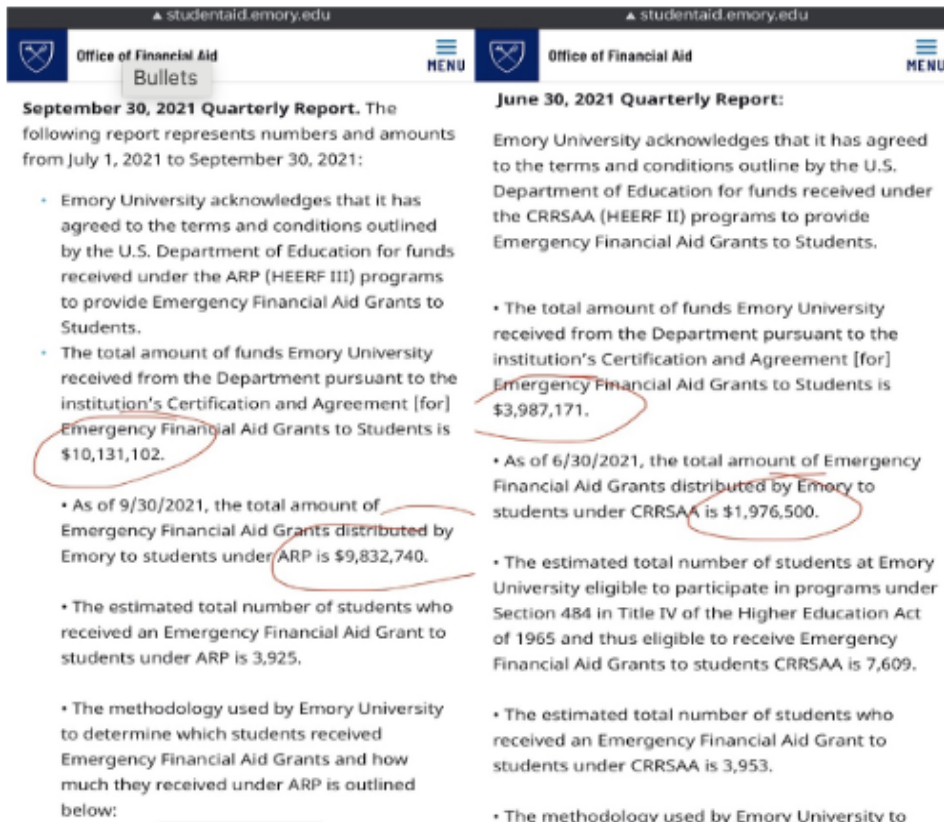


Figure 5. Emory's inconsistent disbursements of 2021 federal funding found by FLI students.

been money intended for them being wasted on free shirts and sunglasses for people who could afford to attend the event was maddening.

Soon, the chats were ablaze with angry FLI students, and memes were made within a



Figure 6. A student-created meme that addresses the frustration and disappointment experienced by FLI students.

matter of minutes (Figure 6), physically embodying the frustrations of these students towards the university. Jali added to the conversation, "Wow, I just read this. I hate this school. If they really wanted us to flourish they'd hand us the damn money. Like low-income means I ain't got income like that so just give it to me." Meanwhile, no one thought twice about the pretenses proposed because many were

already disgruntled over the numerous wrongs committed by the university. In their eyes, *it* could only be true. *Sponsored by the Emory COVID Relief Fund* and *This is money I could have sent home* (Figure 7) emerged on the Quad in resistance to 2036. The tension in the air could not be missed, and soon, student leaders of these organizations found their inboxes flooded with messages of *Wow, I never felt more cheated.*



Figure 7. Chalkings from a student protest against the allegations of misallocation of COVID relief funds.

And so, a group of FLI student leaders agreed to come together to address the accusations brought forth. That same day, a statement was given to these students to disperse to their respective groups.

Thanks again for raising this concern. We appreciate hearing from students and are pleased that you reached out.

I confirmed with the administration that no federal COVID-19 relief funds were used to support the 2036 event or any other aspect of the 2036 campaign.

We are committed to helping all our students succeed. The flourishing of our students is indeed the first main goal (out of three) of the fundraising campaign. The aim is to increase financial support for students as well as enhance other forms of support. We want all our students, whatever their start in life, to be able to excel in academics and all aspects of their lives both at Emory and beyond.

While the claims of inappropriate spending by the university were unfounded, they were readily accepted as the truth because of the established distrust between these students and

administration, as well as the overall institution. The recognizable animosity towards the university only became accentuated with 2036, even when one of the key tenets of the campaign was student flourishing in relation to first-generation students.

According to the campaign’s website, “With an eye on Emory’s bicentennial, 2036 will spearhead a movement to shape the future, providing access to transformative and experiential learning environments with world-renowned faculty and groundbreaking research opportunities. (Emory University n.d.)”. Delving deeper into the website, the 2036 campaign brings attention to first-generation students, who “face unique psychological, academic, and financial challenges that can interfere with the completion of their undergraduate studies”. It further goes on to state how these students are not as financially supported by their families in comparison to their peers, and because of this, 2036 will allow for the “creation of an endowed scholarship at Emory to provide enduring opportunities not just for a single student, but for entire generations” (Emory University n.d.). At the heart of 2036, this campaign would set a foundation for FLI students to thrive; however, students protested it, a future that would support them and future students.

Because while Emory envisions a future for itself, its first-generation, low-income students cannot. How could these students look ahead when there were so many issues that tied them to the problems of the present)? When the



Figure 8. A screenshot of one of the FLI student group chats criticizing the 2036 campaign.

words spoken did not align with current actions (*Figure 8*), students could not envision a future for themselves (Underground Emory, 2021).

“Our students are our future. And supporting student flourishing means helping them become thinkers, doers, and team players. It means creating an inclusive environment where our diverse student body feels at home, strengthening their values, developing skills, and preparing them for advanced and professional studies, and for their careers. Their success empowers them to contribute to the world around us. Emory’s top priority is guiding students as they realize their potential and enabling them to excel.” (Emory University n.d.)

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Mistrust of Emory Grows Following Ongoing Reports of Collusion

Headlines of *Emory among sixteen elite universities sued for allegedly conspiring to limit financial aid* hit in January of 2022. Brown University, the California Institute of Technology, the University of Chicago, Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth University, Duke University, Georgetown University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Northwestern University, Notre Dame University, the University of Pennsylvania, Rice University, Vanderbilt University, Yale University, and finally, Emory University are the schools named in the lawsuit exposing a price-fixing conspiracy. These institutions, of which fourteen are QuestBridge partnering schools, were members of the *568 President Group*, “an affiliation of universities that use a consensus methodology to calculate applicants’ financial aid” (Smith 2022).

Named after antitrust exemption Section 568 of the Improving America’s Schools Act, universities could share methodologies for calculating an applicant’s financial aid so long as need-blind admissions were practiced. The allegations brought forth held that the aforementioned universities, grouped together as Cartel 568, violated federal law since financial need was considered for admittance, where more wealthy students were preferred over lower-income

students, in addition to “explicitly aiming to reduce or eliminate price competition among its members” (Smith 2022).

When news broke regarding the suit, students were visibly upset as their respective schools drastically increased inaccessibility to higher education, contradictory to statements and promises these institutions previously upheld. Instead, these universities were labeled as gatekeepers to the American Dream because “Privileging the wealthy and disadvantaging the financially needy are inextricably linked. They are two sides of the same coin.” While Emory was only a part of the 568 Presidents Group from 2004 to 2012, its potential part in colluding with the other universities further established this long-standing claim that Emory does not support its first-generation, low-income students: it actively works against them. And in doing so, it has created more tension between the university and these students. Students, in addition to the frustrations, felt embarrassed for the university that claimed “scholarships mean better access” in their 2036 campaign (Emory University n.d.). It undoubtedly tarnished their reputation as equitable, and many students were set on ensuring Emory knew of it in the best way (*Figure 9*) they could (The Emory Spoke, 2022). In poking fun at Emory, it has

brought together this particular group of students, who find comfort in each other because they

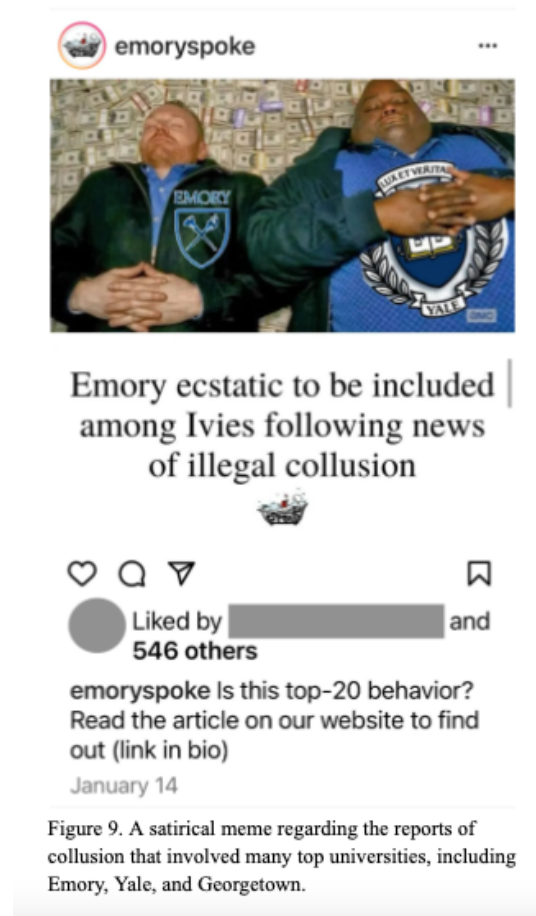


Figure 9. A satirical meme regarding the reports of collusion that involved many top universities, including Emory, Yale, and Georgetown.

have concluded that the university continues to neglect its FLI students - that they are simply there as a statistic - a marketing tool.

With the press release on the expansion of the Emory Advantage, many students were adamant, especially given the timing. A few days after the world learned about Emory's involvement in the *568 Cartel*, news coverage turned to the Emory Advantage, where past alumni were singing praises of Emory for expanding college access. It was seen that hopes of killing any connection to collusion were quite successful, except in the FLI community. Bertha responded to the news with, *"I do not trust this institution. Guarantee my mom is gonna call me tonight excited about this, then in the fall get confused and disappointed and not understand."* Others responded similarly, too, chiming in, *"It looks good on paper, but it feels so sus."* and *"How much y'all wanna bet we're gonna have to take out private loans instead of government ones now, and that's their loophole...I feel like my grant aid is gonna tank next year."*

Following news of these allegations, Emory released HERF III disbursements for \$167.09, which undermined the administration's statement during the 2036 campaign. In asking about the COVID relief funds, the institution stated that the funds were already disbursed, so when students received notifications of another round of disbursements, it was met with disdain because of the amount of money in light of recent events. Instead of trusting the institutions that have allowed these students to pursue opportunities their parents could not, students remain suspicious, and this can further hinder them from seeking help from the administration.

6.2 Confronting Club Funding Parallels between Student Leadership and Administration

While the administration has remained unsuccessful in its attempts to aid FLI students, it has brought together these students to support one another through student organizations that

celebrate the first-generation, low-income identity. However, these organizations are unable to properly assist these students when they are provided no resources to do so.

“With more than 450 student organizations ranging from club sports to the arts, there is a place for everyone. Students can find a community to share in their interests, identities, and everything else imaginable.”

Although the exact verbiage may differ among tour guides, the general gist of the statement on club culture at Emory will remain the same: there is a club - and a place - for everyone. This idea of student engagement and a welcoming atmosphere is further emphasized through the extensive programming that student organizations host and the university publicizes.

Most of these events are financially supported by the student activity fee (SAF) that is billed to students each semester. For the 2021-2022 academic year, the SAF was \$98 per semester. The SAF - equivalent to \$1.8 million - is then held by student governing bodies, who decide how these funds are distributed. Student organizations must submit organizational budgets to these student governing bodies annually to be audited. Along with countless sheets filled with rows of items and prices, organizations must also submit price documentation for each item, which requires an immense amount of time and effort. These files are then reviewed by student leaders who oversee the finances of these student governing bodies - and therefore - student organizations on campus.

In the instance of Emory Quest Scholars Network (EQSN), the organization home to Emory's QuestBridge Scholars, it had submitted a budget in May of 2019 for approximately \$6,000, in which it received \$0. In March of 2021, it had submitted a budget for approximately \$5,000, in which it received \$354.48. The funds allocated to EQSN were laughable. \$354.48 for 407 scholars on campus is equivalent to \$0.87 per person for the whole school year. Upon

receiving their budget, these students were confused and frustrated. How could they be expected to put on meaningful programming for these students if the students in charge of these clubs could not even afford a trip to the Dollar Tree for materials?

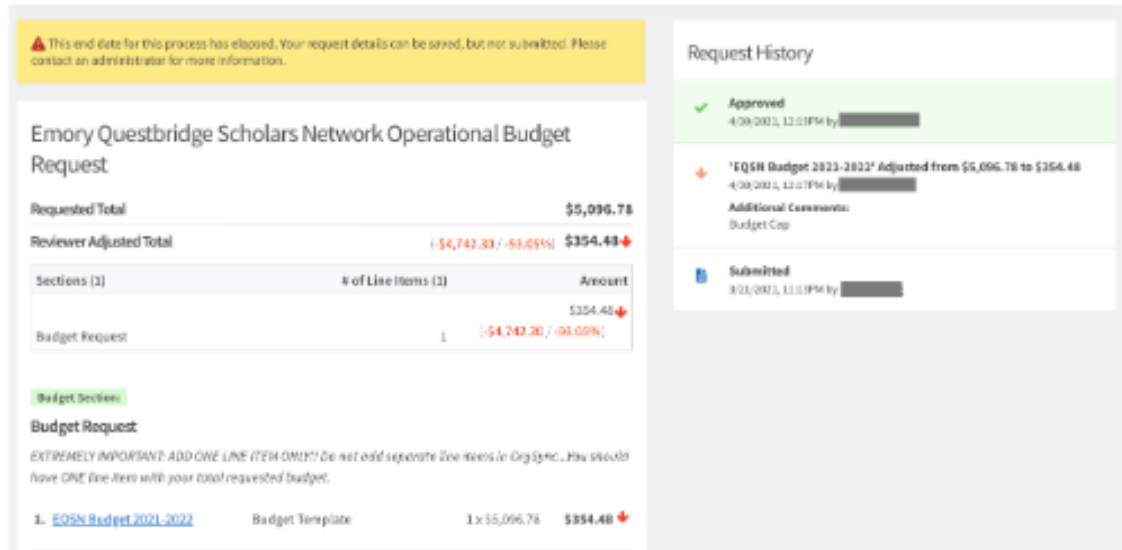


Figure 10. QuestBridge’s allocated budget for the 2021-2022 school year, including an additional comment in relation to the budget adjustment by the student governing body.

The reason for the minuscule amount was due to a budget cap (Figure 10). These policies limit how much funding an organization can request.

Newly “Recommended for Funding (RF)” chartered organizations receiving their first Operational Budget may receive up to 125% of the past academic year expenditure associated with the organization’s self-generated account.

Growing organizations (or organizations that have been given an RF charter within the past two academic years) may receive up to 110% of the past academic year’s expenditure associated with the organization’s allocated account.

Longstanding organizations (or organizations that have been given an RF charter more than two academic years ago) may receive up to 105% of the past academic year’s expenditure associated with the organization’s allocated account. (College Council n.d.)

Organizations are required to raise funds in order to apply for an RF charter to seek funding. The funds raised are then set aside in their self-generated account, and the amount becomes the basis for determining maximum disbursement to these organizations. However, asking for donations

and requiring membership fees are not feasible actions that EQSN can ask of its members, who are still in unstable financial situations. Therefore, the self-generated accounts of many clubs that advocate for FLI students tend to fall flat. And because of this, it continues to hinder these students in that they cannot receive funds that are greater than their budget cap. Ten years down the line, EQSN will continue to be underfunded since they cannot receive more than 105% of the past academic year's expenditure in the allocated account for which they received \$354.48. Meanwhile, other student organizations are able to build up the wealth of their club as they start with a sizable amount of funds that they can continue to increase with policies like the budget cap.

This leads EQSN to one option to get the funds they need to carry out their programs and events. If organizations need more funds in addition to their operational budget for the year, they can request for supplemental funding, where they must attend a supplemental funding hearing. These *hearings* have student leaders present to other student representatives of the student governing body for ten minutes on what the funds will be used for, why they are needed, and any other relevant information.

To have EQSN create a presentation on why funds are necessary seemed counterproductive. This is an organization of FLI students, students who have expected family contributions of or near zero dollars as determined by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). It should be intuitive that these students do not have the financial means to hold their events, and yet, these students found themselves preparing for a presentation consisting of *We are poor, and therefore, we have no money*. It was demeaning to beg for money in front of well-off students who sat in these positions of power.

Once the presentation concluded, questions were taken from both EQSN and the student governing body. In light of learning about the budget cap, student leaders from EQSN asked if there was any way to increase theirs and were met with, “*While your mission is noble, other executive board members are just as passionate about their cause, and we have to be equal.*” However, *Anime Club* and Emory Quest Scholars Network are *not* comparable. They are *not* equal and to suggest otherwise would disregard the equitable atmosphere that Emory has attempted - and yet has failed - to create. Funnily enough, the representative that cited equality is now running to lead that student governing body with *equity* being included in his platforms. Nevertheless, the budget cap policy is just a replication of the failed structures put in place that hampers a movement towards an all-inclusive campus.

And after everything, new generations of Emory QuestBridge Scholars will find themselves in the same situation, begging for money and solidifying the *poor* image that comes with the FLI identity. Ultimately, *this* is the future for incoming first-generation, low-income scholars.

Conclusion: Afterthoughts in Memory of Emory

“Stage 1: The initial period is one in which everything is new, exciting, and interesting for your students. It is fun for your students to explore their new environment.

Stage 2: After a time, your students realize that they must work to adjust to the new culture. This work may be stressful and students may experience a strong sense of dislocation. They may miss certain foods. They may spend a lot of time daydreaming during this period. Many students feel isolated, irritated, bewildered, depressed, or generally uncomfortable.

Stage 4: As a more thorough understanding of the host culture is required, your students will begin to feel more comfortable in their new environment. Your students feel more at home and their self-confidence grows. Everything begins to make sense.

Stage 5: At this point, your students are able to interact effectively in the new cultural environment. They find it easy to move between the two cultures.”

Karen Russell’s “St. Lucy’s Home For Girls Raised By Wolves” follows a pack of girls, whose parents are werewolves while they themselves are not, having opposable thumbs and all. Nonetheless, their words are incoherent, and their practices seem strange. However, their parents wanted better for them, so these girls eventually leave home to be reeducated for human society by nuns.

As the plot unfolds, these stages, totaling to five and taken from the *Jesuit Handbook on Lycanthropic Culture Shock*, introduce the progression of their education process. The development of the short story becomes more and more individualistic as the reader sees individual girls become separated from the pack. Eventually, the girls pass their exams, where they oust one of their own who is unable to adopt their new culture. And because they finish their process, the girls are allowed to return home - to their original environment. As the main character returns home, she recounts, “My mother recoiled from me, as if I were a stranger.

Then, she sank her teeth into my ankle, looking proud and sad. The pack waited for a display of what I had learned So, I said, telling my first human lie, ‘I’m home.’”

While absurd, this short story deeply resonated with many FLI students. They found that their experiences with Emory and higher academia were best encompassed by a story about girls raised by werewolves and rehabilitated by nuns. In hopes of a better future than their parents, these students went to Emory, where they went through a similar process to the girls at St. Lucy’s - a reeducation, so to speak. FLI students learned to stow away the characteristics of their home life in exchange for higher academia.

This process can be brutal. Because in becoming more engaged, students are often left in disillusionment with these institutions. They must come to terms with experiences that they bear witness to, and, more often than not, that undertaking is done alone. In navigating these nonsensical situations, it leaves these students in confusion, and they are left with a choice: to continue to be confused with the system or to be left behind in trying to understand it.

Although this reeducation experience that FLI scholars undergo may vary greatly, a common thread that ties together these students is their motivation in seeing it through, their *why* *Emory*: Students like twenty-two-year-old X, who signed her name next to the *X*, ultimately chose to pursue higher education in the hopes of helping the communities that they came from. In an excerpt of her personal statement for medical school, X explains why she wanted to pursue academic medicine.

The broken English stumbled out of my mom’s overly cracked lips trying to figure out if I was okay. It was a little past midnight when my mom came from work. I remember she had rushed over as if she had just had a good night’s rest. If she was tired, she tried not to show it as if it were contagious and would make me sicker than I already was. The past few months were filled with waves of fevers and surges of chest pain that were no longer bearable. Thinking it was the flu, my mom prayed for it to pass, but instead, she found herself holding me in the emergency room.

“She needs time to rest.”

Rest was a foreign concept to my single-parent, immigrant household. Even before starting school, I never had the chance to sit still. I stayed at home while my mom worked to make ends meet, so I cleaned in the hopes that it would fix our issues of scraping by. Needless to say, the house was spotless. As I became older, there were more responsibilities, as I took on a job to help support my family. It seemed never-ending as the schoolwork piled on, too. I devoted more than I ever could to have a future that my mom never could. So, I never faltered, and most certainly, never rested.

As time passed, I was old enough to know that I should prioritize work over my health. I started working around thirty hours a week to help pay for the bills that had accumulated. Slowly, but surely, I started to feel numb to the pain. In the end, I ended up at an urgent care – and then, the emergency room - because I ignored what my body was trying to tell me.

This time, I was forced to rest to heal my ribs from an intense case of Costochondritis. I was alone because I did not want to hold back my family from earning the money we had so little of. So, as I lay there, I went through some sort of enlightenment I guess you could call it. I could not help but think that it is so common for people of low socioeconomic statuses to have this mentality: that health and success are a trade-off.

Health disparities are so common with minority communities, who many might label as uneducated. And, COVID-19 further highlighted that people - like my family - have no choice but to work to live at the expense of contracting this deadly disease. Because of this, I want to be able to work towards ridding the stigma that we must choose between being healthy or being successful which is so often seen in low socioeconomic areas. By going into academic medicine, my background as low-income in conjunction with my anthropological foundation can inform and improve knowledge on patient care to see the change that I hope to bring forth, which I will further pass on by cultivating future physicians who can address the barriers that we see with these communities.

Similarly, other students aspire to help disadvantaged communities. For AJ and Francine, they are pursuing law because “they wanted to have a more active role in helping the specific people [immigrants due to their family’s experience immigrating to America] they wanted to help”. These students have done and will continue to do whatever it takes to reach their end goal, even if that means having to throw their sleep and sanity out the window. They find themselves constantly reassuring themselves, saying it will be worth it in the end - that the diploma in their hands will make everything more than worthwhile.

When asked about her experiences at Emory, X would have described it as the best time of her life, an experience she would not change for the world. She gave her well-rehearsed *why Emory?* spiel every week to prospective students, going so far as to meet with some online, and it ended up being pretty convincing. She soon found, with each new class, students walked up to her saying, “X, you are the reason I am here at Emory.”

“To those students, I am truly sorry. I glorified Emory in a way that made it seem like the best place in the world, and I am sure that I made your transition to higher academia that much harder. But, I think at that time I thought those words were true.

Idiotic. Insane. In denial.

It was what I believed was the truth. But in trying my best here at Emory, it caused me to crash - and hard. I was Icarus, flying too close to the sun, with no one to catch my tragic fall.

In other words, shit had never hit the fan so hard.”

7.1 The Emory Employee

In the Fall Semester of 2021, X was approached by student leaders to serve in an advisor capacity on an event to thank Emory employees, namely those not in positions of power: the dining, custodial, and transportation staff. She was more than happy to help and saw it as a perfect extension of an initiative that she was already leading, and it hit close to home for her. Initially, she was optimistic. The event’s inception was what pushed her to see that good could and would eventually come.

However, it went through various stages, each time getting further and further away from what X had hoped for. The administration offered a budget of approximately \$12,000, urging for it to be spent on cookies and hot beverages from Emory’s catering company, and X soon found herself to be the only student representative at these meetings with Emory’s offices. The student governing body that had approached her disappeared, and the event fell on X’s shoulders, and the immense weight of it crushed her.

After too many meetings to count, the date of the event started approaching quickly. The week of the event, the student governing body had returned in some capacity to help after almost everything had been fleshed out. X had decided that faculty should be allowed to come if they wanted, but the event was aimed more towards staff; ultimately, she wanted faculty to mingle with staff to express their gratitude. The representative of the partnering student governing body stated that *“they don’t know if that makes sense since faculty are shown appreciation, and we want to focus this on staff and hourly employees”*. This was followed by *“the power/financial/social gap between faculty and hourly employees is so large”*.

The conversation sat weirdly with X, and she felt it was best encapsulated by the phrase, *the class version of mansplaining*. X felt like she was too familiar to be taught about these gaps by one of the most prolific student leaders on campus. It was more than a jab, if anything because they knew that X worked closely with first-generation, low-income scholars. To make matters worse, other student leaders voiced their frustrations with X, yelling that it was unfair that these workers were only receiving cookies when they have so little and blaming her for not doing more.

“Not them telling me about gaps. Like I think I know. I am literally living the gap, like huh? I can’t anymore.” For X, it was a really disheartening experience because these students were supposedly fighting on behalf of others all while disregarding and belittling first-generation, low-income students that they sat next to on a daily basis. By the time the event came around, X had already gone through too many mental breakdowns to count. However, what really put the nail in her coffin happened with the aftermath of the event.

As the event drew to a close, there were mounds of cookies left - so many trays that had not been touched. *“There was no way I was going to let some rich ass Emory student take these cookies that I sat through hours of meetings for,”* X recounted.

On rare occasions, her mom would bring home a leftover sandwich from work at events like these, and it would make eight-year-old X’s day to know that she would have something special that night. With that in mind, she packed hundreds of cookies to be distributed to these employees to take home to enjoy with their families.

But doing exactly that resulted in the termination of an employee: a forty-nine-year-old staff member in dining services. This particular employee was kind enough to help in passing out cookies to co-workers who had shifts during the event, bringing them to the preparatory rooms behind the counters. However, his kindness was repaid with severe repercussions because of an institutional rule that prohibited items from being brought into the back. Without a second thought, the floor manager fired the dining worker.

With his knees on the floor and tears in his eyes, he pleaded for his job. However, he was met with no regard until a white student talked to the manager on his behalf. Eventually, he was reinstated, thankfully, but X’s aspirations and motivations were uprooted, a byproduct of what culminated. And while X had no stakes in this instance, it was traumatic to say the least.

“I really struggled the next few weeks because I most definitely had PTSD from the event, which made me feel even guiltier because like I wasn’t the one who literally lost their job.” She cried for days on end - in meetings, in lab, in class, and even in the moments where she thought she was better - because she felt at fault. The thought of dropping out was no longer a joke but an idea that she wanted to come to fruition.



Figure 11: Emory President Greg Fenves' social media post thanking staff members from campus services, dining, and campus life in regards to the Emory Employee Appreciation Event.

From this event, X went through a sort of enlightenment period. Seeing posts, even by President Fenves (*Figure 11*), about the event made her visibly upset, where they shared pictures of the event and thanked these workers (Greg Fenves, 2022). It felt very performative, and she did not want her name associated with it. She desperately needed some sort of closure, so she explained what had occurred to the administration. This was met with “*Are you sure that happened?*” and “*There was probably another reason he got fired.*” On hearing this, X sat there in disbelief, dumbstruck that there was no benefit of the doubt. This, in turn, emphasized the idea that

her *being at Emory* was, in some ways, pushing her further away from her hopes of helping people she truly cared about. She did not want to reach a stage where patients became merely cases or - in cases like these - workers became simply that, workers. She did not want to be disconnected, unable to understand and empathize with her home and others. In seeking answers to her distress, she spoke with peers, who went through a similar phase.

This sort of disconnectedness was ubiquitous. Students felt they were becoming out-of-touch with the communities they originally came here for. On top of navigating institutions that were simply not made with them in mind, first-generation, low-income students somehow must push their anxieties aside to walk across the stage come May, crossing their fingers that the

system did not change them but that they have changed the system. And while obtaining a degree will open so many doors, students wish it did not close the most important one.

However, I will not be closing this chapter - this door so to speak - just yet. Because the words that I have written thus far couldn't encapsulate the embodied experiences that X witnessed. Like feminist ethnographer Gina Ulysse said, there were still these "ethnographic collectibles (excess bits unfit for publication because they were too personal, too raw, or seemingly trivial) that I did believe still needed and ought to be shared" (Ulysse 2017). Because while writing this ethnography had brought some sense of closure to my time here at Emory as an FLI scholar, I was forced to simultaneously work through these issues that I sought to explain. It couldn't be done with this black-on-white reproduction that remained unmoved. No, *it* had to be experienced. It felt wrong to tell the story of X in this hierarchical way that paid homage to institutions that continued to inflict damage.

What had happened in the aftermath of the employee event struck X to her core. This embodied ethnographic experience crystallized Emory's failures against its first-generation, low-income students and its working-class people. It is a demonstration of performative action on behalf of the administration, as they attempted to promote better working conditions for working-class people while also using the same opportunity to strip a black employee of his livelihood. Informed by Ulysse's *Rasanblaj*, as well as Trinh Minh-ha's *Reassemblage*, it is here that the only way to effectively articulate this traumatic embodied experience is through this more personal experimental mode of feminist ethnography, of manipulating form through poetry and perspective, in an attempt to try to make sense of that which does not (Ulysse 2017, Minh-ha 1989). This unconventional approach is a physical representation of what happened, how it forced those involved to confront what had happened abruptly similar to *this* ending.

This visceral experience of what is to come is simply a manifestation of the embodied experience that I happened upon - that I certainly did not ask for, and yet, it was given to me anyways. X I signed my life away on the line like others before me had. I - no X - I mean - it was a difficult

-- B R E A K --

I never took a break,

And I guess you could say that broke me in the end.

I always worked and **worked and worked** because I was told that **hard** work pays off.

Sleepovers, parties, homecoming, prom, the senior picnic, first-year formal.

I skipped all of those things so that I could work.

Working through work,

I *worked*.

And then, I didn't.

When I was in high school, I thought I had my whole life planned out, not to out myself as that stereotypical Asian girl. But, I knew what I wanted because I knew what I didn't want. It was as simple as that. I didn't want the life that my family had. I didn't want to be like my mom. I didn't want to be like my two older brothers. And, I mean I didn't know my father, but I knew I didn't want to be like him. As much as I love them, even with all of the wrongs they had hit me with, I wanted something different because I thought I deserved it. I owed it to myself to try.

Middle-school me wanted to be a pediatrician, and it seemed so easy to say that at the time because I didn't know how hard it was going to be. I wanted to make a change. I wanted to change healthcare. But, that was what I wanted up until, yeah, *then*.

I'm not trying to exaggerate this or get pity points or compare trauma, but I literally killed myself in high school. I joined too many clubs and worked more than full-time, all while juggling a course load only composed of APs. I knew that state schools were not bad, but I wanted better - I wanted Emory. I worked so hard - I didn't know it at the time - but I did.

I taught - and am still teaching - art to little, and not so little, kids in this small art school because I knew *money makes the world go 'round*. When I mean work hard, I guess you could say I worked myself to death. My senior year, I went to work with food poisoning. In between me puking my soul out of my body, I worked. I puked so hard that the sternum of my rib cage broke. I worked, and then, I took my AP exams.

But, I was happy because I had a plan.

I was happy because I was going to see the change that I wanted.

Sometimes, I say that I didn't deserve my acceptance to Emory, but I think deep down, I knew I did. I worked against all the literal shit that was thrown in my direction, and I even cleaned it up, leaving everything more spotless than how it was found. Sure, navigating the college process alone is hard enough as it is, and I do not wish it on anyone, but do you know how hard it is to feel like you are the only grown-up? Like you are the only one who knows what's going on? Like you are the only one who *actually* cares?

My first three years at Emory, I took too many credit hours. 19, 20, 21, 22 credit hours. Each semester was filled with more than enough work, but I kept adding more work because *shit hadn't hit the fan yet*. I thought that was what I needed to do to get in. Along with doing research in a lab and serving on the executive board for too many clubs to count, I continued working full-time as a student. I did *that* because I genuinely liked doing all of those things. But also, I did *that* because I wanted to get in.

I was struggling in my courses, so I slept negative eight hours a night for more time to work, and when I was extremely sleep deprived, I would only sleep for a solid thirty minutes in the library so that I could continue to work. I was lucky if I remembered to eat. I had no time for anything, but I tried to make time for everything.

But, I was failing. 76, 62, 54. I had never scored so low. I ended organic chemistry with a C, and my GPA ended up in the trash. How could I go to medical school if I couldn't even get in, if I couldn't even pass chemistry? I studied so hard and yet failed so easily.

And, I kept on failing. Not just academically, but socially too. I had friends at the time, but it felt performative. Because I was working so many hours, I was only on campus for classes or for clubs or for late nights in club libs. I spent so much time studying, trying to make things right. I didn't have time to go out with friends, and because of that, they didn't make time for me. I just couldn't understand why everything was so hard, and I cried outside of Few Hall well-past midnight, alone. I did not know who to talk to, so out of pure desperation, I called my mom, and then, I was fine because I knew what I wanted. And so, I *worked*.

The following Sunday my uncle, who is what I would consider more than comfortable financially, drove me back to campus after I worked two twelve-hour shifts that weekend.

I heard you are dropping out of Emory. I mean Emory is hard, and some people can't handle it. You know what? Not everyone can be smart.

This was followed with...

Your cousins are so smart. This one plays piano so well. That one just won an award.

This one, that one, this, that, this, that.

After *that*, I never told my mom anything.

I never told anyone anything.

Instead, I just worked.

Fast forward to August 2021, my last fall semester as an undergraduate student, I thought I was what Emory would consider...*flourishing*. It was *hard*, but I was *fine* because I knew what I *wanted*. After so much pushing and pulling, I finally brought my GPA up to a 3.8, even with a failing grade in organic chemistry, which is no easy feat might I add. Requirements for anthropology & human biology, visual arts, and the pre-medicine track were basically done. I was mostly on track to complete my - this - honors thesis while simultaneously working on another research project in a biochemistry lab, even though the two had absolutely no overlap at all. And, I held pretty high positions in various student organizations. Because of *that*, I was able to bring about a lot of change, even if I have difficulty admitting it in public.

I found a community in QuestBridge, and the love that I had for it and the people grew exponentially over the years.

Ambitious. Brave. Caring. Dedicated. Encouraging. Fearless. Genuine. Honorable.

They were all of this and more, so I wanted more for them because they deserved better. These were people, even if I knew a fraction of them, that I cared for deeply, who I absolutely adored and wished nothing but the best for. So, I put in as much work as I could, fixing little things here and there because I wanted it to be *better* for them.

I put in the work. Even through the pandemic. Even when I slept in my car to care for my grandparents who contracted COVID. Even when my home was falling apart. Even with all of the crazy that COVID created, I started a mentorship program that connected FLI students at Emory with FLI alumni of Emory. I did that because I cared. I didn't see it as me losing time but as me creating worthwhile memories for people who I loved.

I just wanted things to be better.

That's all I ever wanted.

That's why I do the things I do, even if it kills me in the end.

When I was asked to help with this event, I immediately agreed, no questions asked. It was important to me, especially since these workers are treated as if they are invisible. I wanted them to feel like people *because they are people*. I just wanted things to be different for them, so I put in a lot of work yet again, but it was because I cared. I sat through meeting after meeting. I fixed problem after problem. Nothing was done in time, and it caused a lot of stress. However, I thought the work was going to pay off in the end.

Everything that I had done was because I cared.

~~I had no words.~~

It made me feel small

i was small

nothing made sense

i didn't have the means to cope.

i made promises that i desperately wanted to b r e a k

Because i was desperate

Because i couldn't comprehend

It would've been so much easier if i was ^{high}

But, i said i didn't want to be like my brother

It would've been so much easier if i was under the influence

But, i said i didn't want to be like my father.

Instead, i pushed everyone f u r t h e r a n d f u r t h e r a w a y

After everything that i had done, i couldn't understand why he got fired. He brought those cookies into the back because of me. It felt like my fault. And, it was my fault. Yet, he was at fault.

And, i had no right to be sad. i wasn't the one who got in trouble, but i was still sad. i was the guilty one, which made me even guiltier because i had no right to be sad.

i tried to fix what was broken.

And, i fixed it.

Well, fixing.

Hey, this is breaking!

fixing

fixed finally

kind of fixed

nope breaking

breaking

fixing

breaking

fixing

breaking

f i x i n g

breaking

f i x i n g

f i x i n g

breaking

f i x i n g

fixing until...

fixing until fixed

but now

I'm breaking

I'm broken.

I'm broke.

In trying to fix things, i somehow made things worse. i killed myself for an event that didn't change anything. It didn't make anything better. It just caused more harm, and i think knowing that caused me to question everything.

What was the point of me even helping anyone?

Sure, he got his job back in the end, but it was so stupid. If that student wasn't there, i genuinely don't think he would've gotten it back. i just couldn't comprehend. The unnecessary amount of trauma that he was put through was my fault.

What was the point of me working so hard?

i worked so hard because i wanted to help. But in helping the people that i intentionally came to Emory for, i caused more harm. i quit everything that weekend. i was no longer working. i was no longer pre-med or pre-grad. i was literally nothing. i couldn't even put into words what i was thinking.

There is no point.

i blamed myself for weeks.

i cried for weeks.

i didn't do work for weeks.

There was probably another reason for why he got fired. Is that what financial stability brings? Is that what privilege means? Is that when everything that is wrong becomes right?

If that's the case, i don't want *it*.

i didn't know what i wanted anymore because what i worked so hard for originally was no longer something that i wanted. i kind of lost my sense of direction. But, i knew what i didn't want. i didn't want Emory anymore. i literally didn't see the point in me going to school anymore. i didn't want to be *here* anymore.

in
this case

i started as a charity case

but i ended as a basket case

it is so dumb that i am writing this because nothing is going to change. i couldn't do anything for him, so what could i do?

So, what was the point?

It is quite ironic that i'm writing about realities of first-generation, low-income students, and in facing those very real struggles, i literally didn't submit my thesis on time because there was just no point.

Nothing is going to change.

So, why was i going to let Emory change me?

Are you okay?

i'm fine.

i mean that is the fine,

the fee,

the price,

i mean that is the price that i had to pay

4

paying it

Forward

Move forward

Move on

Just try to move

Why can't i move?

i was just so tired of trying so hard. There was absolutely no reason for *it*. i now saw everything that i skipped as sacrifices.

And, i couldn't help but cry because i felt so stupid.

It was yet another failure of mine.

i wanted those things back.

i wanted my time back.

i wanted.....to quit Emory.

It's *self-inflicted* because i care.

If i don't,

who will?

It just isn't worth it.

i don't want this

No more.

i don't even know

Anymore.

In the heart of dear old Emory
Where the sun doth shine,
That is where our hearts are turning
'Round old Emory's shrine.
We will ever sing thy praises,
Sons and daughters true.
Hail we now our Alma Mater,
Hail the gold and blue!
Tho' the years around us gather,
Crowned with love and cheer,
Still the memory of old Emory
Grows to us more dear.
We will ever sing thy praises,
Sons and daughters true.
Hail we now our alma mater,
Hail the gold and blue!

More?

i don't want it

...Any more?

--

Maybe, they were

right?

Maybe, i am dumb?

bmud?

mudb?

That's not it,

right?

dumb?

domb?

donb?

done.

right?

Why can't i do anything right?

Am i alright?

being right

left behind

|

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