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## Dear Student Affairs: Reflections from a First-Generation HESA Graduate Student

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## Dear Student Affairs: Reflections from a First-Generation HESA Graduate Student

Tatiana L. Havens

*This letter is an invitation for first-generation and economically minoritized student affairs practitioners to reflect on the multiple identities they hold within the U.S. higher education system. The Critical Cultural Wealth Model is a theoretical framework that explicitly examines first-generation and economically minoritized (FGEM) college students' academic and career development. This framework is used as a guide to explore how the dominance of Whiteness informs the historic and present construction of social and financial support structures for FGCS students in higher education, and how these structures ultimately fail to support FGCS on an individual and systemic level.*

*Keywords:* First-gen, low income, barriers, higher education

I am nearly seven months away from receiving a Master of Education in Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration, but I am far from the similar celebratory excitement I felt in May 2019. I am a first-generation college student, and I am feeling disappointed. There is an immense, pulsing swell of gratitude for the support that led me here, and please do not conflate my complicated emotions for ignorance of the profound privilege of possessing two postsecondary degrees. I write this letter as a way to create space for self-healing while providing a potential opportunity for affirmation and validation as a means of community care for fellow first-generation college students who may see themselves reflected through what is shared here. There is a sort of empty, hollow ache in my chest. Now, I have never run a marathon, but I feel I have reached mile twenty three. There is a miscommunication between my mind, body, and soul. It is heavy. I will make it to the finish line but I am desperately seeking space and time to heal from the realization that

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the gratification I, and my family, have long sought will not find me when I cross that stage.

As both a first-generation college student (FGCS) and aspiring student affairs professional, I am deeply interested in the FGCS experience and ways higher education claims to support and promote FGCS development and persistence. For the purposes of this letter, first-generation college students (FGCS) are defined as a student whose parents and family have not attended college, are unfamiliar with the U.S. postsecondary education system, and have not received any form of a postsecondary degree (Museus & Chang, 2021). Recent data suggests nearly 31% of all first year, full time college students across the nation are FGCS (Museus & Chang, 2021). I strive to center transparency, vulnerability, and wellness in my work, and it is important to me that I explore the present challenges that impact the college student experience in my work. As a white, FGCS, woman graduate student and student affairs practitioner, it is my responsibility to critically examine and reflect on how I can strive to decenter dominance in order to fully understand and support the needs of all students, centering those most marginalized by the culture of exclusion and white supremacy in the U.S. higher education system. In this letter, I explore how the dominance of whiteness informs the historic and present construction of social and financial support structures for FGCS students in higher education, and how these structures ultimately fail to support FGCS on an individual and systemic level.

### **Guiding Theoretical Framework**

The Critical Cultural Wealth Model (CCWM) is a framework designed by Dr. Patton Garriott (2020) to explore the unique experiences of first-generation and economically minoritized students (FGEM) and “challenges researchers to move beyond individualistic, monolithic conceptualizations of FGEM student’s academic adjustment and career development” (pp. 89) . Prior research on FGEM students’ development centers social capital and career theory, but these were not specifically designed to understand the intersections of power, oppression, and privilege that FGEM students experience throughout their collegiate career (Garriott, 2020). Also, prior research often examines FGEM challenges on an individual level as opposed to exploring a power analysis of institutional structures and responsibility in supporting FGEM student development (Garriott, 2020). The CCWM derives from Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model as it aims to

challenge deficit-based narratives of social capital that pose FGEM, Students of Color, and all marginalized student populations as “damaged” or “lacking” in assets, strength, and capital required for college success in comparison to their peers (Garriott, 2020, pp. 82). The CCWM is comprised of four core tenets, structural and institutional conditions, social-emotional crossroads, career self-authorship, and cultural wealth, that aim to explore the “complex identities and experiences of FGEM students” (Garriott, 2020, pp. 84).

These four central tenets of the CCWM further illuminate various dimensions within their considerations of the overall complex experience and development of FGEM academic and career development. The first component, structural and institutional conditions, explores FGEM students’ challenges as symptoms of oppression, and this component refers to institutional policies and procedures that lead to five forms of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Garriott, 2020). Garriott (2020) emphasizes that these five dimensions are not mutually exclusive and may serve as a guiding framework to understand the relative cycle of power, oppression, and privilege a FGEM student experiences. The second component, social-emotional crossroads, refers to tensions FGEM students experience when navigating their college experience and familial relationships, and this component encapsulates three dimensions: campus cultural fit, normative capital, and school-family integration (Garriott, 2020). Garriott (2020) notes that one’s intersectional experiences with structural and institutional conditions may influence and shape their social-emotional crossroads throughout their experience.

The third component of the CCWM is career self-authorship, derived from Baxter Magolda’s (2008) self-authorship theory, is defined as a FGEM student’s ability to make career decisions that are self-reflective, informed by and account for context, and incorporate one’s understanding of their capacity for agency and problem solving when faced with challenges (Garriott, 2020). Two core dimensions of career self-authorship in the CCWM are work volition and career adaptability, and Garriott (2020) highlights “FGEM students’ social-emotional experiences should relate to their career self-authorship and that career self-authorship should be associated with academic persistence, career or major choice satisfaction, and well-being” (pp. 87). These three components work together to provide context and understanding for the CCWM, and the fourth component, cultural wealth, further emphasizes the role institutional oppression has on FGEM students’ development.

The fourth component of the CCWM is cultural wealth, and this component is largely informed by Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model (Garriott, 2020). Cultural wealth theory, grounded in critical race theory, highlights how communities of color develop and bring alternative forms of capital to cope with systemic oppression, which are not recognized in dominant narratives of social capital especially in higher education (Yosso, 2005; Garriott, 2020). In the CCWM, as informed by Yosso's (2005) model, three forms of capital are exhibited through the cultural wealth component: family and community capital, critical consciousness, and resilience (Garriott, 2020). Garriott (2020) highlights:

“Importantly, the CCWM requires that practitioners attend to environmental, structural, and political influences on FGEM students' well-being and success. This means that college personnel and career counselors must step out of the confines of their one-on-one roles with FGEM students and intervene at institutional and policy levels.” (pp. 90).

The CCWM offers a tailored theoretical perspective applicable to FGEM students' experience, and suggests that understanding institutional and structural factors, FGEM students' cultural wealth and social-emotional experiences can further inform our understanding of their academic and career development throughout their collegiate experience (Garriott, 2020). The CCWM framework highlights a perspective that will be applied throughout the remainder of this letter as I cover some structural and institutional challenges that influence the social-emotional experience of FGCS, myself included.

### **Whiteness**

A one-size-fits-all approach to first-generation student support programs is damaging to and fails to recognize the unique experiences of first-generation Students of Color and economically minoritized students. The history of exclusion in higher education has led to the field's continued reinforcement of dominant ideologies and identities, most notably whiteness and white supremacy. In her work to reimagine college student development through a femcrit perspective, Robbins (2019) shares:

“Student affairs educators have long argued that holistic development of individual students should be central to the mission of U.S. higher education, but this preoccupation with individual development may constitute a grand narrative serving patriarchal, capitalist, white supremacist interests” (p. 41).

FGCS support programs center the celebration of the profound accomplishment of being the first in your family to receive a college degree, but often also fail to address and support the development of the multiple other identities students hold in addition to being FG. Foundational research on FGCS, often cited for program development, centers the challenges these students face on an individual level as opposed to a structural, systemic analysis of institutional barriers (Garriott, 2020; Museus & Chang, 2021). Most notably, when FGCS support staff and programs fail to recognize the differing perspectives and experiences of white FGCS students and Students of Color, economically minoritized, FGCS students, they further Robbins’ (2019) notion of perpetuating dominance in serving capitalist and white supremacist interests of individual prosperity as opposed to collective community care through a call for systemic change.

## **Race and Class**

The failure to construct a raceclass conscious FGCS support program results in the erasure of the unique collegiate experiences of first-generation and economically minoritized Students of Color. Scholars have argued that race is an intimate and integral component of one’s personal identity development, and it is critical to understand the influence that racial identity development has on a student’s perception of self and their environment (Sarcedo et. al., 2015; Museus et. al., 2018; Ma et. al., 2021). Sarcedo and colleagues (2015) explored Leonardo’s (2013) raceclass frame to understand the influence of raceclassist microaggressions on FG and economically minoritized Students of Color. Sarcedo and colleagues (2015) utilized counterstorytelling as their guiding methodology, empowering the personal narrative of their participants, to further understand how raceclassist microaggressions affect the sense of belonging and self-efficacy of FGEM Students of Color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). Their findings indicated that raceclassist microaggressions have a deeper emotional effect on FGEM Students of Color because of the intersection of their multiple identities, and these raceclassist assumptions perpetuate “most devastatingly the implicit message that FGEM students of

color do not belong in college” (Sarcedo et. al., 2015, pp. 12).

Within the context of the CCWM, FGEM Students of Color persistent endurance of raceclassist microaggressions further develops their critical consciousness and resilience capital as they must consistently rely on their “accumulated knowledge gained from resisting oppressive forces to take action and advocate for themselves” (Garriott, 2020, pp. 88). Microaggressions can cause students to develop feelings of isolation, self-doubt, imposter syndrome, and the effects raceclassist microaggressions may have a significant impact on FGEM students’, especially FGEM Students of Color, academic and career development (Leonardo, 2013; Sarcedo et. al., 2015; Garriott, 2020; Ma et. al., 2021). Kendall (2020) mentions, “When the obstacles you face vary by race and class, then so too do your priorities” (pp.3), and it is important for practitioners and educators to understand the effects of whiteness and white supremacy culture on FGEM students, and to be intentional in their construction of learning spaces, whether within a classroom or not, to be receptive to the varied responsibilities and priorities of FGEM students based on their racial and class identities. For example, asking and expecting FGEM students to leave whatever challenges they may be facing “at the door” when entering a learning space could mean your ask implies that they should not have even come through the door. Sarcedo and colleagues (2015) powerfully remind student affairs practitioners that “Whiteness, like a microaggression,...stays hidden from view to allow its destructive life cycle to continue unchallenged” (pp. 13) and it is critical to advocate for institutionally supported programs that highlight the prevalence and harm of Whiteness to white students, faculty and staff to combat the perpetuation of white supremacy culture, ideas and interests in higher education (Sarcedo et. al., 2015; Garriott, 2020).

### **Deficit-Based Thinking**

FGCS support programs are designed to help students navigate the ‘hidden curriculum’ of higher education institutions (Garriott, 2020; Wilcox et. al., 2021), but we, as student affairs professionals, fail to ask the most important question: why is the curriculum for successfully navigating a collegiate experience allowed to be hidden? The hidden curriculum alludes to the prolonged tendency of higher education institutions to privilege the experiences of white, middle-to-upper class students (Sarcedo et. al., 2015; Garriott, 2020). Also, researchers have long used theories not specifically designed to examine the experience of FGCS which often suggests FGCS

are seeking capital in their pursuit of higher education as opposed to acknowledging the value they inherently possess regardless of their proximity to postsecondary education (Garriott, 2020). When scholars and practitioners approach FGCS program design with a deficit mindset, they focus on their perceived barriers for FGCS, fail to critically examine institutional structure and policy, and ultimately place the burden for success on FGCS advocacy and resiliency (Garriott, 2020; Ma et. al., 2021; Wilcox et. al., 2021). Furthermore, this mentality reflects Robbins (2019) ideology of individual student development through serving an individual subset population, FGCS, as opposed to questioning the capitalistic and white supremacist interests that allow for higher education to be exceptionally challenging to navigate. In promoting this idea in program development, we force FGCS to assimilate to the dominant, normative culture, Whiteness, as opposed to directing our energy toward program and systemic development that embraces accessibility and universal design to best serve a diverse student population.

### **Who's the Imposter?**

There are many internal and external stressors involved with being a first-generation college student that impact a student's self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and overall ability to obtain their degree. The prevalence and dominance of Whiteness in higher education systemic structure and policy further emphasizes the culture of exclusion that influences the social emotional well-being of FGCS, economically minoritized students, Students of Color (Sarcedo et. al., 2015; Museus et. al., 2018; Ma et. al., 2021; Museus & Chang, 2021). Furthermore, the absence of meaningful connections, representation, and relevant learning opportunities on campus may cause intense feelings of isolation, confusion, guilt, and anguish for FGCS (Engle and Tinto, 2008; Swanbrow et. al., 2017; Museus et. al., 2018; Museus & Chang, 2021).

### **Mental Health and Well-Being**

FGCS report increased rates of depressive symptoms, posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms, lesser life satisfaction, and higher levels of single-event traumatic stress (Swanbrow Becker et. al., 2017). Some FGCS report feeling a strong psychological and emotional distancing between themselves and their families as well as tension navigating their racial, ethnic, gender and professional roles and identities (Swanbrow Becker et. al., 2017; Museus et. al., 2018; Wilcox et. al., 2021). Additionally, Swanbrow et. al (2017)

identified that FGCS experience higher levels of family achievement guilt, meaning they feel guilty about their educational achievements while their family members have not had similar access to postsecondary education. FGCS are often left to navigate exclusive campus communities, multiple identities, and the confusing system of higher education with little structural support from staff, faculty, fellow peers, and their families. In their scholarship, Moreno (2021) centers the familial guilt that Latine students experience as a result of pursuing college in addition to navigating their familial relationships and potential responsibility. FGCS are shifting family tradition by pursuing higher education, and the stress of balancing their familial and academic expectations may significantly impact their ability and desire to pursue the completion of their degree. Within the context of the CCWM, Garriott (2020) cites how FGCS' motivation to support their family and their communities allows them to stay resilient in face of institutional oppression and exclusion throughout their collegiate experience. Sense of belonging is a success factor commonly examined alongside the FGCS experience, and recent scholarship has indicated that FGCS' feelings of belonging are tied to their overall mental wellness.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Social support and feeling a sense of connectedness to campus is strongly linked to college student's persistence, retention, and graduation (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ma et. al., 2021; Museus & Chang, 2021). FGCS' feelings of belonging may be directly and indirectly influenced by the campus climate and presence of a collective community culture (Museus et. al., 2018; Museus & Chang, 2021). Although higher education is built on a foundation of individuality, Museus and Chang (2021) study the value of collectivist communities on FGCS' sense of belonging on college campuses. Their findings suggest campus communities who actively develop programs and structural supports that provide opportunities for FGCS to connect with one another may see an increase in FGCS' feelings of belonging within the community (Museus & Chang, 2021). Also, Museus and Chang (2021) suggest FGCS may experience an increased sense of belonging if relevant learning opportunities were available to discuss topics applicable to their communities.

Within the context of CCWM, FGEM students experience a critical consciousness about their social positionality and are often concerned with supporting their family and communities, so opportunities where FGCS can draw direct connections between their learning and their aspirations

for their family and community would increase their feelings of belonging and validation in their pursuit of postsecondary education (Garriott, 2020; Museus et. al., 2018; Museus & Chang, 2021). Additionally, “campus fit”, meaning FGCS perception of their sense of belonging, is considered to be a social-emotional experience that influences academic and career outcomes for FGCS (Garriott, 2020; Wilcox et. al., 2021). FGCS exhibit resilience in their navigation of the ‘hidden curriculum’ of resources and knowledge about accessing academic support, financial resources like grants and scholarships that facilitate successful academic and career outcomes (Garriott, 2020; Ma & Shea, 2021; Museus & Chang, 2021; Wilcox et. al., 2021) Sacedo and colleagues (2015) highlight how the prevalence of racism and classism in higher education cause harm to FGEM students of Color in the academy, and Museus and Chang (2021) assert that student affairs practitioners must be explicit in recognizing how present structures within higher education privilege the experience of continuing generation students. There are significant areas of growth within the field for building more inclusive campus cultures for historically excluded student populations.

### **Economic Stress**

According to recent research, FGCS are more likely to apply for financial aid, borrow loans, and to take on large educational loans than their continuing generation peers (Furquim et. al., 2017; Wilcox et. al., 2021). Despite this population’s growing presence in higher education, there is very little research conducted focusing on the borrowing patterns and behaviors of FGCS (Furquim et. al., 2017). However, more recent research focuses on the influence of economic stress, specifically student loan debt, on occupational satisfaction and delay of life milestones in FGCS (Wilcox et. al., 2021). There is very little research on the economic stress experienced by FGEM graduate students, and this section of the paper aims to center the unique choices and challenges FGEM graduate students face as these are central to my life as I move toward finalizing my career as a first-generation college student in the classroom.

### **Financial Aid**

It is no secret that college is expensive and research has repeatedly highlighted staggering evidence demonstrating the financial barriers students face in attempts to enroll in postsecondary education pursuits (Rhodes, 2021; Wilcox

et. al., 2021). Although research has shown the increase in tuition through inflation (Furquim et. al., 2017), the financial aid timeline expected of prospective college students poses an additional, far less examined, barrier to post-secondary enrollment. In a phone interview with Jessica Smith, the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC) GUIDE (Giving Undergraduates Information and Direction in their Education) Program Coordinator, she shared her belief that this timeline is a 'hidden' barrier, meaning we understand cost is a common barrier but the actual process is less discussed, often cited by the high school students in Vermont (J. Smith, personal communications, October 21, 2021). The VSAC GUIDE program directly supports Vermont student's financial component of the college-going and decision process, and a large barrier is the billing and financial aid timeline for students is too quick and not transparent enough to feel accessible for anyone (J. Smith, personal communications, October 21, 2021). Students who are constantly worried about being able to pay their bills and avoiding fees are unable to focus on their academics in the same way as their financially comfortable peers, furthering feelings of isolation, inferiority, and imposter syndrome in FGCS (Furquim et. al., 2017; Rhodes, 2021; Wilcox et. al., 2021).

### **Student Debt Crisis**

The total student debt in the United States has reached over \$1.7 billion, and economists estimate that the debt will accumulate to \$2 billion by the end of 2021 (Johnson, 2019; Wilcox et. al., 2021). From 2006 to 2020, student debt grew by 232% while mortgage debt only grew by 24% in the same period (Wilcox et. al., 2021). Research has shown student debt is related to difficulty paying basic needs, is negatively associated with home ownership, and has been shown to delay major life milestones like marriage and family formation (Wilcox et. al., 2021). Recent studies have shown that FGCS are 8 percent more likely than their continuing generation peers to owe at least \$10,000 in loans and 6 percent more likely to owe at least \$20,000 than their peers (Furquim et. al., 2017). FGCS are more likely to rely on student loans to finance their education, and the consequences of borrowing are likely to have a more adverse impact on this population of students as well (Furquim et. al., 2017; Wilcox et. al., 2021).

The CCWM positions FGEM student's economic stressors as a symptom of oppressive institutional policies and procedures, and financial stress is a

direct result of institution's economic exploitation and marginalization of FGEM graduate students (Garriott, 2020; Wilcox et. al., 2021). Students who pursue graduate and professional degrees currently hold the highest share of student debt in the U.S., and FGEM graduate student persistence is significantly underdeveloped in research (Delisle, 2014; Wilcox et. al., 2021). When studying the experience of FGEM psychology students, Wilcox and colleagues 2021 found that graduates with high debt are more likely to work more, experience less job satisfaction, and more likely to be working outside of their field in order to make ends meet. It is critical for practitioners and policy makers to understand that a student's decision to borrow is a central component of their college-going decision and trajectory process, and the field should embrace transparency during the admissions process of a comprehensive understanding of the hidden cost of pursuing a degree at both the undergraduate and graduate level (Furquim et. al., 2017; Museus & Chang, 2021; Rhodes, 2021; Wilcox et. al., 2021).

### **Life Beyond School**

It is an dramatically outdated assumption that college students' main priority is their individual interest in scholarship and their academic pursuits. FGCS often balance multiple jobs, familial and community responsibilities, and their academics throughout their collegiate experience (Museus et. al., 2018; Ma & Shea, 2021; Moreno, 2021; Museus & Chang, 2021). FGEM students are more likely to borrow loans to pay for educational expenses, and borrowers are likely to engage in risk averse career and life choices (Wilcox et. al., 2021). Student loan debt has been proven to delay life milestones like marriage, home ownership, family formation, and parenthood on top of the difficulty with meeting basic needs while avoiding delinquency (Furquim et. al., 2017; Wilcox et. al., 2021). Within the context of the CCWM, financial stress related to college has demonstrated a relationship with FGCS perceptions of work volition, meaning "the ability to make career choices despite constraints, career choice, and life satisfaction" (Garriott, 2020; Wilcox et. al., 2021, pp.2). The economic marginalization of FGEM graduate students inhibits their ability to engage in their field which further limits diverse perspectives that exist within the profession (Wilcox et. al., 2021). The romanticized concept of building a career may not be possible for FGEM graduate

students as the cost of living is dramatically higher than the wages available in their respective professional fields.

### **Moving Forward**

I mentioned earlier how I am feeling disappointed, and there are a few reflections I want to leave student affairs with in this letter. After spending a collective, but not consecutive, six years in higher education, I am so fearful of the financial reality that awaits beyond the completion of graduate school as my student debt payments far exceed my monthly rent. My sense of self, my worth, and my success has largely been defined by my ability to chart this path in higher education for my family, and there is so much I did not know when I put my first college admission deposit down in May 2015. My faculty and staff mentors throughout my undergraduate experience applauded my perseverance and motivation as a FGCS, but I also wish there was space to problematize the less romanticized realities of living as a FGCS graduate. Now, I am absolutely proud and quite shocked at myself for how far I have come as I reflect on these past six years, but I also feel strongly that I cannot pat myself on the back too hard without critically reflecting on the cycle of power, privilege, and oppression I experience as a result of the multiple identities I hold in addition to my FGEM identity.

I am a white woman, and the present condition of higher education largely acknowledges and discusses the challenges white women experience in this world. However, the racism, sexism, classism, and institutionalized oppression experienced by my peers and colleagues of Color, especially Women of Color, is approached with a deficit-based lens which fails to address the harm and cyclical violence that exists within the fabric and foundation of our institutions. In her book chapter, "Solidarity is Still for White Women", Mikki Kendall states, "We are part of a society that we are fighting to change, and we cannot absolve ourselves of our role in it" (Kendall, 2020, pp.9). I write this letter as an opportunity, as well as an invitation to others, to reflect on what it means to me to be a white woman and a FGEM higher education and student affairs graduate student who feels deeply taken advantage of by, yet also incredibly privileged within, this system.

I faltered by putting my trust in a romanticized idea of higher education, and yet I feel my pursuit of my passions within this field hinges on asking FGEM students to do the same. I am deeply passionate about supporting historically excluded student populations, especially FG and EM students while also advocating for transformative policy change that centers justice and liberation in higher education. However, in order to center liberation and transformative justice in my work, I must continue to work to critically understand what it means to build intentional programs that center multiple identity development for FGEM students and explicitly center the needs and experiences of FGEM students of Color. Myself, and fellow practitioners, cannot conflate the experiences of white FGEM and FGEM Students of Color because in doing so, we perpetuate the dominant normative of whiteness and the white student experience as the default for understanding FGEM student development. For example, incorporating affinity and accountability spaces for FGEM students to engage in identity development may create opportunities for FGEM students of Color to further their sense of belonging on campus while also challenging white FGEM students to understand how this system still privileges their experience in addition to their feeling of exclusion. Although white FGEM students, myself included, experience imposter syndrome, isolation, and the various barriers that exist in higher education, our racial identity provides unearned privileges and protections within this system. My FGEM student identity is hidden because institutions were built to serve white students while my peers of Color may be assumed to be FGEM due to the persistence of raceclassist microaggressions in the field. I do not say this as a way of invoking a hierarchy of violence and oppression, but more so as an invitation to fellow white FGEM student affairs practitioners to engage in an honest reflection of who and what role we play in this system (Kendall, 2020).

As I move beyond the classroom space, my work must continue to challenge the ugly, violent reality of working and operating as a white individual in a system that centers whiteness and white people as the dominant narrative and default for the college student experience. I urge fellow white colleagues in the field to create spaces to engage each other as white people and our white students to interrogate what it means to exist in a system and society that privileges whiteness while also listening to and explicitly centering the voices and experiences of our colleagues and peers of Color. If our program design, development and execution does not make space to explicitly support and center FGEM students of Color, then we fail to support FGEM students of

Color (Sarcedo et. al., 2015). In doing so, we, as individuals and as a field, further uphold patriarchal, capitalist, and white supremacist interests in higher education (Robbins, 2019).

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