Students of Size: An Exploratory Case Study on a Hidden Climate

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STUDENTS OF SIZE: AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY ON A HIDDEN CLIMATE

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership

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Entitled: Students of Size: An Exploratory Case Study on a Hidden Climate

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in Department of Leadership, Policy, and Development: Higher Education and P-12 Education, Program of Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership

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ABSTRACT

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Colleges and universities often espouse values related to equity and inclusion for diverse students (Harper & Antonio, 2008; Torres, Arminio, & Pope, 2012;). Student affairs practitioners are frequently responsible for working towards inclusive environments (American College Personnel Association (ACPA), & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), 2015). An estimated 31% of college and university students are classified as overweight or obese (American College Health Association, 2007), yet body weight or size is rarely a consideration in work related to student equity and inclusion on campus. Limited research exists on the experiences of students of size in college and university settings.

The current study was designed as an exploratory single case study to understand the climate on campus for college students who self-identified as students of size. A feminist theoretical perspective and a critical action agenda underpinned the study. Using a descriptive single-case design, the climate for female students of size was examined at an institution in a region of the U.S. where rates of obesity are among the lowest in the country. Empathic interviews, as well as participant-generated photo elicitation, were used to illuminate the climate and to explore the climate and understand how weight-related stigma and bias presented within the climate.
The climate at the institution examined was found to be one in which size is generally hidden and missing from the institutional rhetoric and work related to diversity and equity. Students of size regularly experienced microaggressions that were perpetrated by members of the university community and as a result of environmental features within the campus. Criticism and judgment, as well as the fear of being judged, were omnipresent and harmful. Students of size were isolated and relegated to the background, when they chose to engage in their university experience at all.

The challenges experienced by students of size were particularly pronounced and amplified for students who also identified as women of color. Cultural theory and the concept of problem framing were used to make meaning of the data and shape recommendations for future research, as well as practical application for higher education administrators seeking to cultivate inclusive campus environments for students of size. Higher education leaders are encouraged to adopt a size justice frame in their work to shape the campus climate in ways that are supportive of diverse students, including students of size. Specific recommendations for programmatic and environmental changes are offered.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Students of Size: A Case Study on a Big Issue

It is Friday night and I am sitting uncomfortably on my extra-long twin sized bed. I feel defeated and disgusted. I look down and decide I will give it one more shot. I lean back on my bed, inhale a deep breath, and suck in my stomach with one last attempt to button my tight black pants. These black pants, which serve as the unspoken uniform of a freshman girl who’s headed out on campus any given night, are my only hope. They are as big as the normal store sells, and I have promised myself time and time again that I will not shop at the fat girl store. The button on my pants is riveted tightly. I have carefully inspected it to ensure that it will not pop.

In frustration, my mind wanders to all of the things that I should have done to avoid my predicament: gone to the gym, stuck to a diet, attended more than two Weight Watchers meetings, or tried those diet pills that I read about in a magazine. Likewise, I drift to all of the things that I should not have done: gone out with my friends for pizza, made my own peanut frozen yogurt sundae in the cafeteria three times this week, noshed on chips— even if they were fat-free olestra laden ones— while cramming for my biology final, eaten breakfast when I really didn’t need breakfast, and I could go on. My abhorrence for my fat and for myself is my self-imposed and well-deserved punishment.

My thoughts are interrupted by a knock at my door. It is one of my friends and we are late to the party. I freeze in uncertainty. Eventually I start towards the door,
formulating my excuse for being late, but then am reminded that my gut is literally hanging out of my pants and I have nothing remotely acceptable to wear. I tip toe back to my bed and sit there in silence. She waits a few moments, knocks again, and then she leaves. Silently I begin to cry. This is not college the way that I had dreamed of it. I do not belong here among the lean Long Island girls with their fashion-forward confidence and svelte sass that dominates the social scene and permeates campus. My attempts to keep up, to pose as though I fit in, are exhausting. After all, my attempts are futile so long as I am fat. Fat girls do not fit here, as evidenced by the gaunt, yet beautiful, smiles I see shining off the sorority composites and in the pleather-bound freshman facebook issued to each new student. Those pictures do not represent me. I am thankful that I neglected to submit a photo for the facebook. It is better to be listed in the back as just a name, else risk exposing myself as the fat failure that I am. My round and pudgy photo would have been the paramount of embarrassment among my peers. I sulk in my own predicament and sorrow and pinch my thigh-hard- as a not-so-subtle reminder to myself that this is my fault.

Twenty-two years have passed since I began college, yet that evening, and so many like it, remains both personally and professionally salient for me. Accordingly, I have focused my dissertation research on the experiences of students of size in college. As student enrollment has grown increasingly diverse, college and university administrators have considered how to respond to the changing demographics of the student body, figuratively and literally. Often cited is the need to ensure an “inclusive campus environment” so that diverse students are able to take full advantage of the available educational opportunities and attain their goals (Harper & antonio, 2008;
Manning & Coleman-Boatwright, 1991; Torres et al., 2012). From federal legislation related to college access, initiatives aimed at increasing student enrollment and persistence to degree completion, and ethical and moral imperatives related to social justice, inclusivity is a pervasive and persistent goal of many institutions of higher education. In contemporary higher education, “The assumption is that institutions strive to be welcoming, accepting, affirming, and engaging” (Torres et al., 2012, p. 1). In their definition of inclusive excellence, the American Association of College and Universities (AAC&U) identified four facets of inclusive excellence in higher education. Among them was the notion of a “welcoming community that engages all of its diversity in the service of student and organizational learning” (Clayton-Pedersen & McTighe Musil, 2005, p. vi). Student affairs practitioners are often called upon to play a key role in creating inclusive environments on campus, and are challenged to be active and intentional in creating safe spaces for cross-cultural learning (Harper & Antonio, 2008). Being intentional about inclusivity requires an acute awareness of how different students are experiencing the college environment, and the courage to enact change when inequities exist.

Indeed, the profession of student affairs has long espoused values related to diversity and the inclusion of diverse individuals in college and university communities. This is evidenced by professional competencies (ACPA & NASPA, 2015), the formal graduate level training provided to those who are preparing to enter the field of student affairs (McEwen & Roper, 1994), the expectations held of new student affairs professionals (Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2004), and the job descriptions of practitioners that emphasize competency with diversity and social justice (Hoffman &
Bresciani, 2012). The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) articulated key standards that effective student affairs programs across many different functional areas should follow. The universal standards for all 43 programs include guidelines in 12 distinct areas including diversity, equity, and access (Mitstifer, 2012). Specifically, student affairs professionals across all functional units should craft environments that are “equitable and non-discriminatory; free from harassment” (Mitstifer, 2012, p. 33). Certainly it is an expectation that student affairs professionals have collective responsibility for creating communities on campus that are safe, supportive, and conducive for all students to learn.

Harper and antonio (2008) addressed the challenges oftentimes associated with working towards a more inclusive campus environment, noting that “courageous educators recognize the presence of various-isms…and oppressive conditions in campus environments, call them to the attention of several others, and respond with deliberation” (p. 11). Likewise, Torres and associates (2012) stated that “a truly…inclusive environment is one where difficult conversations are the norm, and individuals are empowered to notice, question, and stop inequality” (p. 4). These statements, and others like them, motivate me. I take my responsibility as an educator, student affairs practitioner, and scholar within the field of higher education and student affairs seriously. As such, I believe that it is my responsibility to not only be aware of inequities, but also to expose and work to change the culture and climate on campus when it is oppressive to students who hold subordinate social identities. I unabashedly strove for this study to serve as an exposé of sorts on the climate on campus for students of size. This was my early intention as I knew that such work could aid in dismantling the type of size-related
injustice that I suspected existed on campuses. Work in this area fits within the larger movement and values aspiration for our society, often referred to as social justice.

Although there are many ways to define social justice (Reisch, 2002), I like Bell’s (2010) assertion that contemporary social justice is “both a process and a goal” (p. 21), in which the goal is

Full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. (p. 21)

If individuals within particular social groups are not participating equally in opportunities within society, such as education or facets of education, there is injustice. If individuals are subjected to stigma and bias on the basis of their identity, and this results in discrimination or other adverse impacts, there is injustice. If individuals feel unwelcome, isolated, psychologically unsafe, or otherwise disconnected with communities and environments in which opportunities for them may exist, such as in education, there is injustice.

Both of the quotations above about the role of higher education with respect to social justice begin with the premise that in order to enact change to create inclusive campus environments, individuals seeking to carry our social justice work must begin by recognizing or noticing where oppressive environments or inequities exist. Through my own experiences, observations, and readings, I have become aware of countless examples of individual, institutional, and cultural oppression and injustice within higher education. Certainly many of the most striking examples are related to how students with differing social identities based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, nationality, age, and religion experience college. I am deeply troubled by the oppressive environments
that exist on college and university campuses for students who do not belong to the 
dominant group based on those facets of identity. I am also intrigued by what I have 
observed as an ironically hidden injustice on campus: the experience of students of size.

**What’s in a Name?**

classifications, shameful slurs, and individuals’ own descriptors of their bodies could be 
used. As I will address in the following chapter, “given the extent to which fatness has 
been condemned and pathologized over the past century, it is impossible to choose a truly 
neutral word for fat” (Saguy, 2013, p.7). The terms most often used in the scholarly work 
on the topic of body weight, particularly in the medical and public health realms, are 
obese, overweight, and heavy (Smith, Schmoll, Konik, & Oberlander, 2007). However, 
these terms are problematic for a project approaching the experiences of individuals from 
a critical social justice lens, as explained below. Likewise, in a study on the use of body weight terminology, Smith et al. (2007) noted that the word choice of descriptors 
influences the perception of the individual(s) described. As such, my word choices in this 
research reflect my own perceptions and may also influence readers’ and participants’ 
perceptions and associated assumptions. What we call it matters. Accordingly, I have 
been very intentional about my use of language, particularly regarding body size labels 
and adjectives, in this work.

Consider that to be *overweight* indicates that one is over a range of normal 
deemed appropriate by a particular community of experts, in this case the medical field. 
Being overweight is then abnormal and the term overweight calls attention to this
abnormality. The term then also has the effect of minimizing the value of diversity in the population, when negative or punitive traits are associated with being above the normal. Rather, society might think of the population’s weight as a range, just as is thought of height (Wann, 2009). An individual might be referred to as tall or short, and while there are certain challenges associated with each, being on the edge of the range for height is not linked with negative qualities as it is for individuals who are on the higher end of a range for weight.

Furthermore, the term obesity “medicalizes human diversity” (Wann, 2009, p. xii) and the implications of this are significant (Saguy, 2013). Most notably, this medicalization of the term assigns a medical condition or disease over the person’s experience in their body. In doing so, there is an inherent assumption that something is wrong and needs to be cured (Wann, 2009). In actuality, the individual’s body weight may not need to be changed, as it may not be bad, wrong, flawed, or otherwise problematic. Additionally, even the medical definition of obesity, which is based on Body Mass Index (BMI) and solely determined by the variables of an individual’s height and weight calculated in a formula, has been criticized as inappropriate, given that it does not account for percentage of fat mass (Burkhauser & Cawley, 2008). Certainly, individuals meeting the medical definition of obese may experience disease or a host of other medical problems; however, they also may not. As such, Burgard (2009) argued that to classify individuals with the medical term obese, based on their BMI alone, is limiting, inaccurate, and otherwise flawed.

Scholars in the emerging discipline of fat studies, the study of attitudes held about fat people (Rothblum, 2012; Wann, 2009), often embrace the term fat, akin to political
movements in which people holding other marginalized identities have reclaimed words that have been assigned a negative connotation by those outside of the community. After all, “there is nothing negative or rude in the word fat unless someone makes the effort to put it there” (Wann, 2009, p. xii). In this vein, reclaiming the word fat, as an ordinary descriptor, can serve to help resist the negative connotations associated with it (McMichael, 2013). That said, I have spent much of my life hating being fat and hating the fat on my body that made me a fat person. I have thought about my fat, I have dreamed about my fat, I have pinched my fat, and I have loathed my fat. I have been subjected to the negativity and stigma that others placed on me and who used that term to describe me. The shame that I have felt, and continue to feel, is powerful. I am not ready, and perhaps never will be, to use the word fat as a positive or even neutral descriptor.

With that in mind, and given the importance of word choice when describing people with larger bodies (Smith et al., 2007), I spent a great deal of time contemplating vernacular and the implications of my choice of language for this research. I will refer to people of size or students of size as general terms to describe individuals who identify with the terms listed in the opening of this section, or who generally are identified by others as such. The exceptions being when I am referring to specific pieces of literature that I have reviewed, in which case I will defer to the descriptors and/or terminology of the authors, and in the later chapters of this work, where I will use the terminology preferred by the participants. The term people of size places the individual person at the forefront, quite literally referring to the person before indicating that size is an element of how they are described. This is in line with socially just people-first terms to describe other groups of people, such as people with disabilities (Blaska, 1993) and people of
color. In placing the word person before the descriptor, it emphasizes the importance of the individual, over the facet of their identity used in describing them. Indeed, although not all participants had used this terminology, several recognized it as an inclusive word choice because they were familiar with other person-first terms.

Likewise, I needed to consider the language to use for individuals who are not people of size, as the literature often drew comparisons between categories or groups of people based on body size, and participants did the same. As is the case with referring to people of size, I will use the nomenclature in the literature that I review when I am discussing other research. Oftentimes, the literature uses the term normal-weight to describe such individuals, which is reflective of the Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) BMI categorization. While I will use this term (and others like it) when discussing prior research, for the sake of clarity when reviewing a particular study, I find the term to be fairly problematic, as it implies that only a particular sub-set of the population, whose body is within particular parameters, to be normal (thereby also implying that those outside of the specified parameters are abnormal). The participants in this study used a variety of terms to describe their peers who were not students of size, including standard-sized, thin, skinny, and normal. While each of these terms carry with them some problematic assumptions or value-based judgement too, I am going to honor the choice of language that Olivia (a participant) used to describe her peers who were not students of size and opt to use standard-sized in the discussion section of this manuscript when another term was not specifically used by the participant(s). I have settled on standard-sized, because while it shares the problem that a normal-weight descriptor has, it is also a nod to the standards of beauty and health that are associated with a body size that meets
the CDC BMI definition of normal-weight. To be clear, in using this term, I am not thereby implying a mathematical or statistical norm or standard. Rather, *standard-sized* refers to individuals who the participants did not perceive to be other students of size. I discuss standards related to beauty and health and the associations with body weight in the literature review.

One additional note about terminology is necessary to include here. Given the gendered nature of body weight (discussed in the subsequent chapter), there are times that I will refer to *men* and *women* in this manuscript. In doing so, I acknowledge that I am omitting non-binary genders from the discussion. I am doing so because the literature that I have reviewed did not offer specific perspective on non-binary or gender Queer individuals related to body weight, and because each of the participants for this study identified on the binary (as women). Additionally, my use of the term *woman* generally refers to any individual who identifies as a woman, or who is perceived to be such. In short, I am referring to gender identity rather than sex, unless otherwise specified, or unless authors of the literature that I reviewed defined gender differently.

**Knowledge and Discourse Gap**

An estimated 35% of college students report a Body Mass Index (BMI) which classifies them as obese or overweight (American College Health Association, 2007). There is an emerging interdisciplinary field of *fat studies* (Cooper, 2010) with an accompanying international scholarly journal focused on this field (Rothblum, 2012), and a body of research that indicates that obese and overweight individuals are subjected to stigma and discrimination in a variety of settings including K-12 education (Puhl, Moss-Racusin, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2008) and the workplace (Giel et al., 2012; Giel, Thiel,
Teufel, Mayer, & Zipfel, 2010). Yet, despite this, little to no research exists about the experiences of students of size. That is, although research on weight-related stigma has been conducted using college students as participants, these studies have primarily used college students as a convenient sample to understand larger social phenomena, rather than the lived experiences of the participants as they experience the college/university environment. Short of the studies examining weight gain among college students, and in particular first year students (Gropper et al., 2009; Hoffman, Policastro, Quick, & Lee, 2006; Levitsky, Halbmaier, & Mrdjenovic, 2004; Morrow et al., 2006; Vella-Zarb & Elgar, 2009), what that gain may be attributed to (Butler, Black, Blue, & Gretebeck, 2004; Jung, Bray, & Martin Ginis, 2008; LaCaille, Nichols Dauner, Krambeer, & Pedersen, 2011), and several articles that examined weight loss strategies for college students (Kozak, Nguyen, Yanos, & Fought, 2013; Matvienko, Lewis, & Schafer, 2001), I have been unable to locate published research that examines how students of size experience college, or which explores related factors, such as academic outcomes for students of size.

Crosnoe (2007) studied the impact of body weight on initial college enrollment, with attention to differences in enrollment by gender, and based on the relative rarity/prevalence of obesity in high schools of the students he studied. It is important to note that although this is one of a few research studies that did specifically examine body weight and higher education, it was limited in that it did not address the experiences or outcomes of students after the point of matriculation in post-secondary education. Crosnoe’s work indicated that when students attended a high school with a relatively high rate of obesity within the student body, the college-matriculation rates of both obese and
non-obese high school women were about the same. However, when obese women attended a high school where they were among very few other obese students, they were far less likely to matriculate to college after high school graduation than their non-obese peers. In the discussion of his results, Crosnoe identified the effects of weight-related stigma working against the obese high school women as a likely factor in the differences he found. Citing obesity as an “academic risk factor that is on par with other demographic, behavioral, and cognitive factors” (Crosnoe, 2007, p. 254) impacting college enrollment, he called attention to the need to more closely study how the “social side of schooling creates academic consequences” (Crosnoe, 2007, p. 255) and the need for additional research to explore how weight-related stigma may be a significant factor in post-secondary access and attainment.

When preparing for this research, and throughout the research process, I sought out information about this topic in the major professional associations for the field of student affairs. I had the good fortune of attending an excellent professional presentation at a National Association of Student Personnel (NASPA) conference several years ago that addressed the experiences of students of size working in para-professional positions within student affairs (Walton, 2015). This presentation was an anomaly. When searching the same organization’s national conference archives online, I did not find any other presentation over a three-year time period (2013-2015) which included any of the following words in the session title: weight, fat, size, or obese. Considering that in 2015 the conference archives indicate that a total of 1,006 unique program sessions were offered, this is telling. Clearly the topic of students of size on campus was not a priority of the organization or its members who propose and select programs for the conference. I
did learn of a conference entitled *Fat and the Academy* that was held in 2006 and
sponsored by Smith College to “examine the intersections of fatness and academia, both
in regards to how and why fatness is studied and to the experiences of fatness for
students, faculty and staff in academic environments” (Smith College, 2006, para. 1).
Unfortunately, I was unable to find any evidence that the conference continued past its
inaugural event in 2006, and my communications to the organizers to inquire about the
status of the program have been met with no response.

Furthermore, I am concerned that some recent activity to align one of the other
major student affairs professional associations, the American College Personnel
Association (ACPA) with a campaign to fight obesity (see chapter II) could have the
effect of further marginalizing students of size on campus. This initiative, and others like
it that may be occurring on a local or campus level, serves as another signal that the field
of student affairs is not attuned to the experiences of students of size or the ways in which
members of our campus communities may experience some well-meaning initiatives.

**Purpose of the Study**

Perhaps college and university campuses are a unique utopia where weight-related
bias and discrimination do not exist. However, this seems quite unlikely, given reports in
the media of college students, in particular college women, encountering negative
treatment as a result of their weight (Dillon, 2007) and examples of overt prejudicial
remarks made by members of college and university communities (DeSantis, 2013).
Likewise, overweight college students may be targeted for weight loss campaigns
through public health promotion intervention efforts, as traditional college aged students
are an age group identified as particularly well suited for such marketing (Nelson, Story,
Larson, Neumark-Sztainer, & Lytle, 2008). Public health efforts to reverse or prevent obesity, which contribute to the anti-fat rhetoric permeating society (Lupton, 2014), may have detrimental and harmful effects for obese individuals (Lupton, 1995; O’Hara & Gregg, 2012). If such health promotion efforts are indeed taking place on campus, whether overtly or subliminally, and the resulting impact on obese and overweight students may be increased shame and marginalization (O’Hara & Gregg, 2012), then student affairs professionals seeking to creative inclusive campus environments ought to be aware of these students’ experiences as they work to create more inclusive campuses.

With these considerations in mind, I undertook this work with a critical action agenda: I sought to call attention to the experiences of college students of size as a means to incite further exploration, discussion, scholarship, and action to create campus environments that are inclusive of students of size. I operated with the premise that the treatment of people of size is a social justice matter that ought to be addressed by student affairs practitioners who work to create inclusive campus environments in support of student learning and development.

Given my own role as a student affairs practitioner with oversight of several functional units that may be directly tied to shaping the climate on campus (see below), I was, and continue to be, invested in my own critical agenda as both as scholar and as a practitioner. As I contemplated how to approach this exploratory study, I considered many different possible avenues. Certainly there were an array of options and considerations, particularly because the gap in knowledge was- and continues to be- so vast. Ultimately, I found myself returning to a genuine curiosity about the lived experiences of contemporary college students of size, and the nuances of those
experiences in a particular setting. My reflections on my own college experience, and my lucid memories of particular places, people, and even sounds and smells, served to remind me that the particulars matter. The smutty music blaring across campus that references a woman’s body, the stench of day-old mozzarella stick grease in the pub on campus, the skinny and happy faces on the poster promoting the university, and the social climbing that can only occur while firmly planted on an elliptical machine in the gym — these seemingly mundane daily experiences contribute to students’ overall experiences at college. I was interested in the impact of the social and cultural setting on the students’ day-to-day experiences and it is for this reason and others (see subsequent chapters) that I chose to frame this study on the climate on campus for students of size.

Given the responsibility placed on student affairs practitioners to create inclusive environments on campus for all students, the limited literature contributing to an understanding of how students of size experience college, and the contextual elements of being situated amidst a national fight against obesity (Leonard, 2004), the purpose of this exploratory case study was to understand aspects of a university climate for students of size.

As explained in chapter III, this research was conducted using feminist descriptive single case study methodology. I sought to call attention to the key aspects of institutional climate that were most relevant for students’ experiences and to put student affairs practitioners on notice about the contemporary climate on campus for students of size. As will be discussed in the following chapter, many factors contribute to campus climate,
including aspects of the culture and the context in which the campus is situated. I am most interested in learning what salient factors students of size identify as shaping the climate on campus.

**Research Questions**

The primary research question for this study was

Q1 What is the campus climate for students of size in a particular institutional case?

Two sub-questions served to further refine the inquiry into the campus climate:

Q1a How inclusive is the campus climate for students of size?

Q1b How does weight-related stigma/bias manifest on campus for students of size?

**My Story**

My experiences as a college student, my own identity, and my work today as a university administrator all underpin this project. Although doctors today would classify me as normal-weight and I benefit from thin-privilege, I was once an overweight college student. My weight plagued me for much of my childhood. I entered college as a self-conscious girl who spent countless college hours lamenting over my fat when I could have been learning, exploring, and otherwise enjoying my college experience. I longed for thinness, as I saw it as an antidote to all that was not right in my life. Miraculously, I never fell victim to anorexia or bulimia, which both ran rampant at my small liberal arts college. I found comfort in vegetarian baked ziti, Chinese food delivery, and Disco Fries—specialty French Fries covered in gravy and copious amounts of goopy processed cheese. Needless to say, I exceeded the notorious *freshman 15* and gained more weight throughout my four years in college. During this time I did find purpose and connections
through my campus employment in the student activities office and I found a social niche and friendships through my sorority. These experiences motivated me to enter a career in student affairs, where I would be able to offer opportunities for engagement and support to college students.

Following a short stint after college in a job involving constant travel (and subsequently more weight gain) around the country, I unpacked my bags and settled in the thinnest state in the country to begin my formal education and career in student affairs. After my year of travel throughout the Midwest and parts of the southeastern region of the country, I was struck by the observable difference in the population in my new environment, in particular the obviously higher proportion of thin people. I experienced a form of culture shock as I adjusted to the thin environment, but ultimately was inspired with a newfound sense of independence and confidence in myself. I channeled these feelings towards losing weight, relying on Weight Watchers as a tool for accountability and information. The program worked for me. I lost about fifty pounds and felt comfortable in my body for the first time since early childhood. Although my weight loss was not the remedy for all of life’s challenges as I had imagined, I was elated to finally be free of (most of) my fat. I quickly gained a confidence in myself as a graduate student, as a staff member, and in my relationships with others.

Unlike the glaring statistics constantly hovering over any formerly fat person, I maintained my weight loss. I was indebted to Weight Watchers for my success, and after years of attending weekly meetings I began leading the meetings in the evenings after work and on the weekends. In this capacity I worked for the largest weight-loss company in the country as a weight loss coach, facilitator, confidante, and accountability partner to
hundreds of people of size. I shared in their anxiety about stepping onto a scale for a weekly weigh-in, their disappointment and anger when they did not lose what they expected, and also their elation when meeting milestones towards their goals. Clients (“members”) shared their weight loss hopes and aspirations with me while I weighted them at the scale each week. They also shared deeply personal accounts of weight-related stigmatization and the accompanying shame that they felt in the aftermath of these experiences. I could not help but be greatly impacted by what was described to me, as it often resembled trauma. I also found myself wondering about the experience of coming to a meeting to talk about the tribulations of being overweight, and even the very goal that brought us all together: weight loss.

On the one hand, attending a Weight Watchers meeting was very often an affirming experience. In these spaces, members came together with a community of peers struggling with similar challenges. Members found camaraderie and comfort within the meetings and with each other. On the other hand, we spent our meetings talking about how to lose weight — essentially how to lose a part of ourselves. At times I even led the group in chanting mantras about the perils of fatness. Knowing that many members would not be successful, or would not maintain weight loss for a long period of time, I found myself in an ethical conundrum of sorts. Was the promotion of weight loss, particularly within the context of a billion-dollar industry, inherently a knock on the identity of people of size? Were my messages about the evils of fatness being internalized as body shame by the very people I wanted to help? If they shed pounds were they also shedding an aspect of their identity? Was promoting such a shift an authentic and noble cause as the company trained me to think and do?
My work with Weight Watchers was always secondary to my primary role within student affairs, and my career in student affairs progressed over the years. Around the same time that I began work on the research proposal for this current study, I took a position as a primary student affairs leader at a large public institution. I now oversee a number of student affairs departments, including a student health center, counseling/psychological services, campus recreation programs, and our center for equity and student achievement. Although I no longer work for Weight Watchers, and I do not conceptualize a role for myself related to student weight loss per se, I am a student affairs professional and I continue to be faced with the dilemma that first implanted in my mind during my time leading weight loss meetings. When we promote health, wellness, and weight loss to students, how is that received by our students of size? What messages are embedded in our programming, and more generally on our campuses by the institution, our staff and faculty, and students themselves about being a student of size? Is our community inclusive of student of size? These questions, and many more, are salient for me in my role as a student affairs practitioner and contribute to my stance as a researcher as well.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

As an exploratory study, the literature that informed the current work was broad and interdisciplinary. As will be explained below, an understanding of campus climate must be accompanied by an understanding of the contributing culture and the surrounding context. Accordingly, the literature included in this review addresses broad contextual issues related to the treatment and experiences of individuals of size in the United States (US). An overview of contemporary issues that likely contribute to the milieu for people of size is provided. I also include an overview of the historical context for these contemporary issues. I incorporate relevant literature on the phenomenon of weight-related stigma and bias. A review of selected fundamental literature on student persistence is also included, as student retention is becoming an increasingly important topic for student affairs professionals working with any given population of students.

I explain the relevance of this topic to the field of student affairs, but go beyond an explanation of relevance and offer a compelling argument that professionals in student affairs must actively seek to broaden their knowledge in this area and apply that knowledge and theory to practice with students of size. To this end, a summary of literature related to several specific functional units on college campuses that likely contribute to the campus climate for students of size is also included.

Research on understanding college and university campus climates has primarily focused on the experiences of students of color (González, 2002; Museus, Nichols, &
Lambert, 2008), as has related work examining factors contributing to persistence such as adjustment or transition to college and climate/culture (Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008). Although the current study was not explicitly focused on race, I drew from the rich theory and some methodological approaches from this body of literature to inform my work related to the campus climate for students of size. Since scholarly work on culture and climate for students of size does not yet exist, and because of the likely parallels and intersections between the experiences of students of size and students of color, the body of work on issues of climate, oppressive environments, and race was useful to help inform and guide my undertaking to address the research questions at hand. Indeed, several other scholars working in the field of fat studies have found a foundation for their work on the oppression of people of size in the literature on the oppression of people of color (McMichael, 2013). To be clear, I am not thereby suggesting that students of size experience campus or facets of society in the same manner as students of color, or otherwise equating the two experiences. Rather, I am drawing from the robust body of literature on race, campus culture, and climate as a useful tool for my work to explore similar constructs for students of size.

Lastly, note that this literature review does not include a thorough analysis of the medical literature related to obesity or the physical health effects of weight on an individual. Although some scholars and some physicians argue that the medical research linking obesity to poor health is skewed or otherwise inaccurate (Bacon, 2008; Burgard, 2009; Flegal, 2006), I am operating under the widely accepted and clinically supported premise that obesity does have links to disease and mortality (Kopelman, 2007; Mokdad, Marks, Stroup, & Gerberding, 2004). However, because that is not the focus of this
research I will not provide detailed evidence of this or otherwise address the medical factors that link obesity and overweight to poor health.

**The 3 “C’s”: Culture, Context, and Climate**

Although some choose to use the terms synonymously (Cress, 2002), campus climate is distinct from campus culture. This distinction is important when seeking to understand the experiences of individuals within a particular setting. Hart and Fellabaum (2008) suggested that the absence of a uniform definition of the concept of *climate* on campus may indicate the need for scholars to explicitly address climate itself in research. They noted that although many colleges and universities have engaged in campus climate studies, such studies tended to be conducted with practical agendas (i.e. to gauge climate on campus in order to adjust programming to better the climate for particular groups of people), rather than with a research agenda. The campus climate survey is becoming commonplace for colleges and universities across the US and has even emerged in recent proposed legislation (Vendituoli, 2014).

To explain the differences between climate and culture in an academic setting, Peterson and Spencer (1990), offered the following explanatory analogy, “culture is the meteorological zone in which one lives (tropical, temperate, or arctic) and climate is the daily weather patterns” (p. 8). Additionally, it is helpful to distinguish the concepts by noting that the study of organizational climate is based on cognitive and social psychological constructs; whereas the study of culture is rooted in anthropology, sociology, and related disciplines. As such, “the purposes served by organizational climate reflect its psychological base and individual-level focus as opposed to culture’s more holistic approach” (Peterson & Spencer, 1990, p. 7). Climate is nimble and
responsive, often reactive, and generally formed on the basis of current perceptions, rather than the more deeply rooted values that are associated with culture.

Putting aside the analogies, Rankin and Reason (2008) offered a straightforward definition for campus climate as “the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards and practices of employees and students of an institution.” (p. 264). Like me, Rankin and Reason (2008) were most interested in understanding the campus climate for individuals who may experience an oppressive campus environment. Accordingly, they refined their definition in practice to hone in on “on those attitudes, behaviors, and standards/practices that concern the access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential” (p. 264). I appreciated the simplicity of their definition, and that it had been applied in other studies seeking to understand the climate from the perspective of minoritized individuals or groups. Accordingly, I used the Rankin and Reason’s (2008) definition as this working definition of climate for this research.

I chose to pursue primary research questions related to campus climate, rather than culture, because it is the day-to-day climate that is most salient for students’ experiences within their own community. Again, considering the analogy of the weather, it is the sunshine or the thunder and lightning that most impacts the experiences of students who are living, learning, and experiencing their campus environment. It is the torrential downpour in the morning that may cause a student to stay cooped up in her residence hall room or the sunshine on the quad one afternoon that may lure hordes of students to gather on the lawn. How one feels and what one sees on campus that day (i.e. the climate) matters. Although the campus culture and broader context are not insignificant, understanding the climate on campus provides the most valuable insight
into students’ experiences. Furthermore, given that students are relatively transient on
campus, a study of the climate, which arguably reflects more contemporary aspects of the
lived experience for students on campus than culture, was a better fit for my critical
action agenda, as I hoped that the knowledge gained through this study would be readily
applied to bring about change.

Note that my focus on climate did not therefore mean that I was disinterested in
the campus culture. On the contrary, it was essential that I learn about elements of the
culture in my quest to understand the climate. Returning again to the weather analogy, if
the rainstorm on a particular day was highly unusual at a particular campus, the impact of
it on the students may have been much different than it would have been on students
attending college somewhere that regularly experienced high volumes of precipitation.
Experiences that people have in different settings and communities are shaped by their
expectations. These expectations come, in large part, from the dominant culture of the
setting. Because culture contributes to climate, I am attuned to cultural considerations in
my review of the literature. A more in-depth understanding of how I incorporated cultural
perspectives as a theoretical framework for this research is provided in chapter III.

As I reviewed and thoughtfully digested countless articles on the concepts of
campus climate and culture, I affirmed the assertion made by Hart and Fellabaum (2008)
that the terms *climate* and *culture* are often used interchangeably. Rankin and Reason
(2008) also expressed frustration with the muddled terminology, citing that, “Terms, such
as environment, climate, and culture often are conflated or erroneously used
interchangeably” (p. 263). I encountered this directly and found myself reading pieces
about *culture* that seemed to really be addressing *climate*, and vice versa (although the
use of the word culture for the construct of climate seemed to be more common than the reverse). As I began to write, I found myself in a bit of a conundrum related to terminology. If I always used the authors’ term(s) when speaking about the construct of climate and/or culture, but their use of the term did not match my definition and understanding, I could very easy confuse my readers, because I was indeed using both terms- but as distinct constructs. For this reason I made the decision to take the liberty to clarify and substitute the terms climate and culture when it was apparent to me that the author’s were using one term, but were actually referring to the other construct (as I have defined it for the purposes of this study). Note that I only did this when I was certain that I understood what the author(s) were describing and in at least one instance when I was not certain I retained the author’s word choice but explained how I saw the key concepts transferring to my discussion of the other construct.

**Context**

An examination of the climate or culture of an institution without simultaneously attempting to understand the broader context is futile. Context offers an explanation of cultural tendencies and dynamics (Pope & LePeau, 2012). Whereas culture is an internal domain, context is a broader external feature, defined in simple terms as the external circumstances that influence and shape the institution. For example, local, state, and federal political arenas provide context for institutional settings, as do differences in geographic region, era, and community economic forces. All can impact how students experience their particular institution, in addition to the cultural domains that are specific to the institution itself. Context is not stagnant, so a contemporary survey of the context is crucial to understanding the culture and climate of a particular environment or
community, such as a college campus. This research was conducted in a state within the US that has one of the lowest self-reported rates of obesity in the country (Center for Disease Control, 2015) and with several statewide public health initiatives related to body weight. Accordingly, I have provided an overview within this context.

Because my work to understand the climate on campus for students of size included an exploration of institutional culture, situated within the context outside of the institution, the literature reviewed in this chapter was organized around these three constructs: context, culture, and climate. Note that there is much intersection between concepts discussed in the literature, and a particular finding or aspect may have relevance or be found within climate, culture, and/or context. These inextricable links are logical, as they all contribute to how an individual may function and feel within a particular setting. The way in which the information is organized in the subsequent sections reflects how I made sense of concepts presented as factors most relevant for understanding context, culture, or climate.

**Context by the numbers: Fat in America.** Although still a minority of the population in some regions, within the last six decades the prevalence of adult obesity in the US has almost tripled, with 36% of adults in the country classified as obese in 2009-2010 (May, Freedman, Sherry, & Blanck, 2013). Even more Americans are classified as overweight (Flegal, Carroll, Ogden, & Curtin, 2010), which is often a precursor to obesity. In a damning report on the state of the country’s weight entitled *F as in Fat* (2011), the authors highlighted that over the preceding decade and a half, seven states doubled their rate of obesity (Levi, Segal, St. Laurent, & Kohn, 2011). In 2010, the adult
rate of obesity increased in 16 states, yet decreased in none (Levi et al., 2011). The trend is clear: Americans are increasingly becoming overweight and obese.

Although a detailed overview of the clinical and medical aspects of obesity is beyond the scope of this research, clinical research indicates that there is a very strong link between obesity and the onset of numerous other medical conditions associated with poor health including type II diabetes, coronary artery disease, and hypertension (Kopelman, 2007; Mokdad et al., 2004). Certain types of cancers including ovarian, cervical, breast, and endometrial cancer are also associated with obesity among women (Kulie et al., 2011). Expectedly, medical research also overwhelmingly indicates that obesity is associated with increased mortality. Some estimates suggest that obese individuals are 50-100% more likely to die prematurely than normal-weight individuals (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

**Context in the region.** Rates of individuals who are overweight or obese vary across geographic regions of the country. According to data compiled by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in 2013, states located in the southeastern and central regions of the United States generally have higher rates of self-reported obesity by adults compared to states in the western and northeastern regions of the country (Center for Disease Control, 2015). West Virginia and Mississippi had the highest rates of self-reported obesity (defined using standard BMI calculations) whereas Colorado and Hawaii had the lowest. The current study was conducted in a geographic region of the U.S. with a relatively low obesity rate and so regional factors were an important contextual element to consider.
The regional context was not simply that the area in which the study was conducted had a relatively low obesity rate; but also that there were active public health initiatives designed to maintain and/or lower the already low obesity rate. Individuals living in the region were exposed to these public health messages in a variety of ways. For example, a prominent public official in state office at the time that the study was conducted, articulated specific priorities related to lowering obesity rates. In a public report that this official sponsored, the first priority health goal was focused on healthy eating, active living, and obesity prevention. Although health certainly encompasses a broad array of personal and community elements, and arguably can be measured in countless ways, it was clear that maintaining, and/or lowering, the already low obesity rate was an important component of this public official’s vision. A set of corresponding goals and objectives were laid out in detail. The report called upon individual citizens to do their part to contribute to lowering obesity by loosing weight and/or engaging in obesity prevention practices. To this end, the public official sponsoring the report issued a public statement that they would do their part to contribute to the state’s goals by stopping eating sweets and keeping to a weekly workout regime. Clearly body weight, fitness, and obesity prevention were all top of mind in references to this public servant’s work.

Accordingly, a number of public health initiatives in the region had been implemented to support anti-obesity public health efforts. Just a few years before this research was conducted, a major health-focused foundation partnered with a regional non-profit organization and received state funding to focus on combating and preventing obesity. Both organizations hosted community events to address different factors
contributing to obesity and organized significant public health communication campaigns, complete with television and radio advertisements. For example, a television advertisement was aired which depicted diverse adults lying in bed and rousing for the day. The audio warned viewers that there’s a wake up call about coming to terms with the reality of obesity in the region. The advertisement went on to describe that obesity was not necessarily as extreme as one might think, and that adding a few pounds over a few years might make you obese too. The worrisome expressions of the faces of the actors and the slightly menacing music served to create the effect of a warning that the viewer too may fall victim to obesity if they were not careful. Other forms of media campaigns were also present, including a significant social media presence and other contemporary vehicles for educating particular pockets of the population such as blogs and online infographics.

When considering the context for a study on campus climate for students of size, location matters. Whether participants grew up adjacent to the research site, or they came to college from another state or country, participants in the current study experienced college in a region with a low rate of obesity. When they observed other individuals around them, they were looking within the vicinity of campus. When they turned on their television, heard or saw location-based advertisements, and attended events in the community, they were exposed to the products of the health initiatives in the region in which the study was conducted.

**Context: Public perception, the media, and anti-fat rhetoric.** As noted above, to understand the climate and culture on campus for students of size, a number of key contextual factors needed to be known and considered. The current context in the US
surrounding the topic of obesity is pervasive and powerful. Obesity has been deemed a public health crisis (Klein, 2004), a major public health problem (May et al., 2013), an epidemic (Boero, 2007; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001), and the “most important public health problem in the United States” (Klein, 2004, p. 6.). Numerous organizations and individuals within the medical community have spoken out strongly and issued compelling calls to action about the need to aggressively prevent and treat obesity in the US (Klein, 2004; Manson, Skerrett, Greenland, & VanItallie, 2004). For example, in Surgeon General David Satcher’s 2001 *Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity*, he noted that obesity had reached epidemic proportions and called upon not only individuals, but also communities and the various organizations and institutions within communities, including educational institutions, to take action to stop and reverse the epidemic (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

To this end, a number of public health policies and initiatives, typically carried out by state or federal health agencies, though sometimes by local municipalities, have been developed to fight the epidemic (Reeve, Ashe, Farias, & Gostin, 2015). Similar to the initiatives described above that were occurring in the region where the study was conducted, efforts through the media, through schools, and other public and private communication channels are in place. As an example, former First Lady Michelle Obama used her positional power to launch a project entitled *Let's Move*, which was “dedicated to solving the challenge of childhood obesity” (Learn the facts, n.d.). Her public platform resulted in messaging in public schools (K-12) across the country about obesity prevention, with a focus on promoting lifestyle changes that students and their families
should make. Although this campaign had numerous elements to encourage such changes, the message delivered was simple: fat is bad and must be eradicated.

O’Hara and Gregg (2012) noted that the “war on obesity is actually a war on fat people” (p. 41) and that public health efforts to prevent and reverse obesity actually contribute to weight-related bias and discriminatory treatment of fat people. In an intriguing piece on the implications of public efforts to prevent and reverse obesity, O’Hara and Gregg framed the war on obesity as violation of basic human rights. They outlined key tenets of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and articulated how and why public polices and prevention efforts geared at thwarting obesity conflict with the doctrine of the Declaration. For example, the first article of the Declaration addresses the right that all people have to human dignity. O’Hara and Gregg contested that “millions of people throughout the world have their right to dignity breached every day via the health-sanctioned vilification of fat and fatness” (p. 36).

Countless examples of such vilification and intentional jabs at the dignity of people of size abound. For example, consider an advertisement placed on the back of public busses that presumably is visible to thousands of people each day, including hundreds- if not thousands- of people of size. The advertisement shows a person of size, depicted from behind, with the words, “Don’t look like the back end of a bus: obesity can cause cancer-take control” (O’Hara & Gregg, 2012, p. 36). The messages embedded within this one example are significant. The first-person language made it clear that the ad was speaking directly to individuals who are already obese or at risk of being obese. The note to them to “take control” clearly implied that their weight is within their control and failed to address the multitude of other factors that may be contributing to their body
weight. The use of a derogatory analogy, that a person resembles the back of a public bus, is cruel and served to perpetuate the shame that many people of size may already experience. This single example shed light on the context in which people of size are living as they go about their day-to-day life. Although I have not found evidence of such violations occurring within a college or university setting, this certainly seems plausible given that colleges and universities tend to enroll the age demographic that has been identified as an ideal target for obesity prevention public health campaigns (Nelson et al., 2008).

Central to the broad issue of how people of size in our society are perceived and treated is the question of responsibility (Brownell et al., 2010). That is, who is responsible for an individual’s weight? Is weight a behavioral issue for individuals who are at fault for their own condition, or is weight tied to a larger social issue for our communities to address publicly? At the most simplistic level, aside from rare medical conditions, the cause of being overweight can be attributed to an individual consuming more calories than the number of calories expended. However, such an explanation ignores the multitude of other economic, social, and political factors that contribute to obesity at institutional and systemic levels, not to mention genetic and biological factors (Saguy, 2013). For example, consider the higher cost of fruits and vegetables to higher-calorie and less nutritionally rich processed foods and how this might impact the food choices of someone limited to public assistance for groceries. Likewise, consider how someone who needs to work multiple jobs might find time to exercise, juxtaposed to someone who’s financial situation allows him or her to work a single job, or perhaps does not necessitate full time employment at all. Or, what about a person with a disability who
is unable to participate in traditional fitness activities? Yet, consideration of these types of constraints is largely absent from the public perception of who is to blame for an individual’s weight (Saguy, 2013). Rather than considering, for example, that the supplemental nutrition assistance program (formerly known as food stamps) ought to be reformed to allow participants to opt for healthier options, the subject of the reform is most often the individuals of size themselves, who are generally perceived as solely responsible for their size.

Furthermore, in considering the topic at hand of college students of size, the above listed examples all resonate. College is a period in life when many individuals encounter financial struggles as they are faced with covering the increased cost of tuition and fees (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Likewise, this is also a period of life when individual may not be working full time or are working a low wage and part time job, resulting in the colloquialism of a poor college student (Silos-Rooney, 2014). Likewise, colleges and universities enroll a diverse student population, including people with disabilities and people from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. College students of size are presumably subjected to the same blame that people of size encounter in other pockets of society.

When considering public perception on any given phenomenon or issue, the media is a logical place to turn. A number of studies examining the role of the media in the portrayal of people of size provide insight into the public perception. For example, a study examining media portrayals in two major news publications of overweight individuals and underweight individuals diagnosed with anorexia or bulimia found that the news media generally attributed being overweight as due to poor individual choices,
whereas underweight anorexic and bulimics in news stories were generally presented as victims of a medical condition (Saguy & Gruys, 2010). Likewise, people of size are often presented in the media as having negative personality traits, such as being lazy, gluttonous, or ignorant, that can be to blame for their weight (Saguy & Gruys, 2010). The proportion of overweight and obese individuals represented on television is also drastically skewed from reality. Only 3% of women represented on commercial television appeared to be obese, and the few larger characters who did appear tended to have rare positive interactions with other characters, thus contributing to negative association with obesity and stereotyping (Greenberg, Eastin, Hofschire, Lachlan, & Brownell, 2003).

The media also plays a part in setting the stage for the public’s perception of the magnitude of the problems associated with the growing number of people who are overweight and/or obese. For example, as mentioned earlier, it has become common vernacular to use the phrase obesity epidemic to refer to the increase in the number of people of size in the US (McMichael, 2013). Boero (2007) argued that despite the rise in the number of obese individuals, the media’s use of the term epidemic is misleading and has the effect of shifting the perceptions about obesity from a complex social problem to an individual disease. She noted that the use of the word epidemic in the media capitalized on the public’s panic about diseases and created a sense of chaos about the disease because the use of that term implies that obesity is contagious and can strike unexpectedly, as other epidemic diseases do (i.e. cholera, smallpox).

In considering the context for people of size in our contemporary society, it may also be useful to consider the social acceptability of the anti-fat rhetoric. In their review of the literature on bias and discrimination targeting obese individuals, Puhl and
Brownell (2001) stated that, “It has been said that obese persons are the last acceptable targets of discrimination” (p. 788). That is, while blatant and even subtle or covert acts of discrimination towards people based on other facets of identity may not be acceptable to mainstream society (though it is important to note that such acts may indeed be celebrated in varying degrees within many communities), the same discriminatory acts towards people of size may be extolled. This acceptable discrimination takes many forms, ranging from informal *fat jokes* to well respected public figures making anti-fat statements. The message is clear: fat is bad, thin is good. People in the US are living in a, “cultural context that not only abhors fatness and the fat person as a sign of degeneracy, but also one that has made the degradation of fat people a media ritual” (Farrell, 2011, p. 119).

**Counter context: Size acceptance and health at every size.** Despite the dominant anti-fat rhetoric in the US today (McMichael, 2013), I want to call attention to several important movements that serve to empower people of size by resisting the dominant culture and offering alternative frames for how people of size live and function within society. Sometimes referred to as *fat acceptance, fat pride,* or even *fat liberation* (a nod to the oppressive nature of the dominant culture), these movements are “fighting for the acceptance of size diversity, the acceptance of people of every size- thin, fat, and everywhere between” (McMichael, 2013, p. 23). Several associations exist to help organize the movements and provide space and voice for individuals of size and their allies to come together and organize efforts to put an end to size discrimination. These organizations include the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, the Association for Size Diversity and Health, NOLOSE, which began as the National
Organization for Lesbians of SizE but which has since expanded to advocate for all
genders, as well as several smaller organizations (Cooper, 2011). Many of these groups
are well organized and quite active, and many have vibrant online communities, often
referred to as the fatosphere, where people of size can find camaraderie, fellowship, and
support, in addition to opportunities for advocacy on public policy issues and other topics
impacting the lives of people of size (Rabin, 2008).

Each organization listed above operates from a slightly different lens and goes
about their work within the fat acceptance movement from a unique approach. Of note is
the Health at Every Size (HAES) movement, which is an alternative public health model
that resists the premise that obesity is necessarily linked to poor health (Bacon, 2008). A
number of scholars, clinicians, and other health advocates have challenged the notion that
being overweight or obese is tantamount to being unhealthy. Rather, as the name implies,
the movement posits that health can be achieved at any size (regardless of one’s BMI or
body weight). Proponents ascribe to a set of beliefs that emphasize linking behavior to
health—rather than a number on the scale (Burgard, 2009). For example, clinicians
practicing from a HAES perspective might work to encourage exercise among all patients
they treat— not as a means to lose weight but as a mechanism for promoting overall health.
Although HAES is far from a mainstream movement, particularly in healthcare
communities, its existence as a counter-culture that stands up to the dominant rhetoric is
noteworthy, as it has gained popularity with a small, but significant number of healthcare
providers.

In Bacon’s (2008) text on Health at Every Size (HAES), written intentionally in
the style of a self-help diet book (ironically the very thing that the author is trying to
combat), she addressed the millions of people of size who have become “victims of fat politics” (p. 123) and advocated for a paradigm shift in which society no longer associates fatness with unhealthiness. Relying on a holistic wellness model to shape her work, Bacon argued that a lifetime of dieting, often depriving your body of key nutrients and causing undue stress and internal fat shaming, is more detrimental to one’s health than any possible effects of carrying extra weight on one’s body. In HAES, the effects of being oppressed and shamed as a result of one’s weight are considered in assessing one’s overall wellness. As such, respecting oneself and achieving self-acceptance, regardless of weight, is paramount to good health. In addition to guidance offered for individuals of size who are seeking health, Bacon offered a concluding HAES message to healthcare professionals. In it she carefully points out that the current dominant model within healthcare is quite often in violation of the fundamental medical oath to do no harm, as patients are often harmed by the shame and blame that weighs on them as a result of interactions with many healthcare providers. Bacon (2008) concluded by referring to HAES as the “compassionate alternative to the war on obesity” (p. 316).

Although I did not find specific indications of HAES within a college/university healthcare or wellness setting, the key tenets of the movement are congruent with the espoused values of student affairs professionals related to inclusive campus environments. Certainly, the attitudes held and conveyed by healthcare clinicians and wellness professionals can and do contribute to the campus climate for students of size (see chapters IV & V).
Culture

For the purpose of this study, college culture is defined as “the collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in an institute of higher education and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off campus” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988 p. 13). Students and student affairs practitioners alike have a vested interest in issues of campus culture for a number of reasons. The culture in which we operate shapes how we experience our environment and creates affective dynamics that impact our lives. Simply put, and as noted in the introduction of this chapter, an understanding of elements of culture were important as I sought to make sense of the climate on campus that most directly impacted students’ experiences. Campus culture also has broad reaching impact on student learning, development, and persistence (Dalton & Cross, 2008; Kuh, 2001); arguably all matters of the upmost importance for students and staff who work with students on these very issues. The following section provides an overview of literature that I found salient when framing the cultural contributions to campus climate.

Cultural considerations: Historical weight. It would be a vast omission to address the culture in the US in 2019 related to body weight without addressing the rich history that contributes to it. The social construction of size in the US has been shaped over time and our contemporary cultural assumptions on this topic are actually quite different than the past, particularly regarding women’s bodies (Seid, 1994). Up until the late 1800’s, being on the large end of the spectrum of body size was associated with a variety of positive traits (Fraser, 2009). A larger body size was considered a sign of
wealth and strength, as it was a signal that you could afford to eat well and could enjoy a more sedentary lifestyle, as opposed to the lower status working/labor lifestyle. Women who carried additional weight were considered attractive and sexy, as the additional body weight was seen as a sign of fertility (Farrell, 2011; Fraser, 2009). By the early 1900’s however, the pendulum had begun to shift towards a preference for thinness. As food insecurity became less of a concern for the general population, due to the shift from an agricultural economy to an industrial one, people in the US had more access to more food, resulting in weight gain (Fraser, 2009). Related to this, the industrialization food and beverage and the advent of refrigeration resulted in early iterations of processed junk food products that quickly became available throughout much of the country. Immigration was also likely a factor in the size shift of the country, as many of the immigrants coming to the US in the early 1900’s were from areas of the world with genetically shorter and stockier populations. Anthropologists have deduced that the shift to desire a thin body type can be attributed to wealthy Americans’ response to these cultural changes just after the turn of the century, as they were seeking a way to distinguish themselves from the common citizens. Added to this was the persuasive fashion industry, with accompanying advertisements that firmly solidified thinness as the ideal American body type, particularly for women, from the turn of the 20th century to present day.

Stigma and bias towards people of size, and in particular women of size, are also situated in a complex historical context. Women have long been subjected to cultural norms regarding their appearance and corresponding social controls that drive conformity (Rothblum, 1994). Examples include the binding of women’s feet, genital mutilation, and
Similarly, the quest for women to be thin is not simply about aesthetics, but also about women’s behavior and obedience in a patriarchy. Women who are smaller than men are well positioned for a submissive role to the dominant larger male body type. Body size is a proxy for control and power and accordingly, larger women are a threat to the male power and control. As Rothblum stated, “The institutions of social control, well aware of women’s potential power, have much to lose when women discard restrictive and oppressive norms” (p. 72). Throughout the research process for the current study, I was both informed by and influenced by the historical, political, and social forces from our history that contribute to the contemporary climate. Furthermore, given the critical feminist agenda of this research (see chapter III), I was mindful of the significant weight that historical perceptions and expectations have had in shaping climates on campus today. Although I remain hopeful that this research can contribute to positive change, I am not so naïve as to think that change will be a simple, easy, or expedient fix. To unfasten a culture that has been building over centuries, even in a particular micro-community such as an individual campus, will be a tremendous feat. However, if I can be successful in exposing injustices of an oppressive climate on campus for students of size, I am hopeful that I can engage with colleagues and other scholars to begin to reverse the culture that has built over time.

**Cultural cornerstones: Weight-related stigma, bias, and discrimination.** A discussion on the culture for people of size in the US in 2019 would also be incomplete without an explanation of the stigma that exists related to body weight. Although weight-related stigma, bias, and discrimination were briefly addressed in the discussion of the current context for people of size (above), as I move into the review of the literature that
serves to inform the culture and climate on campus for people of size, I delve more fully into stigmas, bias, and the related impact of these constructs. Additionally, and as mentioned in chapter I, Crosnoe (2007) found disparities in college enrollment rates between obese and normal-weight high school women and the effect of weight-related stigma working against the obese high school students was cited as a likely causal factor for their lower rates of college matriculation. Crosnoe’s study included a recommendation to further study weight-related stigma within higher education and specifically the “social side of schooling” (p. 255). This work serves as a significant motivating factor for me to undertaking the current project. As such, I give ample attention here to the topic of weight-related stigma, bias, and discrimination.

In his seminal text on stigma, Goffman (1963) defined stigma as occurring when others assign pervasive demeaning attributes to an individual or group that takes them “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (p. 3). Stigma is a socially constructed phenomenon, based on perceptions of some about the ‘others’ (Major & O’Brien, 2005). Stigma itself is an evaluation or attitude, which can become the basis for actions or behaviors, such as discrimination, against the targeted individual or groups. Although Goffman (1963) did not address stigma related to body weight when he published his social stigma model, numerous scholars studying obesity and body weight have drawn from his work when they have concluded that, “obesity clearly is a socially stigmatized trait” (Crosnoe, 2007, p. 243).

The stigmatization of people of size is prevalent in a variety of settings, including in education (Crosnoe, 2007; Puhl, Moss-Racusin et al., 2008), and is perpetrated by many types of people, including diverse college students (Latner, Stunkard, & Wilson,
Puhl, Moss-Racusin, and associates (2008) defined weight stigma or bias as “negative weight-related attitudes and beliefs that are manifested by stereotypes, rejection, and prejudice towards individuals because they are overweight or obese” (p. 347). The frequency at which individuals experience weight-related stigmatization is positively correlated with BMI. That is, the larger the individual, the more instances of weight-related stigmatization they are apt to experience (Friedman et al., 2005).

Colleges and universities have likely facilitated weight-related discrimination for some time (Crosnoe, 2007). Research from the 1960’s brought to light inequities in college acceptance for obese versus non-obese students (Canning & Mayer, 1966). Obese high school graduates were being admitted to prestigious institutions at significantly lower rates than their normal-weight peers, even when accounting for differences in academic performance, high school, social class, and motivation to attend a prestigious college. Moreover, this discrepancy in acceptance was even more pronounced among women applying to college (Canning & Mayer, 1966). Note that this study was conducted at a time that the college interview, held in person, was often a key determinant in the acceptance process at prestigious colleges and universities. Similarly, recommendation letters, typically written by high school teachers or others who know the applicant directly, were important factors in the admissions decision. As such, the authors concluded that the significant differences in acceptance rates between obese and normal-weight applicants were likely attributed to discriminatory attitudes among college admissions interviewers or recommendation letter writers against obese applicants (Canning & Mayer, 1966). Crosnoe’s (2007) more contemporary work also indicated that the college matriculation rates of obese and non-obese high school students differ, with
obese students enrolling at lower rates than their non-obese peers. Crosnoe also found that gender was a factor in the disparity, with the difference in college enrollment the most pronounced with women.

Weight-related stigma may also impact how students are able to fund their education. Crandall (1995) posited that if parents apply gender stereotypes to their own children, it is logical to expect that weight-related stigma might also impact parental behavior towards their children. In a study of first year students, participants reported on their weight, primary source of funding for college, parental income, and a variety of other factors. After controlling for differences in parental income and other factors that are known to be related to parents’ willingness to fund their child’s college education, results from Crandall’s study indicated that overweight college women received less financial support from their parents to attend college than their normal-weight peers, but this did not hold true for men. Because prior research indicates that a relationship exists between students’ ability to pay for college and their persistence (Cabrera, Stampen, & Hansen, 1990), the implications of parental stigmatization of their overweight daughters related to their willingness to fund their education may be important for understanding the persistence of overweight college women.

Once enrolled and throughout their college career, overweight and obese students may continue to experience weight-related stigma and the associated effects. In a study of overweight and obese adults, Puhl, Moss-Racusin, and associates (2008) examined the self-reported worst instances of weight-related stigma that individuals experienced. The majority of participants reported that verbal bias (such as teasing, taunting, and name-calling) was the worst form of weight-related stigma. After their home and public places,
school settings were the most common places for the worst instances of weight-related stigma to occur. Perhaps contrary to popular belief, findings from this study also indicated that although many individuals experienced weight-related stigma as children, the worst occurrences occurred in adulthood, and were most often perpetrated by other adults.

In addition to the weight-related stigmatization in educational settings, weight-related stigma exists in employment settings (Puhl & Brownell, 2001; Roehling, Roehling, & Pichler, 2007; Solovay, 2000). As one of higher education’s primary functions is to prepare students for the workforce, stigma and resulting discrimination occurring in hiring and promotion practices is of concern, as it may inhibit college students and alumni from realizing the outcomes of their degree or perhaps of persisting to complete their degree if prospects for employment are limited. Likewise, many college students are working while enrolled in school and many in positions on campus. Accordingly, issues of workplace stigma and discrimination are relevant for higher education as colleges and universities also play the role of employer for many students. Although employment discrimination (on or off campus) is not the focus of the current study, I have included a brief overview of two illustrative studies here (Giel et al., 2010; Giel et al., 2012) as it seems plausible that issues of employment discrimination may spill into the campus climate, particularly if students are working on campus or simply if they are linking their experience in college with expectations for post-graduation employment.

In their review of prior research on weight-related discrimination in the workplace, Giel and associates (2010) found that discrimination against overweight and obese individuals in the workplace was displayed as general negative stereotyping due to
weight, as a barrier to hiring, a barrier to promotion and/or professional opportunity for success, and as a risk factor for unequal treatment in the workplace, compared to what normal-weight individuals experience. Additionally, in a different study involving human resources professionals, Giel et al. (2012) found that individuals who presented as overweight or obese were more likely to be disqualified and less likely to be selected for higher ranking supervisory positions than normal-weight individuals by human resources professionals. Giel et al. also examined the effects of race and gender bias in the hiring process. Results from this study indicated that weight-related stigmatization had a stronger adverse effect on potential hiring and level of position than gender or race bias had. When weight was held constant with normal-weight potential candidates, the effect of gender bias disappeared. However, when human resources professionals were asked to choose between obese women and obese men, women were less favorable candidates, indicating that the impact of weight-related stigma may be greater for women than for men in the hiring process.

As mentioned above, stigma itself is an evaluation or attitude, which can become the basis for actions or behaviors, such as discrimination, against the targeted individual or groups. Discrimination can occur in a variety of subtle and unintentional or even subliminal ways, but it can also be intentional, public, legal, accepted, and even celebrated. Although it is common to associate the act of discrimination with illegality or at least general inappropriateness, this is not always the case. Indeed, federal law, as well as many state laws, offers some protection related to discrimination, articulating that various forms of discrimination against certain protected classes of people are illegal. At the federal level, it is illegal to discriminate against individuals on the basis of race, color,
religion, sex, national origin, age (40 or older), and disability. Virtually all institutions of higher education are obligated to adhere to federal laws because they receive federal funds in the form of financial aid for their students, in addition to other sources of federal funding (Kaplan & Lee, 2007). Starting with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, institutions were barred from discriminating on the basis of race, color, or national origin. In 1972, institutions were also prohibited from discriminating on the basis of sex with the passage of Title IX. In 1973, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act clarified that discrimination on the basis of disability status was prohibited, and this was expanded in 1990 with the Americans with Disabilities Act, which explicitly prohibits discrimination related to the disbursement of financial aid. In 1975 the Age Discrimination Act made age discrimination (against individuals over 40 years) illegal at the federal level as well.

Despite progress in support of the rights of many people based on identity, as described above, it important to note that federal law does not prohibit discrimination on the basis of body weight, and only one state (Michigan) has legislation to protect against weight-related discrimination (Pomeranz, 2008). In her text on the legalities associated with such actions, Solovay (2000) noted that, “discrimination against fat people is the civil rights hurdle of the new millennium” (p. 29). There are numerous examples of the courts upholding the rights of employers, corporations, and others to legally discriminate against individuals because they are overweight (Solovay, 2000), evidence that this hurdle has not yet been surpassed. People of size are living in a world where they are legally denied opportunities and access to services, opportunities, and experiences based on their own body. With rare exception, there is no legal recourse for the treatment to
which they are subjected. As I consider the campus climate for students of size, I will not only look for elements of weight-related stigma and bias, but also any overt discrimination that may be occurring.

**Cultural stratification: Status in society.** Closely related to the issue of stigma, but meriting a unique discussion, is the concept of how status is socially constructed within a culture. While stigma and bias are targeted towards individuals, status considers the categories within a social system in which others place individuals within that system (Webster & Hysom, 1998). Individuals are placed within status categories based on characteristics, but not all characteristics are associated with status. Ridgeway (1991) theorized that the social construction of status occurs when “consensual cultural beliefs indicate that persons who have one state of the characteristic…are more worthy in the society than those with another state of the characteristic.” (p. 368). She further noted that status characteristics are defined through comparison with other status groups, so that competence (defined as “beliefs about an individual’s general capacity to achieve a desired end” (p. 368)) of those in a particular status is perceived as greater or less than other statuses. Ridgeway was also explicit about the social justice concerns associated with status, citing that categorization by status groups undermines individual’s abilities and actual competence, by clustering individuals into groups which may not be representative of actual competence.

A body of literature reviewed by Webster and Driskell (1983) indicated that physical attractiveness or unattractiveness was a status characteristic such that being perceived as attractive generally gives one elevated (superior) status, which is associated with competence and other general positive qualities. Thornhill and Grammer (1999)
even went so far to state that “perhaps the most robust and replicable finding in all of social psychology is that looks really matter” (p. 106).

The benefit of elevated status has been studied in the classroom. In their meta-analysis of research on the topic of attractiveness in education, Ritts, Patterson, and Tubbs (1992) found that teachers perceived attractive students more favorably than their less attractive peers. Specifically, the academic potential and intelligence of attractive students was rated as higher than their less attractive peers. Furthermore, studies have indicated that interactions of other facets of identity, such as race and gender, with attractiveness impacts how individuals are categorized by status (Frevert & Walker, 2014; Ritts et al., 1992). Although most of the studies related to attractiveness status and education have been conducted with elementary and high school students, it is logical to assume that the social status benefits associated with attractiveness would extend to post-secondary educational settings. Perhaps colleges and universities offer a unique status-free environment, but this seems highly implausible, particularly because evidence of status, and the corresponding benefits associated with holding a high social status, is also found in the workplace (Frevert & Walker, 2014).

**Identity and intersectionality.** As I conclude this discussion on weight-related stigma, bias, discrimination, and social status, I would be remiss if I were not explicit about discussing two concepts embedded within the relevant literature: social identity and the intersection of social identities. An individual’s identity is complex and dynamic. One is not simply a person of size, just as one is not defined solely by one’s gender, race, or sexual orientation; yet, theses constructs intersect to form one’s identity and have infinite and cumulative effects on one another. It has been stated, “identity is not simply additive
but multiplicative” (Bell, 2010, p. 22). That is, stacking together different facets of identity does not result in an end sum outcome that is necessarily double (or triple, etc.) the identities. Rather, there are complex interactions between an individual’s various social identities and the impact of these interactions varies based on a tremendous number of unique variables. Likewise, one facet of identity does not override and/or otherwise negate another, although it could certainly have an effect on the other.

Identity is both a deeply personal construct, and one that is shaped by the people with whom individuals interact. In her essay on the complexity of identity, Tatum (2010) described how “the parts of our identity that do capture our attention are those that other people notice, and that reflect back to us” (p. 6). Although not to imply that the hidden facets of our identity are not impactful in very substantive ways, aspects of ourselves that are outwardly visible are oftentimes first salient when casting someone as othered. Tatum’s work identified seven categories of otherness: ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, and ability, though she was quick to acknowledge that these are not the only categories of otherness in our society. I conceptualize body size as a facet of identity. Furthermore, using Tatum’s theory related to visibility of identity, body size is a facet of identity that is readily visible and apparent to others, therefore ripe for a categorization of otherness.

The literature on weight-related stigma and bias certainly supports this assertion and also brings to light the effect of intersecting identities for people of size (van Amsterdam, 2012). In addition to several of the articles referenced above (Crosnoe, 2007; Frevert & Walker, 2014; Giel et al., 2012; Ritts et al., 1992), additional literature further frames the intersections of facets of identity for people of size. For example, Puhl,
Andreyeva, and Brownell (2008) conducted a study using a sample of over 2,000 adults who were surveyed both by phone and through a mail survey about a variety of health and wellbeing factors, including perceived discrimination. The items about discrimination asked the respondents to cite the perceived basis for the discrimination experienced. The survey also collected a variety of demographic data, including participants’ BMI. Results from this research indicated that moderately obese women were three times more likely to report discrimination on the basis of their weight than men in the same weight category. African American participants reported the highest level of weight-related discrimination, and in line with the findings related to gender, this was most pronounced for African American women. Age also appeared to play a factor in weight-related discrimination, with younger participants citing higher levels of discrimination than older participants, after controlling for reported BMI, and again this was particularly the case for younger women (Puhl, Andreyeva et al., 2008).

Studies on weight-related discrimination in employment settings also point to the intersection of weight and gender. In an interesting study from Iceland that attempted to control for gender as a factor in employment discrimination found that the effects of obesity were significantly more problematic for women than for men (Asgeirsdottir, 2011). Specifically, “the probability of being employed is in inverse proportion to weight but also that both the magnitude of the estimated effects and the levels of statistical significance are greater for women than they are for men” (Asgeirsdottir, 2011, p. 151). Research on employment discrimination in the US has yielded similar results. Roehling and associates (2007) surveyed a nationally representative sample of over 2,500 adults in the US to understand participants’ perceptions of three forms of weight-related
discrimination related to employment (not hired, not promoted, and fired from a job). Results indicated that women were 16 times more likely than men to report weight-related employment discrimination.

Although the interrelated dynamics of how facets of identity contribute to perceptions of weight-related stigma are complex and outside of the scope of this particular research, it is important to note that these intersections exist. Furthermore, beyond just acknowledging these intersections, I was attuned to participants’ multi-faceted identities and considered how their holistic identities were shaping their experiences. This is discussed further in chapters IV and V.

Climate

Climate considerations: Weight on campus. In addition to the millions of students who enter higher education already as individuals of size, weight gain among college students is a ubiquitous and expected phenomenon, often referred to as the freshman 15 (Connell, 2009; Hoffman et al., 2006). That is, it is widely expected that college students will gain approximately 15 pounds during their first year of college. Indeed, weight gain among first-year college students is common (Gropper et al., 2009; Hoffman et al., 2006; Levitsky et al., 2004), though the frequently stated 15 pounds is an exaggeration of the norm (Morrow et al., 2006; Vella-Zarb & Elgar, 2009). Weight gain in early college is more common for students who are already individuals of size. Students who begin college already overweight gain almost twice as much weight during their first six months of college than their normal-weight peers, resulting in them being more at risk for becoming obese (Kasparek, Corwin, Valois, Sargent, & Lewis Morris, 2008).
Research has been conducted to better understand how and why different groups of college students tend to gain weight after transitioning to their new environment and the findings are varied (Butler et al., 2004; Jung et al., 2008; LaCaille et al., 2011). For example, some studies attribute first year college women’s weight gain primarily to decreased physical activity after entering college (Butler et al., 2004; Jung et al., 2008), whereas others have suggested that increased alcohol consumption plays a role in college students’ weight gain (LaCaille et al., 2011). It is also apparent that college students generally do not meet the recommendations set forth by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and other public health agencies for appropriate levels of physical activity or nutritional intake, so that may also be a factor. College students generally eat fewer fruits, vegetables, and fruit juices, and consume more high fat meats, snacks, and desserts than recommended (Dinger, 1999). These statistics, along with the broader call to action for various community entities to become involved in the fight against obesity, may lead student affairs professionals to join in the fight.

The climate within student affairs related to students of size on campus can be illustrated by a recent move on the part of American College Personnel Association (ACPA), a primary professional association for student affairs professionals. In 2014, ACPA announced a new agreement with the Partnership for a Healthier America. Despite a name that might imply a general focus on health, the Partnership’s focus is solely on combating obesity, stating that its purpose is to “to ensure the health of our nation’s youth by solving the childhood obesity crisis.” (Partnership for a Healthier America, 2015, para. 1). In her communication to members, ACPA Executive Director Cindi Love explained the alignment of ACPA with the Partnership, “We believe deeply in the core values of
this program and the benefits for students…” (Love, 2014, para. 1). In the inaugural announcement, ACPA not only encouraged members working on college and university campuses to join in the fight against obesity, they also offered incentives to member institutions who were early adopters of a formal Healthier Campus Initiative. Through this program, member campuses opted to enter into a formal agreement with the Partnership for a Healthier America (“Healthier Campus Initiative”, 2014). Campuses were asked to commit to enacting and/or adhering to a series of guidelines related to food and nutrition, physical activity/movement, and programming. For example, actions that participating institutions can select from in their commitment include hiring personal trainers and dieticians on campus and clearly identifying healthier options in food service facilities on campus. The promotional materials about the Healthier Campus Initiative emphasized that college and university campuses are the ideal setting to focus the fight against obesity, citing the prevalence of weight gain in the first year of college, the sedentary lifestyle and poor nutrition of most college students, and the role that higher education can play in establishing longstanding lifestyle habits (“Healthier Campus Initiative”, 2014).

The relationship between ACPA and the Partnership for a Healthier America is a clear indication that student affairs professionals are being directed to engage in the fight against obesity. Furthermore, the underlying message is that a healthy campus revolves around the issue of body weight, rather than the myriad of possible health issues that such an initiative might address. Focusing an initiative sponsored by a major student affairs professional organization entitled the Healthy Campus Initiative on body weight alone implies that those working with college students should focus health efforts on obesity
prevention, rather than other salient health topics for college students such as mental health, sexual health, drug and/or alcohol related health factors, or even cancer prevention related to behavioral choices (i.e. tobacco cessation programs aimed at preventing the development of lung cancer or sun/UV exposure protection to reduce risk of skin cancer). None of those topics, or the literally hundreds of other possible health topics aside from obesity, are addressed in the Healthy Campus Initiative. This signals the conflation of body weight with overall health, in this case specifically within the context of higher education.

**Climate considerations: Students of size and student affairs.** Since its inception, the profession now known as student affairs has maintained a philosophy that colleges and universities have a responsibility to consider students in a holistic manner (American Council on Education Studies, 1937). That is, rather than solely considering the facets of an individual student’s identity that seem salient in a particular situation, students are to be considered as whole people — complete with their various identities that they may hold — so that they can learn and grow as students. The Student Personnel Point of View (SPPV), initially published in 1937, is a formative document for the profession of student affairs that articulates the purpose of the profession. Rather than focusing solely on students’ intellectual and scholarly development, colleges and universities ought to concern themselves with other facets of students’ development including “…his emotional make up, his physical condition, his social relationships, his vocational aptitudes and skills…” (American Council on Education Studies, 1937, p. 3). To this end, educational services at institutions should span a variety of functions, such as “determining the physical and mental health status of the student, providing appropriate
remedial health measures, supervising the health of students, and controlling environmental health factors” (American Council on Education Studies, 1937, p. 4). When the SPPV was revised and reissued in 1949, health promotion was included in the edict (American Council on Education Studies, 1949). Rather than conceptualizing health services as solely about the treatment or response to illness and disease, colleges and universities should have a health program that “should also aggressively promote a program of health education” (American Council on Education Studies, 1949, p. 5). Undoubtedly the field has evolved since the early SPPVs were published, though subsequent iterations and more contemporary seminal documents have affirmed the importance of addressing students in a holistic manner by considering the physical and mental health of students and the campus environments in which students learn and often live (American Council on Education Studies, 1949; Sandeen et al., 1987).

**Wellness.** Related to this foundational purpose of the field, the concept of personal wellness, despite having many different definitions and models (Corbin & Pangrazi, 2001), fits well with the edict of the SPPV. The notion of wellness was formalized in the early 1960’s by Dr. Halbert Dunn, whose early definition described the act of orienting towards maximizing individual potential within the functioning environment (Warner, 1984). The wellness movement marked an expansion of traditional health care, focused exclusively on treating poor physical health conditions, to a consideration of broader issues of disease and illness prevention, taking into account personal behaviors, choices, and environmental factors. Today, wellness is often defined as a state of being in positive health along various personal and/or environmental dimensions (Corbin & Pangrazi, 2001). Although different dimensions are used in
different wellness models, generally wellness encompasses physical, social, intellectual, emotional/mental, and spiritual aspects of an individual’s overall health.

The rise of the wellness movement began in business and workforce settings in the 1950’s (Petosa, 1984), but student affairs programs in colleges and universities embraced student wellness as an area of responsibility by the 1970’s (Warner, 1984). Given the environmental component to Dunn’s initial wellness model, the shift from illness and injury prevention to a more integrated wellness education approach was a natural progression for higher education, where institutions had a broad scope of responsibility to their students and communities, typically centered around a physical campus environment. Hettler (1980) articulated that higher education should take on the responsibility of promoting personal wellness with students for several reasons. Hettler suggested that by encouraging personal wellness, colleges and universities could improve student retention. Likewise, wellness promotion could help graduates of the institution secure better jobs, because employers might be apt to want to hire healthier individuals. Lastly, he suggested that higher education had the potential to help increase the overall lifespan of the population, as detrimental behaviors that lead to early death are often learned or made habit during young adulthood. Thus, by promoting student wellness, colleges and universities could decrease the negative behaviors that are often causes of premature mortality in adulthood, thereby serving society at large.

As I considered the issues of wellness for the current study, I was struck by the possibility that efforts to promote wellness on campus may also detract from other dimensions of wellness for some students. For example, consider the example provided earlier regarding the public health campaign on the back of public busses to prevent
obesity that was cited as a human rights violation (O’Hara & Gregg, 2012). Certainly, the creators of this advertisement may have framed it as a wellness promotion effort, as it may help promote positive health along the physical dimension that Corbin and Pangrazi, (2001) label. However, if exposure to the advertisement manifests as a form of weight-related stigma for people of size, being subjected to this may have adverse effects along the emotional/mental wellness domain. Colleges and universities are indeed engaged in the act of health/wellness promotion, so similar messaging and programming may exist on campus and this may impact different students’ wellness in vastly different ways. Indeed, I found some evidence of this, which will be discussed further in chapters IV and V.

**Student persistence.** College student persistence is a complex and multi-faceted issue. Scholars and practitioners alike agree that a combination of institutional and individual student characteristics factor into a particular student’s likeness to persist to graduation (ACT, 2010; Tinto, 1993). Institutions may engage in a variety of effective practices that help promote student persistence (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005), but the individual student’s unique characteristics also contribute to their propensity to persist (Tinto, 1993).

Individuals who are subjected to weight-related stigma may experience a number of potentially detrimental effects of this victimization that could be linked to failure to persist in college. Weight-stigmatized individuals may experience adverse psychological impacts such as depression (Friedman et al., 2005; Wott & Carels, 2010), as well as negative body image and poor self-esteem (Myers & Rosen, 1999). Major and O’Brien (2005) explained that being a target of negative stereotyping and discrimination often
results in a threat to one’s social identity. They offered a model for understanding this threat and the resulting implications on the targeted individual. Simply put, the model is based on the presumption that being targeted by others through stigma related to one’s social identity is stressful. Stress is present when individuals face demands that exceed their current coping resources (Miller & Kaiser, 2001). When an individual experiences a stigmatizing incident the targeted individual assesses their own identity as part of the targeted group. In doing so, the targeted individual assesses how being a part of the targeted group impacts their overall wellbeing and then subsequently experiences voluntary and involuntary responses to the stress associated with being in such a group (Major & O’Brien, 2005).

Examples of involuntary responses to this stress are increased anxiety, heightened blood pressure, and other emotional, cognitive, and physiological responses (Miller & Kaiser, 2001). Voluntary responses to stigma induced stress include intentional actions that individuals take to respond to the stress which are intended to lessen or eliminate the stress, or the experiences that led to the stress. Such strategies, which are also referred to as coping mechanisms, can include a variety of tactics, including disengagement or avoidance of the stigmatizing situation. Such strategies could have detrimental effects on student learning and student persistence, particularly if the stigmatizing situation occurs in a setting that is otherwise conducive to student success.

Myers and Rosen (1999) examined the specific coping mechanisms employed by obese individuals who reported being targets of weight-related stigma. Common coping strategies included positive approaches, such as positive self-talk, but also negative or maladaptive approaches including isolation and avoidance of or departure from a
situation. Furthermore, use of the maladaptive coping mechanisms was associated with poor mental health symptoms including negative self-esteem. Results from this study indicated that poor self-esteem and poor mental health can be consequences of being targeted by weight-related stigma. Furthermore, Major and O’Brien (2005) explained that “coping with stigma involves trade-offs. Strategies used in the service of achieving one goal (protecting self-esteem) may inhibit attainment of other goals (academic achievement)” (p. 406.). This trade-off is apparent when considering the experiences of students who may experience weight-related stigma in college. For example, if a student avoids engaging in class or class attendance altogether because they are experiencing weight-related stigma, it is natural to expect that there will be a negative effect on educational outcomes and subsequently persistence to degree completion.

Many scholars seeking to understand factors contributing to or detracting from persistence have also turned to the study of campus cultures and/or climates because students’ sense of belonging to the campus community is a factor strongly associated with persistence (Kuh, 2001). The barometer on the climate indicates the degree to which students feel as though they belong and are valued within the community. At a most basic level, students who feel that they belong or fit within an institution’s culture, or find subcultures within to which they can fit, are more likely to remain at the institution. Drawing heavily from Tinto’s (1993) work on student attrition, this premise is based on social integration theory which when applied to higher education posits that students who do not join or otherwise connect with their peers (therefore who are not integrated into the culture of the institution) are most at risk for attrition.
This brings to mind questions related to students of size and memberships in student organizations, such as fraternities, sororities, athletic teams, and student clubs. Involvement on campus, which is oftentimes accomplished through peer-groups, is associated with increased satisfaction and persistence (Astin, 1999). Are students of size less likely to join such groups, either by their own choice, or because of discrimination, bias, or other factors within the student groups and sub-cultures? Although I have been unable to find research which explicitly examines these questions, news stories about sororities dismissing members on the basis of weight and/or attractiveness (Dillon, 2007) and other anecdotal evidence leads me to believe that students of size may be less welcomed in certain sub-cultures within university structures. Likewise, the research on physical attractiveness and social status supports the notion that individuals who are perceived as unattractive are less successful in their social interactions than their attractive peers (Frevert & Walker, 2014), and this is also found with self-reports from college women (Dollinger, 2010).

Kuh (2001) also addressed the role of sense of community within an institution on student persistence. On the one hand, institutions that value and celebrate community have more success retaining students. That said, Kuh stated that “community is a double-edged sword in terms of persistence as there may be inherent conflicts in the language and rituals colleges use to celebrate community with the values and expectations of different groups of students” (p. 28). Consider this, for example, from the perspective of a student of size attending an institution that places much value on aesthetics and/or personal fitness within the community. Kuh also noted the importance of institutional communication about their culture to students and the role of transmitting values through
“behavioral and linguistic artifacts, and the manner in which it conducts business on a
daily basis” (p. 31). That is, what do students see, hear, and experience on campus and
what does this mean about the institutional culture and how they fit, or not, within?
Consider this from the perspective of a student of size. What images of their peers do
they see on campus posters, marketing materials, or in the student newspaper? What do
they hear about their peers and institutional faculty and staff about activities on campus
and how do they interpret these messages? As they experience the campus, what do they
encounter that may indicate that they belong, or do not belong, within the culture on
campus? Furthermore, how does this culture contribute to the day-to-day lived
experience— the climate— for students of size?

Cheng (2004) also studied university communities and the perceptions that
students have about their own university community. Using a survey designed to capture
students’ experiences within, satisfaction with, and feelings and attitudes about
community, Cheng affirmed that students’ sense of acceptance within the university
community contributes to their sense of belonging at the institution. Consistent with other
work in this area, in a recent study on the experiences of Asian American college
students, Wells and Horn (2015) found that the more positively students perceived the
campus climate, the greater sense of belonging the students had to the institution. The
issue of congruency also emerged from this work. The more compatible the students
perceived their own culture with the campus culture, the more they felt they belonged
within the culture.

As I engaged in the research process, I was very mindful of the existing research
related to student persistence and student belonging (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods,
2007; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002; O’Keeffe, 2013) and later, Strayhorn’s (2019) work on the same topic helped inform the implications for the current research. I was intentional in probing to learn how students of size interacted with other students, the groups to which they belong (and did not belong), and the messages they saw or heard on campus that may indicate whether or not they belonged within the community. Additionally, I was constantly reminded of the link between belonging and persistence as it related to the overall importance of my study and the social justice mission of the work. If attrition was occurring in part because students of size did not feel as though they belong or fit in on campus, then they are potentially denied the many benefits associated with earning a degree. And, even if students of size were not leaving the institution, if they were not able to take full advantage all aspects of the University experience, they may also be denied some of the benefits of a college education.

**Climate conduits: Functional units.** Several functional units within student affairs facilitate activities or experiences that contribute to the climate on campus for students of size. As such, in this final section of the literature review, I have provided overview information on college and university dining services and recreation programs. I both anticipated and confirmed that students of size have some distinctive experiences and challenges when using dining services and recreation programs on campus. These two functional units contribute to the climate on campus for students of size in unique ways and so this section serves to provide an overview of these functions, related to body size. Additionally, although not detailed in this section, the prior discussion on the
wellness movement and its manifestation in student affairs may provide the reader with further context on how students of size may intersect with student affairs programs and activities.

Since 1979, the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) has published guiding standards for functional areas within higher education (Mitstifer, 2012). The stated standards for each area include “criteria that every higher education institution and its student programs should be expected and able to meet” (p.9). Although some individual student affairs units may seek accreditation or other external validation of the quality and/or merit of their work, a general student affairs accreditation does not exist. In lieu of this, many institutions use the CAS standards to check the quality of their programs or otherwise affirm that the services provided meet established benchmarks and that the scope of the programs are appropriate and aligned with professional expectations. Indeed, CAS encourages the use of the standards as a tool for this purpose, instructing users that “‘self-regulation’ is the preferred route to program quality and effectiveness” (Mitstifer, 2012, p. 4). Accordingly, the CAS standards can be used to determine what elements should be offered within particular units, and also provide general information on the values and activities that units should adopt, at a minimum. I have referenced the CAS standards below, as they offer a touchstone for the nature of the work and activities within particular units and therefore can help provide perspective on the ways in which the units may shape the campus climate for students of size.

**Dining services.** Dining services, in a variety of forms, are likely offered on every brick and mortar campus in the country. Ranging from a few vending machines in a classroom building, robust all-you-can eat restaurant style buffets with required meal
plans, to popular franchises that are independently owned and operated on college
grounds, food is prevalent where college students congregate. The National Association
of College and University Food Services (NACUFS) is a membership organization
serving both institutions of higher education, as well as dining/food service industry
individuals and companies. The organization positions itself as a resource for
benchmarking data and best practices and provides educational programming on a variety
of diverse topics of relevance to food service on college and university campuses (About
NACUFS, n.d.). Nutrition and wellness is an organizational area of emphasis. To this
end, webinars are available to members that address related topics and the organization’s
national conference in 2015 includes sessions entitled Food Service: Key to a Healthier
Student Body, Simple Strategies for a Healthier Menu, Branding Nutrition on an Urban
Campus, and related topics.

The CAS standards for dining services are explicit that dining services on a
college or university campus should extend beyond simply providing food to hungry
students. Rather, dining services must address the “engagement of students in learning
about sound nutrition practices” (Mitstifer, 2012, p. 220). The standards go on to specify
that, “nutrition education provided by the department should…contribute to the overall
health of the campus community” (p. 222). As is consistent across the CAS standards for
all functional units, issues of diversity, equity, and access are also addressed, and it is
clear that dining services programs must consider issues of social justice in the delivery
of their programs and services. Although body weight is not addressed overtly in the
standards, dining services professionals and leaders striving to follow CAS standards
should surely consider the experiences, messages, and feelings that students of all sizes have when utilizing dining services on campus.

The limited scholarly research on campus dining services tends to center on student satisfaction with services and/or available offerings (Saad Andaleeb & Caskey, 2008). This is in line with the notion of student services as a commodity for attracting students to particular institutions with desirable amenities. Many institutions are considering how their dining services are responding to students’ expressed needs and/or desires, and are offering more options to accommodate these needs, whether that takes the form of popular franchises on campus or diversifying options within the traditional dining hall format. A New York Times article provided insight into students’ perceptions of dining services on a campus (Singer, 2006). This article revealed that students perceive a relationship between campus dining services and their body weight, placing blame on their dining halls for their weight gain (Singer, 2006). Accordingly, institutions may be offering food that students perceive as healthier than traditional fare in an effort to please their student consumers or to divert blame for unwanted weight gain.

Some campus dining facilities have also adopted strategies to help guide students towards healthier choices (Steinberg, 2012), though there is limited research on the sustained efficacy of such practices. For example, some college and universities post signage throughout their dining halls to educate students on the nutritional composition of the foods available (Martinez, Roberto, Kim, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2012). Although the motivation for such labeling varies, some institutions have chosen to provide this information to students in an effort to encourage students to make healthy choices and because the vast majority of students, when asked, indicate a desire for nutritional
labeling at their campus dining hall (Martinez et al., 2012). Driskell, Schake, and Detter (2008) studied such a nutritional labeling program at a college dining hall to determine if and how students were using the labels. Through a survey of students at a dining hall with nutritional labels, they determined that over half of the sample reported using the nutrition labels to inform their food choices. The reasons cited for use of the labels included general knowledge, concern about overall health, and caloric counting, among other reasons. Of the specific nutritional information available on the labels, students indicated that they were most interested in the information on calories, fat content, and serving size (over other information such as protein, ingredients, fiber, sodium, vitamins, and minerals). In their conclusion, the authors suggested that, “By taking advantage of the opportunity to educate their patrons about nutrition, diet, and health, dining hall directors…may help their patrons develop eating habits that are part of a healthful lifestyle.” (Driskell et al., 2008, p. 2076). While dining hall directors help students shape their eating habits, they are also likely shaping the climate on campus. My own recollections of being in the dining hall on campus are poignant to this day. The stale and salty french fries that left me with as much guilt as grease, the popularity of the salad bar despite the produce being mostly limp and browning, and the bagel station littered with doughy innards that had been discarded due to their caloric content by my thin peers were all symbolic of my campus climate.

**Recreation.** Colleges and universities across the country spend hundreds of millions of dollars on recreation services and facilities on campus, often funded through direct student fees (Kampf, 2010). Services and offerings are often used as a student recruitment tool, as the benefit of having a high caliber on-site fitness center and related
offerings is perceived to be an attractive draw for prospective students. According to a 2013 study surveying over 33,000 students at close to 40 different institutions, 68% of students reported that recreation facilities influenced their college choice and 62% of respondents indicated that campus recreation programs were factors in deciding which institution to attend (Forrester, 2014). Likewise, college and university administrators often value recreation offerings related to student retention, as students who participate in recreation programs have higher retention rates and overall improved health and wellness. Student users of campus recreation services reported on the “wellness benefits” (Forrester, 2014, p. 20) that they attributed to their participation in recreation programs on campus. In addition to benefits such as stress management, feeling of wellbeing, and athletic ability, 84% of students surveyed also indicated that weight control was a top benefit of participating in recreation programs on campus.

With over 4,500 members, NIRSA (formerly the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association) serves as a professional association for college and university administrators in the field of collegiate recreation (About NIRSA, n.d). It is apparent from the organizational mission and vision that NIRSA positions itself as an organization to assist members with their work in college/university recreation as a catalyst for promoting overall personal wellness. Accordingly, organizational activities such as conferences and publications address many facets of wellness, including body weight. For example, the organization’s 2015 annual conference sessions covered topics related to assessing student’s body weight and helping to set effective weight loss goals and related fitness plans.
The CAS standards for recreational sports programs include several key points for consideration related to how recreation programming on campus may shape the climate for students of size. First, the standards provide guidance on recreational sports program missions stating that recreation programs should “provide programs and services for participants that are conducive to the development of holistic health, particularly fitness and wellness.” (Mitstifer, 2012, p. 394). It is clear from this statement that recreation program should consider a holistic model for health and that fitness is paramount to health. Although body weight is not explicitly mentioned in the CAS standards, one can surmise that recreational sports programs on campus are therefore expected to play a part in helping students achieve physical fitness, of which body weight is widely considered to be a significant factor. A later section within the standards addresses issues of diversity, equity, and access, stating that recreational sports programs must “create and maintain educational and work environments that are welcoming, accessible, and inclusive…equitable and non-discriminatory” (Mitstifer, 2012, p. 399). Again, although body weight is not explicitly called to attention, given the nature of the services and work within recreational sports programs, one would assume that body size is a relevant consideration, along with other domains of diversity within the student population.

Indeed, some colleges and universities have offered specific programs through their recreation departments to facilitate weight loss or offer students support with weight management. For example, a program through a large recreation center on a university campus in Colorado combined personal training and nutrition coaching in a cohort-based non-credit class format (“Weight management program returns,” 2014). The promotional materials to recruit student participants noted that the class was designed for individuals
who were, “looking to lose a few extra pounds” (para. 3). Limited research has been conducted to study the effectiveness of various strategies to motivate college students to exercise and lose weight. For example, overweight and obese college students were more likely to engage in exercise when they were told about the benefits of doing so, rather than the negative consequences of not exercising (Kozak et al., 2013). Results suggested that intentional messaging and programming to college students could result in behavioral changes, which in turn could result in weight loss or prevention of weight gain.

Just as dining halls contribute to the campus climate for students of size, so do recreation centers and the programs run within these units. For me, this was a very different contribution, as it was one of avoidance. During my four years in college not once did I enter the fitness center. This is despite the fact that I was paying fees for free access to the facility and programs, and that I walked past the building just about every day on campus. It was not that I did not consider engaging with the fitness center programs; rather, I spent a lot of time wishing and hoping that I could. A social and emotional barrier stood in my way. It was as though the trim runners on the treadmills taunted me each time that I walked past and gazed through the windows. The space was often crowded, but the body diversity was paltry. The perfect bodies were lined up on the elliptical machines in their leggings and tanks, barely breaking a sweat as they caught up on what I could only imagine was the latest campus gossip and party planning. I did not need to enter the building to know that I did not belong.
Literature Review Conclusion

The literature reviewed above is broad based and spanning many disciplines. Although the current study seeks to understand the campus climate for students of size, this cannot be accomplished without also taking into consideration issues of institutional culture and the greater context in the surrounding region and beyond. Furthermore, because there is a void in the literature on the experiences of college students of size, I needed to draw primarily from work in other arenas and connect the relevant findings to the topic at hand. Because of this same void, there are many different ways that I could have framed the research questions for this study, as the gap in the literature is quite broad. That is, I could have chosen to hone in directly on individual students’ experiences and understanding their stories as students of size or I could have looked explicitly at academic outcomes of students of size, perhaps even considering a comparative study. Related to the issue of weight-related bias and stigma, I could have chosen research questions that explored the people on campus who hold such biases or who perpetrate discriminatory behavior. It could be argued that I should have taken the approach of starting with the seemingly basic task of understanding the number of students of size and relevant demographic variables about these students to set the foundation for subsequent work in this area. After all, even basic data about the number of college students of size is not readily available. Certainly, there are many more avenues that I could have chosen to pursue within this broad topic, yet I chose none of those options.

I landed on the focus on the climate for students of size after many conversations with colleagues, peers, and my advisor, and only after I had begun to pursue several other pathways within the broad topic of students of size. I realized after one particularly
thought provoking conversation that although learning about the experiences of students themselves was fascinating to me, I wanted to embark on dissertation research that went beyond students’ direct experiences and examined the structural or community elements that contribute to those experiences. That is, I wanted to intentionally seek to understand not only how students of size experience college, but also challenge myself to also understand why that may be the case. As I read and re-read many of the articles cited in the literature review above, I was affirmed in my decision to frame this study around climate as I began to understand both how campus climate effects students and the various elements that contribute to the climate. Such a frame allowed me to focus on the experiences of students of size themselves (which has always been at the forefront of my interest in this topic), while incorporating the factors that others contribute to their experiences on campus, and also exploring the impact of body size on college success without limiting myself to an examination of academic outcomes.

My methodology (described in the subsequent chapter), including my data collection methods, is logically also based on this focus on climate. Although my methodological choices are not directly mirroring any of the literature reviewed above, they are absolutely informed by the wealth of knowledge and perspective that I gained from reviewing the work of fellow scholars working in the area of campus climate, social stigma/bias, and the experiences of people of size.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

I scanned the atrium of the library, wondering if my next participant would be there early too. I was two interviews in and was already struck by the experiences that each woman had shared with me. The two participants thus far had markedly different life stories and did not run in the same circles within Sporty University. Despite their differences, some commonalities about their experience with the climate at the university were beginning to coalesce in my mind. What would Katie, who was not yet known as Katie to me, be like when I sat down with her? All I knew of her was what she had offered on the participant questionnaire that she had completed through the website that I set up for the research. I knew that she was a graduate student- the first of 3 that I would interview- and that she was 22 years old and identified as White. I also knew from her questionnaire responses that her size was an incredibly salient aspect of her identity and something that she was constantly conscious of when on campus. I wanted to explore that further with her and had tweaked my interview protocol a bit to ensure that I would do so.

As I waited I scanned my surroundings. I took note of a large banner promoting a fitness challenge that Sporty University’s Chancellor sponsored. Though I had not yet learned about this from participants, I soon would understand how this program, and the jarring reminders of it throughout the campus, contributed to the climate for students of size at Sporty University. I was early enough to grab a drink from the coffee shop. I
noticed the nutritional information prominently displayed in the case with the prepared sandwiches and pastries, and wondered if this might be a topic that participants would call to my attention.

It felt somewhat surreal that after years of preparing to collect data, I was at this point in my research process. My unnecessary and exaggerated paranoia about finding participants had been a moot point after all. My participant recruitment emails had been well distributed by helpful faculty and staff who I did not know, but who had received a forward from another helpful colleague. When Olivia told me that she was involved in the study because she had read one of my flyers hanging in a campus bathroom I could hardly believe it. I had incorrectly assumed that flyers would be fairly ineffective, but figured that I had nothing to lose by hanging them anyway when my contact at Sporty University suggested it.

Now that I was here, putting all of my preparation to practice, I felt a good deal of self-imposed pressure. I was most concerned with my ability to conduct truly empathic interviews. I kept reminding myself that I had no reason to be nervous—after all, I was not the one who would be asked to divulge intimate personal experiences in a climate that I already had begun to learn was uncomfortable and sometimes flat out harsh for students of size. I was a seasoned student affairs administrator with years of experience talking with students about fairly personal matters. Why was this any different? And yet it was different, and my nerves were an indication of that. Would I ask the right follow up questions to bring about the meaningful data that I would need to answer the research questions? How could I simultaneously take notes and be attentive to the participant at the level that I knew that I would be necessary in order for her to trust me? What if I
inadvertently said something offensive? Would she even show up? And, most importantly, what was she going to think of me, a visible outsider, who had chosen to study this topic that no one else seemed to want to address?

I had meticulously selected my clothing for my interviews. I strove for a look that I thought would help cast me as a non-judgmental and kind confidante. Anything remotely sporty looking was out. I eschewed any outdoors branded items in my closest and anything that one might wear to strike a yoga pose. Ironically, what most drove my choice of attire for the interviews, was that it needed to be baggy—an attempt to hide my standard-sized body that I figured would be the biggest barrier to participants’ comfort with me. While I would be sharing photos of my larger self from my college era with participants, I was hyper aware that the participants might be reluctant to share candidly with me, given how I presented.

Katie arrived, just on time, and greeted me warmly by introducing herself. I immediately noticed her body size. The opposite of what I was expecting, Katie actually did not present to me as a student of size. Quickly, I needed to manage my thoughts about this, and put my own judgment of her in check. Was this not the same person who had indicated such discomfort on campus because of her body size?

Quickly, I pivoted in my thinking and reminded myself that my criteria for participation only required that students self-identify as students of size (and not be underweight—thanks to the Institutional Review Board’s (IRB) requirement). Indeed, Katie met the Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) definition of overweight, regardless of how she looked to me. And, more importantly, her own conceptualization of her body was
that she absolutely was a student of size. I took a deep breath, we settled in, and I began my protocol regarding informed consent, permission to audio record, and resources on campus.

Just as there was not a singular most pressing research question to pose about the topic of students of size, there was also not a singular pathway to framing an inquiry to address the research questions selected for this project. On the contrary, given the unexplored nature of the topic within higher education, there were a multitude of approaches that might have led to meaningful and interesting outcomes. Ultimately, I decided which path of inquiry to pursue, and made the associated decisions about how to carry out the study once I selected a particular approach to the research questions. My own values, my lived experiences, and my understanding of the nature of reality and truth in the world underpinned the project. I was unabashed that I intended to use this research process and findings to inform practice and help dismantle injustices. This critical action-oriented framework, from which I operated, also factored into the research decisions.

This chapter provides a detailed overview of the decisions that I made, specific to the methodology and associated methods. Explanatory context about why I framed the study as a feminist descriptive single case study using interviews and photo-elicitation methods for data collection is also provided here. This chapter concludes with an overview of the data analysis techniques that I employed. Not only was it essential that I be intentional and thoughtful with my decision-making in the research process, but it was also imperative that I was transparent about the process itself. As such, I have provided the rationale for the key decisions that I made in planning and executing the study here. This chapter not only describes the research methods, but also provides the context and
explanation for the choices that I made about how to pursue the project. My decisions were informed by sound methodological guidance from other scholars, as well as a thorough explanation of my epistemological framework and theoretical perspective.

Although I developed a careful research plan that was vetted in advance of the study, given the exploratory nature of the inquiry, as well as my commitment to my feminist theoretical perspective, it was important to me that I maintain flexibility within the research process. An iterative approach was fundamentally necessary in order for me to appropriately engage with participants and ensure that their experiences drove the research as it unfolded. I have noted where deviations from the initial research plans were made.

As I thoughtfully considered a variety of possible approaches to responding to the research questions, I found myself returning to the notion of congruence (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). That is, each decision must fit with my epistemological stance, theoretical perspective, and so forth. Rather than isolated decisions, I developed an intentional and cohesive approach for the study. In the moments that I was tempted to jump ahead in my planning to specific data collection methods or techniques (often after reading a particularly interesting study that might serve as a model for my own research), I resisted making such hasty decisions. Rather, I attempted to carefully consider how each decision I made would not only help answer my research questions, but also match with my overall approach to the study so that I maintained integrity throughout the research process.

I engaged in this research as a doctoral student. My learning and self-discovery about research and my role as a researcher are also noteworthy. I did not approach this
work as a seasoned scholar who had already developed a body of work from which to build. Rather, this research was as much about answering the questions at hand as it was about my own learning. Accordingly, despite excellent support from my advisor, peers, and others, I had many moments of doubt and hesitation as I navigated the research process for the first time at this level. As appropriate, I have noted where I believe I may have veered off the best course or made a mistake. This is also discussed further in chapter V where I offer recommendations for future research.

My Worldview

As was likely apparent from the very first sentence of this manuscript, I approached this topic with one chunky thigh within the research. That is, I am personally connected to the topic because I experienced college as a student of size. Although I no longer identify outwardly as a person of size, I have often remarked that I will always feel like a fat person. Therefore, I pursued this inquiry as a person of size, indeed a student of size, too. Yet, I am not a person of size. I am apt to be perceived by most people as a normal-weight woman and enjoy many privileges associated with a standard size body type. I reiterate my positionality here so that I am explicit with readers about where I fit within the topic and the study itself. Creswell (2007) stated that, “Good research requires making these assumptions, paradigms, and frameworks explicit in the writing of a study” (p. 15). I cannot emphasize enough how much my own lived experiences influenced how I conducted this study.

Given my body type as I was working on this research, I spent considerable time throughout the research process considering and ruminating on the topic of thinsplaining (O’Connor, 2013). Akin to whitesplaining, thinsplaining is when someone outside of a
marginalized group takes on the role of explaining (hence the ‘splaining) to the marginalized group about their own experiences, with little or no depth of understanding about the issue or sensitivity to the experience of the individuals (O’Connor, 2013). Although sometimes disguised in academic rhetoric or good intentions, ‘splaining can result in a condescending and oversimplified explanation to a minoritized group or individual about how to fix a problem or otherwise better their situation. This is problematic because the outsider (who typically benefits from the privilege of a dominant identity) then further contributes to the oppression or objectification of the members of the minoritized group. In other aspects of my own identity, I have experienced ‘splaining, and know firsthand the frustrations, anger, and harm associated with it.

As someone who is currently unlikely to be perceived as a person of size, I risked thinsplaining throughout this research process. This risk became even more pronounced as I began to engage with participants. Goldberg (2014), a bioethicist who also noted that he benefits from thin privilege, offered two tips for avoiding thinsplaining in research. He suggested that researchers take care to listen very carefully to others’ voices (those of the insiders), and that research be conducted from the bottom-up so that those voices can emerge within the research, rather than using a pre-disposed theory in which data must fit. Although Goldberg’s commentary is not a methodological guide, his points on thinsplaining, and guidance on how to avoid it, are well taken and fit well with my feminist theoretical perspective and epistemological framework (see below).

My own contemplations on thinsplaining helped guide more of my research decisions than just about any text or other study that I have read. Each time that I considered how I might arrive at answers to my research questions, I paused to consider
how students of size would perceive me, both during and after my research. As I prepared for each individual interaction with a participant, I reflected on Goldberg’s (2014) advice and considered how I could actualize it within the interview setting. It occurred to me that thinsplaining was indeed likely to occur unless I was hyper-aware of my own body identity while engaging in this work and continually put my own thin privilege in check. And, even with my sincere efforts to avoid thinsplaining, I acknowledged that it likely occurred to some degree, either with the participants directly or as I wrote about and shared their experiences with others.

In addition to the tips that Goldberg (2014) offered, I further tried to mitigate thinsplaining through my choice of research questions. Early in my work on this topic, I was interested in the experiences of students of size on campus. Early iterations of the research plan focused on the direct experiences of students of size. I subsequently shifted to a focus on the campus climate for students of size. This seemingly subtle shift occurred for a number of reasons, including logical amendments as I read more deeply into the relevant literature. However, this shift was also made in part due to a refinement of my own identity as a critical feminist scholar. Rather than focusing on the problems experienced by members of minoritized groups, such as students of size, I reframed the research to be examination of the social dynamics that contribute to the climate for students of size. In Sprague’s (2005) text on feminist methodologies for critical research, she discussed the danger in objectifying the people we seek to study. She noted that when researchers whittle participants down to data or objects in an effort to objectively find facts, exploitation or even abuse can far too easily occur.

Reducing human beings in concrete social relationships down to a set of attributes or a consequence of a genetic pattern make it hard to see social and environmental
conditions that give rise to or exacerbate behavior that we find problematic. It leads to a search for how to change the individual, rather than a consideration of how we might change the situation. (Sprague, 2005, p. 20)

My primary research question, centered on the climate on campus for students of size, is designed to hone in on the social and environmental conditions that Sprague describes. In doing so, the risk of thinsplaining was further allayed, as I was not attempting to speak for individuals who are members of a group to which I no longer belong, nor speak to them to tell them how to fix or solve a predicament. Rather, I strove to critically bring attention to the climate on campus for students of size, a complex and dynamic construct that is not the problem or responsibility of any singular group or person.

**Epistemology**

To understand the climate on a college campus for students of size, I veered away from an absolute notion of reality and truth related to body weight or how one might experience a particular setting. Rather, I operated from a sense of understanding reality and how one arrives at truth from a constructivist standpoint (Crotty, 1998; Jones et al., 2006;). That is, I understood that meaning is constructed as people interact and experience various social situations and therefore, there is not an absolute or correct uniform truth. Instead of a stagnant or singular reality, Creswell (2007) emphasized the social nature of how meaning is constructed, and the importance of relying on individuals’ subjective views of their experiences. Also stressed is that these “subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). That is, the interpretations that form meaning for individuals are situated in social and historical contexts, rather than time stamped notations of singular interactions or experiences.
Constructivism was a particularly appropriate fit for a study that drew from cultural perspectives and that examined issues related to stigma and bias. Stigma itself is a socially constructed phenomenon (Goffman, 1963). The meaning of the experience is constructed by the individual(s) involved, as they interpret what has occurred, as opposed to a particular experience having the same impact or result for every person. No singular interpretation is any more valid or real than any other interpretation. Furthermore, as discussed briefly in the prior chapter, the topic of body weight is situated in deep and complex historic and cultural contexts. My constructivist epistemological stance allowed me the space to recognize and explore the historical and cultural settings that shape weight’s contemporary significance, a vital allowance for feminist research.

In Lupton’s (1995) critical text on public health and individuals’ bodies, she called attention to the dominance of positivist quantitative research in the field of public health and obesity prevention. She attributed this to the connection between public health and biomedicine but articulated the need to challenge the dominant stance in the field of public health. Lupton noted, “the practices and discourses of public health are not value-free or neutral, but rather are highly political and socially contextual” (p. 2). She issued a plea to researchers working in the realm of body weight and public health to address the socially constructed nature of body weight. While Lupton’s observations about this are now over twenty years old, as I prepared to conduct this study I was struck by how relevant her assessment is today. The dominance of positivist research in this arena is maintained, in part because the scholarly literature related to body weight is still predominately from a medical perspective which pathologizes fatness (Rich, Monaghan, & Aphramor, 2011). I therefore sought to contribute to the body of work that challenges
some of the traditional notions of reality and truth as related to health and the body by framing this as a constructivist study.

**Theoretical Perspective**

I am a feminist scholar and this inquiry was feminist research. In the spirit of the transparency that I stated earlier was so important to me, I only settled on embracing this work as a feminist research project after I was deeply immersed in the literature review and research planning. There are practically infinite definitions of feminism (hooks, 2010; Hurdis, 2010) and likely as many ways for individual researchers to apply feminist theory within the research process. My feminist perspective stems from the broader critical tradition that “seeks to understand how cultural dynamics interact to construct social systems…critical theory aims to change practices by challenging assumptions and biases…” (Frost & Elichaooff, 2014, p. 54). A campus climate is a manifestation of a social system and, as described earlier, cultural components contribute to the climate that students experience on campus. As a feminist scholar, I intentionally examined the cultural dynamics that contributed to the campus climate. Furthermore, I was clear that I wanted my research to be used in ways that would help challenge current practices.

Although it could be assumed that feminist work is therefore about women’s issues, and only women’s issues, that is not the case. Rather, this work is about the complex milieu of the contemporary campus climate for all students of size but was conducted from my frame that gender is a core contributor to climate when the topic is related to the human body. My feminist perspective means that I worked from a stance that gender is inextricably linked to the social construction of fatness and perceptions of people of size in any contemporary setting in the US. As explained in the prior chapter,
the social construction of body size in the US in 2019 is shaped by the history of this construction over time. Despite the shifts over time in preferred and privileged body types, the issue of gender has been a pivotal component of how body size, and specifically fat, has been perceived in the dominant culture (Farrell, 2011). People’s perceptions about body weight are tied to gender (Farrell, 2011; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Tischner & Malson, 2011). This is not just to say that people are generally more critical of body weight when their perceptions are related to women, but it is also to say that perceptions of male and gender-queer individuals’ bodies are shaped by this cultural and historical context tying body weight and gender together. As such, gender is a significant factor when discussing and studying any topic related to body size, even if the study itself is not explicitly about gender.

Given my epistemological stance, it was neither possible nor necessary to separate the issues of gender from the topic of body size. Rather, I acknowledged the socially constructed meaning of size and sought to further understand how this impacted the campus climate for students of size. I paid close attention to issues of gender as I framed my research questions, explored the array of existing research related to the topic, interacted with the participants, structured my data collection methods, analyzed my data, and as I interpreted and reported on what I found.

A primary goal of feminist research is social transformation and the support of a social justice agenda (Hesse-Biber, 2014a). Making scholarly contributions that can be applied to help create a more just campus environment for students of size was an early motivator for me in taking on this project and continued to fuel me throughout the research process. Mainstream academics may criticize “applied” research, which is
intended to be used to address social problems, as its goal is not focused solely on contributions to scientific knowledge (Sprague, 2005). However, many feminist scholars have come together in opposition of this dominant camp and have argued that the goal of research should be centered on understanding oppression for the sake of generating knowledge to combat society’s injustices. I am troubled that this stance is not the dominant one within the broader community of scholars across many disciplines, but I am grateful to have a sense of shared purpose working towards the collective social justice agenda with other feminist scholars. I am hopeful that as feminist research proliferates, our work will not only become more accepted within the mainstream academic community, but also be recognized and lauded for the applied outcome: the impact and transformation that it can have on individuals and communities.

**Theoretical Framework**

Two primary theories informed this work. “Whereas theoretical perspective influences how the researcher will approach and design the study … the theoretical framework offers suppositions that inform the phenomenon under study.” (Jones et al., 2006, p. 24). Theories serve to link or connect elements and help toward understanding the meaning of complex processes or situations (LeCompte & Preissle, 2001). My feminist perspective provided the lens through which I operated, and the theories that make up my theoretical framework helped to explain the phenomenon. Cultural perspectives, applied as a theoretical perspective, and the concept of problem framing (described below) informed my research decisions and process, helped me understand the relevant literature, and helped me make meaning from my data and arrive at the key findings.
Cultural perspectives. As I read through an array of literature about the difficulties faced by college students who are not a part of the dominant group (González, 2002; Harwood, Browne Hunt, Mendenhall & Lewis, 2012; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998; Wells & Horn, 2015), I was struck by a sometimes-subtle recurring theme related to the importance of campus culture in shaping students’ experiences. As such, when considering the most appropriate lens through which to approach the broad and uncharted topic of the experiences of students of size on campus, cultural perspectives came to mind. As noted in chapter II, although no singular definition of campus culture exists, and despite the limited cultural research conducted within higher education (Tierney, 1988), Kuh and Whitt (1988) defined institutional culture in higher education as,

the collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in an institute of higher education and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off campus. (p. 13)

In their comprehensive report on culture in higher education, Kuh and Whitt noted that culture is both a process and a product. That is, culture is both something that is created and present (the product), but it is also a conduit for shaping interactions between people in the given environment. Culture influences the behaviors of individuals and groups, and those same behaviors also contribute to the culture.

The call to consider campus culture was compelling. Higher education leaders today are faced with increased costs, decreased resources, and many complex decisions. While the retention and graduation of students has been important for higher education leaders since at least the founding of the modern university, it has become even more of a priority in the early part of this century (Berger, Blanco Ramírez, & Lyons, 2012). Only
with a keen understanding of institutional culture, and attention to the influence of the culture on various constituencies, can leaders within colleges and universities effectively make decisions that will address the diverse and increasingly complex needs of students (Tierney, 1988). The consequences of decision-making and leadership without an understanding of organizational culture can be dramatic. Tierney (1988) stated that, “… the most persuasive case for studying organizational culture is quite simply that we no longer need to tolerate the consequences of our ignorance, nor … will a rapidly changing environment permit us to do so” (p. 6). Considering this from the perspective of the impact on students within the culture, such consequences could include failure to learn, attrition, and the secondary effects of failing to fulfill the institutional mission.

Given the critical feminist agenda of this research, and the literature that I reviewed on weight-related stigma and bias in other environments, I felt a strong sense of responsibility to study the culture on campus for students of size. Although I honed in on the more nuanced and dynamic construct of campus climate, I approached my work on climate with a keen attention to campus culture. I was reminded that “before student cultures can be influenced, they must be discovered and understood” (Kuh, 1990, p. 57). Though I was not pursuing an in-depth cultural study, and instead opted to examine the contemporary issues that manifest for students (climate), I approached my work on climate with this underlying cultural theory in mind. As I worked with students to understand the climate on campus, I unearthed relevant aspects of campus culture to help make sense of what I was learning about the climate.

Kuh and Whitt (1988) offered insight on the value of using cultural perspectives to understand what occurs within colleges and universities and made several
recommendations regarding the appropriate uses of these perspectives. Specifically, they noted that aspects of culture may “denigrate the integrity and worth of certain groups” (p. 8), and therefore cultural perspectives may be useful when studying the experiences of minoritized individuals within higher education. There are examples of cultural perspectives being used to understand LGBTQ students’ college experiences (Evans, 2002; Rodriguez, 2014), and the experiences of students of color enrolled at predominately white institutions (González, 2002) and at diverse institutions (Wells & Horn, 2015). Although many distinctive elements contribute to an institution’s culture, and various sub-cultures exist with a single institution, the dominance of certain facets play a key role in institutional culture. Kuh and Whitt (1988) summarized that “…the dominant constellation of assumptions, values, and preferences introduces and socializes new members into the accepted patterns of behavior, thereby perpetuating- for all practical purposes- many of the dominant assumptions and beliefs of the culture” (p. 14). As new individuals enter into a culture, they are influenced by the dominant culture and socialized to adapt their ways to fit within. As such, understanding the dominant groups, and the resulting culture that is formed, is vital to understanding the overall culture of a particular institution. Although Kuh and Whitt did not expand their cultural theory to include issues of climate, I contend that the same is true of achieving an understanding of campus climate.

Framing

As discussed in chapter II, “people of size are subjected to assumptions about them based on how others perceive their body weight. In Saguy’s (2013) critical text on the ways in which US society and culture shape public perception and action towards people
of size, she provided a theory for understanding the different camps of this complex issue. Saguy used the concept of *framing* to demarcate the major worldviews that people tend to hold about fatness, its causes/responsibility, and the associated action(s) or treatment associated with it. Saguy’s theory of framing hinges on the issues of what constitutes a problem. For example, is fatness itself a problem, or is it the ways in which our society treats people of size the problem? Depending on the frame one uses, the answers to these questions will vary. Saguy defined six *problem frames*, which she explained as the major ways of understanding fatness in our society: the immorality frame, the medical frame, the public health crisis frame, the health at every size frame, the beauty frame, and the fat rights frame. Each frame differs with respect to the nature of the problem associated with fatness in our society, the related action to address the problem, the major proponents of the frame, and several other domains.

When I first encountered this concept of framing, I was reminded of the basic social psychological theory of schemas, where individuals link assumptions and these assumptions are informed by the social world in which we live (Axelrod, 1973). With this in mind, identifying dominant frames allowed me to look for and explore associated assumptions or tendencies within the campus setting. Furthermore, because my work was conducted from a critical feminist perspective, I used the concept of framing to organize my recommendations (detailed in chapter V) for enacting positive change.

Key to the Saguy’s (2013) theory is that perceptions about body weight and treatment of others related to their weight are not isolated to singular thoughts or individualized actions. Rather, they are linked closely and organized with other thoughts and actions and are ultimately tied to an underlying perceived problem. Note that neither
Saguy’s framing theory, nor my application of her theory, involved rigid structures that encompass all possible thoughts or assumptions held within the frame. Rather, as will be explained later in this chapter, I used the frames to help me organize and understand information that I collected.

**Case Study Methodology**

As I reviewed the literature on campus cultures and climates in preparation for this research, I was affirmed of the importance of the uniqueness of each individual campus culture and climate. Although themes and similarities exist between like institutional types, within geographic regions, and in some instances likely by happenstance, the seemingly infinite factors that contribute to a particular institutional culture, and the live-time occurrences that shape the climate experienced by students, led me to a decision to holistically investigate a particular campus setting. Campus climate is so nuanced that I determined that a deep dive into a singular setting would be a more appropriate fit to answer my research questions; rather than an attempt to identify themes or patterns across institutions. This decision to focus my inquiry on a single campus environment was in line with much of the research on campus climates for other minoritized groups of students, such as students of color (González, 2002; Wells & Horn, 2015) and LGBTQ students (Rodriguez, 2014; Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, & Hope, 2013). These studies also recognize the uniqueness of a particular campus environment, and therefore the need to account for specific elements within the culture to uncover meaning about the climate.

Several methodological approaches could have been used to guide me in this deep exploration of an institutional climate for students of size. An ethnographic approach was
my initial consideration, given that it is inherently tied to the study of culture and has gained popularity for use in educational settings (Eisenhart, 2001; Wolcott, 1997). Like Kuh and Whitt’s (1988) definition of culture itself, ethnography has been touted as both a process and a product (Wolcott, 1997) and is particularly suitable for studies of cultures, as it enables researchers to integrate into the culture of inquiry and uncover meaning from within. Using ethnography, a researcher can immerse oneself into the culture, thereby experiencing firsthand and contributing to it. From this vantage point the researcher is then able to reflect on her own experience, in addition to other elements observed, and achieve a rich and intimate understanding of the culture that would be challenging to uncover as an outsider (Wolcott, 1997). Accordingly, ethnography has been used by scholars studying institutional cultures within higher education (Moffatt, 1989) as well as the climates for particular groups of people within higher education institutions (Vaccaro, 2012).

A pure ethnographic study to address the research questions for the current study had initial appeal, but it did not offer the flexibility in data collection that I needed to holistically examine the climate on a campus for students of size. Although sometimes targeted by critics and skeptics of qualitative research (Yin, 2009), case study, as a methodology, offers a framework that enabled me to deeply explore a particular climate. Research design fundamentally centers on the research problem or the questions being posed at the onset of the research (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). In his text on the use of case study methodology, Yin (2009) emphasized the careful selection of methodology based on the nature of the research questions posed. Case study is a recommended
methodology for exploratory studies and Yin (2009) further clarified that case study is most useful when the nature of the exploration is in response to *how* and *why* questions, for example *how do students of size perceive the campus climate?*

The following definition of case study further addresses the appropriateness of case study methodology for the current topic: “case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). As discussed in chapter II, the array of components that contribute to the culture and climate for students of size are largely influenced by the surrounding context outside of the campus setting. I wanted to be explicit about studying the particular phenomenon of the climate on campus for students of size, else risk conflating the issues for students of size with the more general contextual issues for people of size (off campus). Although the culture on campus is shaped by historical social and political factors, the key question related to the climate on campus for students of size is assuredly a contemporary matter. Using the earlier analogy of climate being akin to the weather that one encounters on any particular day (Peterson & Spencer, 1990), it was essential that I capture the real-time factors that contributed to the climate. For example, a single incident, either in the broader context or within the campus community, could shift the tenor for students of size on the campus. In order for me to be able to intimately understand the climate, I needed to be aware of and address these types of contributing factors and indeed I found that such incidents, that were unique to the campus that I studied, emerged as key elements for participants. Yin’s (2009) definition
of case study methodology not only accounts for this need, but also emphasized its importance in calling for the need to study the “phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context” (p. 18).

There are additional reasons that case study was a suitable methodology for the current study. Case study is known for offering particularly descriptive results, due in part to the common use of anthropological methods and the resulting thick description that can emerge (Merriam, 2009). Because case study allows for diverse ways of analyzing and presenting data, researchers who gain intimate and deep knowledge of a particular case are able to flex their creativity as to how the results are presented. In doing so, case studies are often incredibly descriptive products of research. Additionally, case studies are notably heuristic; that is, they are able to help bring to light previously hidden or silenced phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). By calling attention to the details of a particular case, new insights can be gleaned about existing matters. In essence, case study can serve to share examples of issues that would otherwise be unnoticed or pushed to the wayside. Certainly, all of these strengths of case study served me well as I conducted this research on the campus climate for students of size. As discussed in chapter I, I strove to call attention to what I theorized was a fairly oppressive climate on campus for students of size. Through case study I was able to provide a descriptive example of a particular climate for students of size. And, from my critical feminist lens, the product of this work will be used for student affairs practitioners and researchers alike to turn their attention to this topic, on which the profession has been silent for so long.

Merriam (1998) provided guidance in her applied text on conducting case studies in educational settings. She highlighted the versatility of case study as a methodology and
noted the different types of case studies that can be used, depending on the intent of the study. Merriam used the term *descriptive case study*, differentiated from an *evaluative* or *interpretive* case study. A descriptive case study, as the name implies, is one that prioritizes the description of a particular case and is appropriate to use when the researcher intends to uncover and share a rich description of the case as a fundamental purpose of the research. Given the research questions at hand, and the exploratory nature of the work, I chose a descriptive case study, as defined by Merriam. Note that while a descriptive case study may typically imply a more passive approach to research (i.e. simply describing the case and concluding with the rich description as the primary outcome of the work), I placed the descriptive case study within my critical feminist agenda. As such, it was my intention to use the descriptive case as the basis for the social transformation that I hoped to elicit a feminist scholar.

Case study research is further characterized by falling into one of two categories of design: single or a multiple case study design. Simply put, a single case study examines a single bound case; whereas multiple, multisite, or collective case studies rely on data from several cases, but which share the same bounded system structure (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, even in a single case study design, multiple units of analysis can be used (Yin, 2009). An additional dimension can also be the examination of subcases embedded within single or multisite cases (Merriam, 2009). After careful consideration and review of the existing literature on minoritized college students and campus culture and climate, I opted for a single case study design. Other climate studies that I reviewed similarly collected data at a single institution (Rodriguez, 2014; Tetreault et al., 2013; Wells & Horn, 2015). Likewise, because individual campus environments are nuanced
and unique, a single setting approach would allow me to delve deeply into the climate particulars. Yin (2009) offered rationale for when a single case study design is appropriate to use. He cited the unique nature of a case as a reason to use a single case. Because of the nuanced nature of campus climate and culture situated in a regional context, the single case study design allowed me to illuminate and describe a particular climate and culture with the necessary depth. Accordingly, this study was conducted as a feminist descriptive single case study. This methodology served to help organize and guide my approach to data collection, and analysis, as well as how I shared my findings and reported on my work.

Case Selection

The one element that all case studies have in common is that the object of the study is delimited as a particular case (Merriam, 2009). Referred to as a bounded system, this refers to the fact that the phenomenon is situated within clearly established parameters of what is included in the case, and also what will not be studied. Unlike other qualitative methodologies, “the unit of analysis, not the topic of the investigation, characterizes a case study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 41). In further explaining the concept of a bounded system, Merriam provided the example of a community or an institution both of which can be defined and set apart from other or surrounding communities or institutions and have relevance for the current study.

Since I began to mull this research topic over in my head, the matter of gaining access to a site to conduct the research was top of mind. In qualitative research, identifying a site where the research will be conducted is often a fundamental aspect of the research design (Creswell, 2007), and this struck me as particularly salient for case
study research where the setting itself can define and bind the case. Not only did I need to follow the standard processes for obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission to conduct the research, but I also needed to build strong rapport and cultivate trust with key individuals at the site for the study so that I would be granted access. Due in part to the critical agenda of this study, and the underlying intent to expose elements of campus climate and culture that I anticipated might be less than favorable, I expected that I might encounter a challenge in gaining access to conduct the study. Likewise, the broader topic of body weight is one that is often met with emotion-laden responses from diverse audiences. I found that many individuals shied away from or were otherwise uncomfortable discussing it. I encountered this firsthand when I shared the topic of this research with friends, family, and colleagues throughout the course of my work in this area. Considering these expected challenges, I knew that I would need to work diligently to identify gatekeepers at an appropriate site to build relationships in order to obtain permission to conduct my study.

In considering potential site institutions for the research, I considered several key institutional characteristics. First, given the literature review that I had conducted, I was curious about how several aspects of campus life may contribute to campus climate—namely dining services and a campus recreation program or on-campus gym. Secondly, while I was prepared to consider broader community context and culture in my examination of campus climate, I wanted to conduct the research at an institution where the campus itself was discrete from the surrounding community so that I could more readily hone in on the factors within the higher education setting that were contributing to the climate on campus. Additionally, while I briefly considered community colleges as
viable sites for the research, I ultimately decided that I was more interested in the climate at a 4-year institution, including the possibility of graduate student perspectives. Finally, I had a pragmatic approach and considered logistical ease of collecting data at particular institutions, including whether or not the institution would permit me to proceed with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from my home institution.

Even prior to finalizing the research proposal, I connected with a senior student affairs administrator at a possible site institution that met the criteria above. This individual indicated an early willingness to assist me with participant recruitment and otherwise help me gain access to the site. This administrator was interest in learning about the climate for students of size at their institution and so was motivated to assist for this reason. I sought this individual’s input on how to formalize approval for conducting research at the institution, as well as tactics for participant recruitment. This particular administrator ended up leaving the university before I was ready to engage with participants, and so I then sought similar guidance and support from a second student affairs administrator at the university. Input from both of these administrators shaped my approach to engaging with students at the site institution. For example, I took their advice about where to conduct interviews, how to best solicit participation from students, and the appropriate way to thank participating students for their time and perspective.

I also needed to ensure approval through the research division of the site institution. I was initially unsure if the IRB approval that I had received from my home institution (see Appendix A) would be sufficient for me to proceed with data collection at the selected site, or if I would need to secure additional IRB approval from the site institution. Ultimately, I was able to share my IRB approval from my home institution.
(along with the full IRB proposal) with research review administrators at the site institution in lieu of a second IRB approval. I obtained written permission to proceed with data collection with students at the site institution from the research administrator authorized to allow me such access. A general description of the site institution follows. I have offered only general information below, and throughout the remainder of the manuscript, as a means to conceal the identity of the specific site.

**Sporty University**

Sporty University is a mid-size residential institution located in a region of the U.S. with relatively low rates of obesity. While the institution engages in intentional work to recruit a diverse student body, the undergraduate enrollment at Sporty University is overwhelmingly White and a slight majority of students are female. The institution has a robust financial aid program to support students who need it, though the majority of students at Sporty University cover the annual tuition and required fees without assistance from federal financial aid. Sporty University has an array of student services and amenities, including on-campus dining and recreation programs.

The Sporty University campus houses a number of buildings with aesthetical architectural features and has ample green space for students to enjoy. While some roads intersect the campus, when you are on the Sporty University you know that you are on a college campus. That is, it is a fairly self-contained campus; as opposed to some campus designs that are more intermingled with the surrounding community. The institutional marketing and branding artifacts, such as signage, and the fairly distinctive building features, surely contribute to the sense of place that is felt on the Sporty University campus.
During the time that I spent on campus to collect data, I found the campus to be quite pristine. It was apparent to me that a great deal of care and attention was paid to the upkeep of the facilities and the grounds. Additionally, while I assume that Sporty University periodically hosts a number of campus visitors, during my time on campus I sensed that the vast majority of the people present were affiliated with Sporty University (i.e. students, faculty, or staff). The visitor parking lots that I used when conducting interviews on campus were virtually empty and staff were visibly confused when I did not have a Sporty University identification card to access a copy machine in the library.

**Data Collection Methods**

Kuh (1990) offered an overview of various methods for gauging campus culture that provided a useful framework for my decisions about the current study on climate. Kuh’s recommendations account for the contextual environment in which an institution is situated and also differentiate and discuss differences between measuring culture at the national, institutional, and sub-cultural levels. Despite the dominance of a quantitative approach to measuring culture on campus, Kuh noted that, “In order to fully comprehend the meaning of behaviors characteristic of student cultures, an investigator must become intimately acquainted with students’ psychological and physical habitats. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and observations, are considered superior…” (p. 54).

Although Kuh’s guidance was regarding studies of campus culture, it struck me this same advice would hold true for a study of campus climates. Furthermore, Hart and Fellabaum (2008) developed a similar conclusion in their content analysis of over 100 campus climate surveys (notably none of them on issues of climate for students of size). Despite the prevalence of surveys to measure campus climate, Hart and Fellabaum called
attention to the value of qualitative data about campus climates, as it is the qualitative data that can offer the most compelling information about the lived experiences of the individuals within the community being studied. Indeed, Harper and Hurtado (2007) conducted a rare qualitative study on campus climate for students of color at predominately white institutions. In doing so, they found that student participants were not familiar with qualitative inquiries into issues of climate on campus, but associated such inquiry with an expression of care.

Banning (1997) offered another critique of the quantitative survey as the sole method of collecting data when assessing campus climate, though he too recognized the dominance of surveys when measuring climate. In an interesting piece on assessing the ethical climate on college and university campuses, Banning provided an alternative model to the climate survey. Though his work was not focused on measuring climate for a minoritized or oppressed group of individuals, I found his key premises applicable to my research, and so applied components of what he suggested in my data collection plan. For example, because surveys call for the researcher to pre-determine the questions to be asked about the climate on campus, rather than allowing the key components of the climate to be defined by those within the climate, Banning called for the use of anthropological methods, in particular the use of representations of diverse artifacts from within the community, as sources of data to understand the climate. Drawing from the same work by Kuh and Whitt (1988) that I used to frame campus culture in chapter II, and from Banning and Bartels (1997), Banning (1997) emphasized how various artifacts, such as signs, art, and even graffiti, within a community can communicate powerful messages about the culture. Accordingly, he drafted an [ethical] climate assessment
matrix as a tool for evaluating how various artifacts serve to represent negative or positive aspects within the community for groups of individuals. In his guidelines on how to apply the matrix to measure climate, Banning stated that, “the linkage mechanism is community dialogue about the photographs” (p. 103). That is, photographs of artifacts are clues about campus culture, but dialogue is what generates data about the climate. Although I did not apply his ethical climate assessment matrix in this study directly (as I am not studying the ethical climate), I drew from this work in my approach. Banning’s study contributed to my decision to use photographs, in some cases of artifacts, representing the campus culture climate within the interview setting to more deeply engage the participants about the climate. The technique of photo-elicitation will be detailed in a subsequent section.

Crosnoe’s (2007) study on the college enrollment disparities between obese and non-obese high school students, which I reviewed in chapter I and which served as a key piece of research underpinning this project, also contributed to my selection of methods for this research. Although his work was conducted as a quantitative study relying on a stratified sample of high school students, Crosnoe concluded his study with an acknowledgement about the limitations of quantitative data techniques related to the topic and the statement that “qualitative research will also be useful in figuring out how obesity is perceived and treated among young people in school” (p. 257). The perception of and treatment of people of size on campus are factors that I expected to manifest in the climate on campus. Accordingly, Crosnoe’s work further guided me towards qualitative methods for answering the research questions at hand.
Lastly, my feminist perspective also informed my choice of data collection methods. Simply put, I needed to choose a way to engage with the participants that would allow for my identity and my relationship with the participants to be not only acknowledged, but also to serve as an asset, and not a detriment, to the research. It was also essential that I opt for an approach that would support the action (applied) research that I envisioned. Hesse-Biber (2014b) discussed feminist approaches to data collection, and in particular to interviewing participants. Her guidance was clear: In-depth unstructured (or semi-structured) interviews in which the researcher thoughtfully attends to issues of power and authority within the researcher-interviewee relationship are ideal for feminist research. Hesse-Biber’s advice on the topic is that from a feminist perspective and also an explicit social justice/change lens, thereby enhancing the applicability to my research.

As stated earlier, an inherent strength in using case study methodology is that multiple data collection strategies are used (Yin, 2009). Following the guidance of Kuh (1990) and Hart and Fellabaum (2008), I therefore used multiple data collection techniques for this study, including an initial participant questionnaire, two semi-structured interviews with individual participants, and participant-generated photo elicitation. My own researcher notes and reflections, along with photos that I took, were the final pieces of data for the study. Details about the data collection methods will be provided later in this chapter.

**Reciprocity and Ethical Considerations**

As I engaged with students of size for the purposes of collecting data for this research, I needed to pay keen attention to the dynamics between myself, an outsider both
to the specific climate and to the contemporary experience of being a college student of size, and the participants. In particular, I needed to be conscious of the impact that participating in the study itself might have on participants. As discussed in the prior chapters, people of size are stigmatized, marginalized, and othered in U.S. society. People of size often feel shame about their own bodies and their own identities. With this in mind, I acknowledged that engaging in dialogue about the climate on campus for people of size might elicit negative emotions for some. Likewise, and as discussed earlier, I needed to be cautious to mitigate the risk of thinsplaining. However, although there were possible risks associated with participation, there were also possible benefits for students of size to be heard, validated, and/or otherwise affirmed in their identity.

Consistent with my feminist perspective (Diver & Higgen, 2014; Sprague, 2005) the concept of reciprocity, simply defined as “giving back to participants for their time and efforts” (Creswell, 2007, p. 44), contributed to many of my decisions throughout the research process. For example, participation in interviews might offer students of size a voice that has previously been ignored. Through participation individuals might have their feelings validated, might be empowered by sharing their stories, and might learn that others share similar experiences. Indeed, as explained in the subsequent chapter, I found this to be the case. Harper and Hurtado’s (2007) work cited above, where participants noted that they associated qualitative research into their experiences with care and concern for their experiences, highlights another example of reciprocity in action. The very act of asking students of size about how they feel on their campus served as a powerful acknowledgement of their identity within the campus environment. Additionally, the active involvement of participants in the research by having them
generate images that are then used in the interview is noted as being an “emancipatory style of qualitative research among scholars investigating marginalized or subordinate groups” (Emmison, Smith, & Mayall, 2012, p. 21). As such, the data collection methods that I chose were intended to contribute a respectful and reciprocal process, as they were designed to offer opportunities for participants to be liberated from the weight of their experiences.

I also recognized that participation might bring about difficult or challenging emotional responses for some participants. It was therefore essential that I consider possible ramifications for all participants. It was incumbent upon me to make referrals and provide appropriate information on support resources as needed. I was careful and explicit about the nature of the topic of the research at the onset of participation so that students could make an informed choice as to whether or not they wanted to participate. I reminded participants that this was a voluntary experience and that they were able to opt out of participation at any point without consequence. Sporty University offered mental health support services for students on campus at zero or minimal cost to the student. At the onset of the initial interview I provided each participant with a flyer about these services and made a point to discuss the offerings and why I was sharing this information (because I knew that the interview experience had the potential to be difficult for them). I reminded participants about this at the onset of the second interview as well. That said, as I learned in an early interview with one participant, some of the very same support services that I promoted as a resource were problematic because some participants experienced fat shaming in the on-campus health and counseling center. In retrospect, it
might have been wise to provide some external mental health referrals as well, and specifically to resources that had been vetted for offering body-affirming support.

The use of photo-elicitation brought about some unique research considerations as well, particularly related to the privacy of the data and the ethics of using images in the research process, as well as the final manuscript. Details on photo-elicitation and participant-generated images are provided in a subsequent section, but key ethical considerations are described and addressed here. Ethical matters were prominently covered in almost every text on visual methods that I reviewed (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2011; Emmison et al., 2012; Prosser & Schwartz, 1998; Rose, 2001; Stanczak, 2007), as the considerations can be complex and nuanced. The particular issues with which I grappled related to the use of photos for the current study were centered around what guidance, if any, to give participants about taking photographs for the purpose of the study that include other people in the frame. For example, if a student thought that an image of a scene from a public social space would be representative of the climate for students of size, yet this image would be impossible to capture without other people in the picture. Although the photographer (participant) would have consented to the research, presumably students who would appear in the picture would not have consented, nor would they necessarily even know that the picture was being taken. Furthermore, if I decided that the image was acceptable to use for the research process itself (i.e. the photo-elicitation portion of the study), would it be appropriate for me to also include that image in this final manuscript, which ostensibly will be available to the public (at the
minimum through a dissertation database)? In addition to protecting the privacy of individuals who could appear in the images, I also needed to protect the identity of the site institution.

Despite these types of challenges, I proceeded with photo elicitation as I knew that others had successfully navigated them and used participant-generated images to tackle sensitive research topics (Branch Douglas, 1998; Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Luttrell & Chalfen, 2010).

Harper (2005) offered reassuring guidance to the aspiring visual researcher, stating that visual researchers may rely on the precedent that photojournalists and documentary photographers and videographers have set. People regularly appear in print news media and on television without consent when in a public setting. Visual researchers, “argue that harm to subjects is unlikely to occur from showing normal people doing normal things” (Harper, 2005, p. 759) and therefore visual researchers should enjoy the same rights and freedoms that photojournalists have. Banks and Zeitlyn (2011) also addressed the practically universal presence of smartphones with cameras in most communities in the U.S., and the impact these phones, along with social media, have had on privacy expectations (namely that we have none).

However, Harper (2005) offered a caution that research photography should not be conducted in settings where “photography would violate the norms of the setting or the feelings of the subject” (p. 760). Considering my hypothetical example from above, a picture, taken from a distance, of a group of students playing a game of volleyball on a campus quad would be appropriate to photograph and use, whereas an image inside of the gym locker-room would not be acceptable. Others have opposing viewpoints with respect
to the use of photographs in published work where the image is personally identifiable, suggesting that images in which the identity of the person can be known should only be used with express written permission (informed consent) of the subject of the photograph (Guillemin & Drew, 2010). If an image is such that the person’s identity can be determined by others, but obtaining such consent is not feasible (i.e. the person’s name and contact information is not known to the researcher or photographer), obscuring the image so that the viewer cannot link it to a particular person is advisable.

Harper (2005) and Banks and Zeitlyn (2011) both discussed the challenges that visual researchers often encounter when seeking to obtain approval from an IRB. While some IRB’s may be familiar with visual research and open to thoughtful and creative ways of mitigating potential risk associated with using visual data, others are less open to accepting visual research methods. Because I sought IRB approval from one institution and then collected data at a different institution, I anticipated that I might encounter less open reviewers. For this reason, I erred on the side of caution with respect to these tricky issues of privacy and visual data. Indeed, the photographic element of my research proposal did raise questions for the IRB, even though I had taken a fairly conservative approach to the related privacy considerations.

The instructions I gave participants related to taking photographs (see Appendix B) asked that they only take images in settings where photography was permitted, appropriate, and where it did not disrupt normal activities in the space. I modeled my basic instructions for participants off of an example provided by Davidson, Dottin, Penna, & Robertson (2009) and heeded their guidance with respect to how to guide participants away from images with identifying information. Although I could not
possibly imagine all of the scenarios that were and were not appropriate, I offered examples with them of what was likely appropriate (i.e. in the student union, in a public space in a residence hall, in an academic building) and what was likely inappropriate (i.e. in restrooms or locker-rooms, in any space where photography is prohibited, or in any setting where individuals express any concern about being photographed). Because I wanted to encourage their creative representation of the climate, I did not place further limitations on their photography. However, for the images included in this final manuscript, I obscured images (by cropping) when individuals could be readily identified in the image, or when the imagery might identify the site institution, as suggested by Davidson et al. (2009).

**Participant Selection and Recruitment**

Before recruiting participants, I needed to determine the criteria for participation; that is, who would I invite to provide me with insight about the climate on campus for students of size? If I were conducting a study on the climate on campus for students holding other social identities I might able to begin this process by identifying which students hold that social identity through some existing mechanism (i.e. demographic information contained in the student’s educational record, through association with a particular program, department, or organization, or similar). In the case of students of size however, I was unable to rely on such a strategy. I could not obtain information about how students identify their own body type on record with the University, nor did I have any indication that those students who identify as students of size gravitate to any particular major, residence hall, student organization, or other organizational unit.
Furthermore, as discussed in chapter I, I did not use a medical definition to define students of size, so did not have a quantifiable mechanism for identifying participants. Merriam (1998) described that for qualitative researchers, who do not seek to generalize their findings to other settings or cases, purposeful sampling, rather than probability sampling, is fitting. Purposeful sampling is based on the premise that “the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). In other words, be purposeful about who to include, rather than seeking to sample random participants.

With this in mind, for this research, I chose to invite individuals to participate who self-identified as students of size (though I acknowledged the array of other terms that people might choose to use to describe themselves). To mitigate the possible risks associated with having participants who have body dysmorphic disorder or other medical and/or some other mental health conditions, such as some eating disorders, individuals who had a self-reported Body Mass Index (BMI) that classified them as underweight were ineligible to participate. An additional participation criterion was that individuals needed to be currently enrolled students at Sporty University (though I did not specify enrollment status or level, nor did I verify enrollment in a formal way).

In order to recruit eligible participants, I broadly communicated the purpose of the study and the opportunity to participate across the student body via posters hung around campus and emails sent to a number of different student listservs. Given the hesitations that I expected that I would encounter from some people about the research topic, I went to significant lengths to advertise the study to students. Based on my conversations with the two primary gatekeepers mentioned above, I employed a variety of techniques to
communicate and promote participation to students. Furthermore, based on guidance from these gatekeepers, I offered a $20 gift card (to an online bookstore) to participants as an incentive and gratitude gift for their participation. I purchased the giftcards for this purpose and personally covered the cost of them. I did this because I was offered insight from my contacts at the university that similar requests for student participation in research at the institution were often accompanied with such rewards and so students at Sporty University were socialized to expect this type of compensation or incentive. The student affairs leader at Sporty University with whom I was working suggested that the gift card be in the amount of $20, as this was on par with what was being offered by other researchers working with Sporty University students.

Related to my selection of purposeful sampling was the question of sample size. That is, how many participants did I need in order to generate ample data to answer my research questions? The answer to this question for qualitative research is far from universal, because the goal of the research is not to generalize to a larger population (Creswell, 2007). Rather, the researcher determines the answers based on the research questions, data, analysis, and available resources (Merriam, 2009).

Given the student population of Sporty University, my planned approaches to participant recruitment, and my knowledge that the topic was a sensitive one and therefore may not be appealing all students who meet my criteria, I set a target of 8-10 participants in my study, recognizing that I might experience some attrition during the process (i.e. not continuing on for a second interview after having completed an initial interview). Because of the exploratory nature of this study, I had minimal information on which to base my sample size estimate; however, this target turned out to be viable, as I
had a total of 10 participants, with 8 completing both interviews (though only 5 completed the participant-generated photo project). Furthermore, and perhaps of greater importance, I found that the 10 participants offered me ample data from which I could draw to answer my research questions.

As mentioned above, and informed by my conversations with the student affairs leaders at Sporty University with whom I was connected, I employed several techniques to communicate about the study with broad groups of students. Because I knew that I would have limited space in my broad-based communications, I established a basic website (www.studentsofsize.com) where I could direct potential participants for more information and to express an interest in participating in the study. I was able to share very basic information about the study in various formats, knowing that interested individuals could learn more details after visiting the website. The website also housed the initial participant questionnaire, which is where I checked that interested individuals met the participation criteria and where I collected their contact information for follow-up scheduling. Note that because I am no longer recruiting participants for the study, and participant recruitment was the sole purpose of the site, it is no longer a live website.

I initially began by posting flyers across campus (adhering to Sporty University’s posting regulations, which were fairly limiting). The flyers (see Appendix C) included tear-off strips on the bottom with the URL for the research website so that individuals could take the information easily off the flyer and visit the website to learn more. I then engaged in a series of conversations with key administrators and faculty in departments that I was introduced to from my initial contacts or whom I sought out directly. I met
with leaders in residence life, student activities, diversity and inclusion, health promotions, and graduate student services. I also met with a faculty member in the higher education graduate program and an administrator in a specialized college within the university. I contacted staff in several academic departments in the social sciences, where I expected I might encounter a research-friendly environment. In all of these conversations and meetings I explained the purpose of the study and that I was seeking to communicate broadly to students about the study. I asked for assistance sharing information about the study via student email listservs, social media platforms, by posting the flyer in their campus space(s), and through applicable other channels that the contact thought would resonate with the students in their program/area of service. I provided my contacts with an electronic copy of the poster and offered to provide them with hard copies of it as well. I also provided sample text to include in a recruitment email to students (see Appendix D), so that they could readily send an email to students about the study on my behalf. I offered to come to meet in a face-to-face setting with groups of students to further discuss the study, though no one took me up on this offer. In some instances, I was aware of how the contact chose to assist with communicating about the study (i.e. I was copied on a mass email that was sent to students or saw a posting on social media about the study), but in other cases I did not receive this follow up from the contact. However, I did ask the participants how they knew about the study. Most participants shared that had learned about it through an email (though the participants could not often identify who had sent them the email), and two participants referenced the poster as their source of information. No participant indicated that they had learned about the study via social media.
Participant Questionnaire

As noted above, a participant questionnaire (see Appendix E) was administered to all potential participants. The participant questionnaire was posted to the research website where potentially interested participants were directed to learn more about the study and to express an interest in participating.

The questionnaire included a threshold question at the onset to ensure that those responding self-identified as a person of size and were currently enrolled at Sporty University. Per the guidance from the IRB, the questionnaire also asked for self-reported height and weight information so that I could use this information to calculate each individual’s Body Mass Index (BMI). I then used a standard and publicly available form on the Center for Disease Control website to perform such calculations. Had any potential participant provided data that indicated that their BMI classified them as underweight, they would have been informed that they were not eligible for participation (and provided with the same information for mental health support resources that participants received). This did not occur, and the height and weight information collected was only used for this purpose. However, one individual completed the survey and did not self-identify as a person of size (though was not underweight), and so was disqualified from participation for that reason.

The questionnaire also asked for contact information (name, email address, telephone number), and basic demographic information (including gender and racial
identity (using the same race/ethnicity options available on Sporty University’s public application for admission), and student level. Additionally, the questionnaire included three questions about the individual’s experiences as a student of size on the campus. The responses to these open-ended questionnaire items were then used to help me refine my specific first interview protocol for each participant.

The use of a pre-interview questionnaire has been used to assist researchers in tailoring the interview protocol for individual participants by providing background information on each participant (Peltz, 2013) as it can offer further context on each participant’s experience (Jackson, 2011). Furthermore, information gathered in a pre-interview questionnaire can offer an “entry point” (Millane, 2010, p. 45) for the interview, thereby aiding in rapport building. Indeed, I found it useful to have some very preliminary information about each participant prior to our first interview, as it allowed me to hone in on specific areas that I wanted to further explore with each individual in the hour-long initial interview. For example, one participant referenced the experience of hearing fat jokes on campus in one of her open-ended responses. Upon reading this, I knew that I wanted to explore this more with her and was able to prepare to do so prior to the interview. Similarly, I learned that another participant had only recently began identifying as a person of size, after a significant weight gain during college. This was quite different from the experiences of other participants, so I was able to consider what unique perspective I might be able to glean from her, and how to frame questions for her interview accordingly. I had the benefit of being able to do so prior to learning about her unique situation for the first time in the initial interview. Likewise, without the information from the questionnaire, I would have needed to spend time in that initial hour
collecting basic demographic information from them, rather than exploring how aspects of their identity might intersect with their identity as a person of size.

A total of 13 potential participants completed the participant interest questionnaire. As responses to the questionnaire came in via the electronic form, I reviewed the participation criteria for each individual response (identity as a person of size, current student at Sporty University, and not underweight (per self-reported height/weight using the Center for Disease Control’s BMI online calculator)). As mentioned above, one potential participant did not meet the criteria (did not self-identify as a person of size) and so was not considered for further participation. Note that this was a disqualification based on a negative response to the question “Do you self-identify as a student of size…” (see Appendix E) and not on the basis of self-reported BMI. I then had 12 qualified potential participants. I contacted each potential participant to confirm interest in participation and to schedule an interview. My contact to engage them further was initially via the email address they provided on the interest questionnaire, followed by a phone call if I had not received an email response within a few days. All but two potential participants were quite responsive to my outreach and scheduled their initial interview with me. Two potential participants did not respond after an email, phone call, and secondary email over the course of approximately two weeks and so I did not further pursue participation with these individuals.

Participants

All 10 participants who scheduled initial interviews did indeed participate and engage fully in an initial interview with me. Table 1 provides summary information about each participant, including demographic information that they provided, as well as
notations regarding whether or not they participated in both interview and whether or not they provided participant-generated photographs for use in the photo-elicitation portion of the research. Each participant scheduled a second interview with me, though two did not complete the second interview. One of the two who did not participate in a second interview was very communicative with me about rescheduling, but ultimately it was not feasible to fit in the final interview with her as it was towards the very end of the academic term and she was graduating and moving out of the country. The other participant who did not complete the second interview was not responsive to me after several attempts to contact her to reschedule her second interview following a scheduling conflict. I interpreted her lack of response as a decision to withdraw from further participation in the research.
### Table 1

**Participant Overview**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year in School</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Racial Identity</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Both interviews?</th>
<th>Photo elicitation?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ayesha</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>International student</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bianca</td>
<td>Graduate student (MA program - 2nd year)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Single mother</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dee</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>Lives on campus</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Student employee; lives on campus</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>Graduate student (MA program - 1st year)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Commutes</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Mexican-American</td>
<td>Commutes</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>First Year</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lives on campus</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Graduate student (MA program - 1st year)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Commutes</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serena</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Student employee; lives on campus</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valencia</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Lives on campus</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Given the demographics of Sporty University and the topic at hand, three demographic factors about the participants as a group are worth discussing: gender, race, and socio-economic status. The demographics of the participants in these domains do not appear to mirror the institutional norm for Sporty University. Additional information about each individual participant is provided in chapter IV.

Of the 10 participants in this research, five identified as people of color. The disproportionately higher percentage of students of color who opted to participate in this study from the overall student population is noteworthy and will be explored in the subsequent discussion related to intersections of social identities and body size. Note that all participants who identified as people of color were indeed the undergraduate participants in the study (five of the seven undergraduate participants in the study were people of color).

Unlike with race, I did expect a disproportionate number of female-identified participants to opt in to the study. Sporty University enrolls slightly more female students than male students. Although I did not intentionally seek out only female-identified participants, I was not at all surprised that all participants were indeed female-identified, given the gendered nature of weight and body size. Furthermore, engaging in interviews about body size, particularly with a female interviewer (though my own gender identity may not be obvious from my name) may be unappealing for male-identified people of size. In a study on body-image perceptions held by college-aged men, Bottamini and Ste-Marie (2006) found that men tended to consider talking about issues related to body-image to be a “feminine preoccupation” (p. 120) and that the men were particularly
hesitant to talk about this topic with a female interviewer. Although not explicitly on the topic of body-image, the current study may have been similarly uncomfortable to potential male participants.

Additionally, several of participants addressed their economic status, compared to their perceptions of their peers at Sporty University, as a relevant demographic variable. Unlike with gender or race, I did not ask participants to share information about their socio-economic status on the participant questionnaire, I did not explicitly inquire about this at any point during the interview, nor do I have other concrete measures about participants’ socio-economic status or directly about the overall student income-level. However, information publicly available online indicates that the majority of Sporty University’s undergraduate students do not receive assistance from federal financial aid to fund their educational costs. Although I do not know about their specific financial aid status, all but two of the ten participants in this study referenced economic or financial hardship in some capacity during the course of our interviews. In some cases this was offered as a comparison, such as describing other students as “rich” (Dee, Jamie, Maria), sharing information about their own background in a poor or working class family (Katie, Olivia, Serena), talking about their need to work while in school (Maria, Serena, Bianca, Jamie), informing me that they had received a scholarship that enabled them to be at Sporty U. (Dee, Maria, Valencia), or telling me about lifestyle challenges related to economics with which they were faced (Bianca). Based on this information, I believe that the participants in this study likely came from lower socio-economic backgrounds than the majority of the Sporty University students.
**Initial Interviews**

After completing the participant questionnaire, individuals who met the criteria for participation were promptly contacted to schedule the first interview, which was scheduled for one hour. All interviews were scheduled within a 30-day timeframe and on the Sporty University campus. Two interviews were conducted in a study lounge in the student union, two were conducted in the graduate assistant research office of one participant, and the remaining interviews were held in private study rooms in the university library. All participants were emailed confirmations of their interview logistics (time/location) in advance of the interview, along with an electronic version of the informed consent form. Participants were informed in their confirmation email that I would seek their permission to audio-record the interview and that I would provide them with a $20 gift card as a small token of my appreciation for their time. Participants were also reminded that their participation was voluntary in this confirmation email.

There are countless ways that interviews can be conducted for research (Fontana & Frey, 2005). In line with my feminist approach to this study, I deviated from a traditional structured interview format, where I, as the researcher, maintained control of the interview process and expected participants to respond to my directive inquiry. Instead, I approached interactions with participants much like conversations, with the intention of dialogue, rather than responses to set questions. The process described by Fontana and Frey (2005) as empathetic interviewing rejects the notion of the interviewer as a neutral party and encourages interviewers to be themselves and to interact with participants as such through the interview process. The interviewer can then take on the role of both a partner and an advocate, suitable for research with minoritized or oppressed
individuals or groups and when the research is intending to promote social change. In using this approach to interviewing, I hoped to mitigate some of the power that I would have otherwise held in the traditional researcher/participant relationship.

In the spirit of empathetic interviewing, I strived to be my authentic self, and shared self-disclosures about my own experiences as a formerly overweight college student periodically throughout the interview process. I was upfront with participants about the nature of the study, my own assumptions, and areas of uncertainty. I began each interview by sharing openly about how I came to the topic of the climate for students of size, and my motivation to engage in this research. Specifically, to facilitate my introduction to each participant, I introduced myself by sharing a bit of my own story of my college experience as a student of size. I also chose to share two photographs of my younger and larger self at the onset of the first interview. By being open with the participants about my role in the research, I was hopeful that I would create a comfortable space within the interview for them to share freely with me. It was essential that participants were comfortable speaking candidly with me, in some cases about matters that may have been deeply personal or that carried with them a degree of embarrassment, shame, anger, frustration, or similarly charged emotions. I received feedback from several participants that sharing my story achieved this purpose. For example, towards the end of my first interview with her, Serena told me that, “Coming into this research I was like, ‘Oh no, is this a fat shaming research thing? That was my impression of it at first, but I was like, ‘Take a chance, take a risk, see what it has to offer.’” She went on to clarify how hearing my story helped her feel more comfortable as a participant.
When you showed me those pictures and then started telling me about your past and where you are now, that has really made me open up to you. Versus if you’d come off as being more offensive, I wouldn’t have shared as much with you. Thank you for sharing that at the beginning.

I was conscious of how I likely presented to the participants (as an outsider and not a person of size) and so this visual self-disclosure through photographs, in addition to verbally sharing a bit about my experience as a former student of size, was key to setting the tone for the empathetic interview. I peppered briefer self-disclosures throughout each interview, as relevant and as I saw opportunities to contribute to a conversation with each participant.

To help maximize my learning from each participant, I did have prepared conversation prompts. While I used a standard interview protocol that I had developed in advance (see Appendix F), I modified it based on information that I learned from each participant’s questionnaire and, to some degree, as I learned from each subsequent interview that I conducted. These were prompts, rather than rigid predetermined questions, designed to address relevant topics, without detracting from the conversational approach that I sought to take throughout the study.

I had few examples to draw from to draft protocols for interviews on the topic of campus climate and the experiences of students of size. In the absence of models for interviews on the topic, I drew from the general themes in the literature on campus climate, and even campus climate surveys, as I found that many of the items in such surveys lent themselves to in-depth responses that I thought appropriate to address within an interview. Additionally, I grappled with issues of participant comfort and candor within the interview. Despite my efforts to be an empathetic interviewer and to avoid thinsplaining, I knew that I would likely present to the participants as an outsider and that
this might limit their openness to sharing with me. With this in mind, the interview protocol was carefully drafted to attempt address this. In addition to starting with my own story, I spent significant time building rapport by getting to know the participants in a general sense, before turning more explicitly to the topic at hand. Throughout the interview, I was constantly attentive to each participant and shifted everything from the prompts themselves, to the choice of language, to the tone of my voice. For example, as Jamie shared stories with me that brought both of us to the verge of tears, I expressed empathy in very explicit ways by reflecting her pain in restatements back to her and at times by simply telling her how sorry that I was that she had endured some really awful experiences. I needed to create space and time within the interview to respond to what she was sharing and so our time together included brief periods of silence. Bianca, on the other hand, had a unique confidence in herself and about her body and had come prepared to the interview with a list of things that she wanted to share with me and so she set a fairly fast paced tone for our time together. My tone and demeanor in interviewing and conversing with her was much different than it was with Jamie and others, as I sought to adapt to fit with each participant’s style.

As I concluded the initial interviews, I explained the photo-elicitation research technique (detailed in a subsequent section) and asked for participation. I requested that they capture digital pictures that represented the climate on campus for students of size and that they text message or email me their images in advance of the second interview. I gave the participants ample creative freedom to capture a variety of images (including images of artifacts of the culture, as Banning (1997) suggested), but also directions to help them structure their work. The interview protocol (Appendix F) includes further
detail about how I introduced photo-elicitation within the interview and Appendix B is a copy of the written instructions that I provided to participants at the conclusion of the first interview.

All participants were asked to consent to audio recording of the interview. All participants gave such consent and all interviews were therefore audio recorded. I took handwritten notes for myself throughout the interviews. I also scheduled time for myself immediately following each interview so that I could further reflect on the interview and add to my notes. All audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim to aid in analysis.

**Photo-Elicitation**

I intended to use a photo-elicitation technique within the second interview with each participant. Photo-elicitation is a process used by researchers to uncover memories and emotions that a word-only interview may not (Harper, 2005). Although it can take on many different forms and alternative names such as photovoice, visual storytelling, and auto-photography (Emmison et al., 2012), the technique typically involves showing participants images as a prompt to further or deepen responses, often in conjunction with an interview question (Prosser & Schwartz, 1998). First conceptualized in the 1950’s by Collier (Lapenta, 2011), and with distinctive anthropological and sociological roots, photo-elicitation has been used in feminist research for decades (Brinton Lykes & Crosby, 2014) and is congruent with my theoretical perspective and epistemological stance. Although the field of higher education has not yet fully embraced visual research (Metcalfé, 2012), much can be gleaned from studying the use of visual methods over the past several decades in other relevant fields.
For example, in a project from the 1970’s, a feminist researcher used photographs designed to stimulate conversation to capture the experiences of working mothers in Peru (Brownell et al., 1977). The use of pictures in this study was cited as being particularly helpful in promoting empathy and fluidity in the interviews about deeply personal experiences. Indeed, the technique of photo-elicitation has been lauded for being “intrinsically collaborative” (Lapenta, 2011, p. 202), thereby helping to mitigate a power differential between the researcher and the researched (Emmison et al., 2012). Likewise, “photographs may offer an opportunity for developing a sense of self-expression for respondents” (Lapenta, 2011, p. 203), thereby enhancing the value of participation and offering voice to those who might not otherwise be heard in more traditional approaches to research (Luttrell & Chalfen, 2010). Given my epistemological stance as a constructivist, I was further drawn to the technique as it offered space for multiple versions of reality and truth to emerge, as participants constructed meaning from the image through their own unique lenses. Note that this is an important distinction from more traditional visual methods in which the researcher is solely responsible for interpreting images (Emmison et al., 2012).

In their text on the use of visual methods in social research, Banks and Zeitlyn (2011), posed several questions that ought to be considered when using pictures in research. Among those questions were several related to the content of the image (i.e. “What is in this picture?”), as well as questions focused on the reason that the photographer captured the particular image (i.e. “Why was this picture taken?”). Rose (2001) further emphasized the need to take a critical approach when using images in research. The social conditions that factored into how and why the image was created, the
viewers own cultural, geographic, and historic lens, and related issues must all be carefully considered in the analysis of a particular image, noting that “visual imagery is never innocent” (p. 32). That is, the image is not ever just what the viewer initially sees at first glance. Rather, there is a story, experience, and circumstance to be uncovered to understand the meaning of the image. It was this type of contextual data that I sought to uncover about the campus climate through the use of photo-elicitation.

Although some visual methods only allow for exploration related to the content, it was my intention to address questions pertaining to why the photographer (participant) chose to take the photograph as a means to gain insight about their assessment of and experience within the campus climate. I sought to know the story behind the image, the compelling reason the image was taken, and the effect that the image, and what the image represents, had on the photographer. Photo-elicitation can allow for the type of critical examination that Rose (2001) called for, as the dialogue about the image offers a space to explore social, cultural, and other contributing factors. As one way to consider this technique, Emmison and associates (2012) offered that photo-elicitation can resemble sharing stories while looking at a family photo album, a naturally occurring event that can bring about deep emotions, memories, and context that viewing the photographs in isolation may not. In this type of interaction, akin to viewing a family photo album, that enabled me to gather rich data to help answer my research questions.

Within the broader field of visual research methods, and also when considering the more specific technique of photo-elicitation, images can be used that were created for purposes other than the research itself (commonly referred to as found images (Prosser & Schwartz, 1998)) or images can be specifically created for the purpose of research (made
or created images; Banks & Zeitlyn, 2011). While I considered both approaches for the current research, I decided that creating images for the purpose of the research would be most effective, as this is such an exploratory topic and I would not know what images to pre-select to include. I also opted to use participant-generated images for the photo-elicitation, for similar reasons (rather than researcher-generated images). I invited participants to take digital images that were representative or illustrative of the climate on campus for students of size. I then used each participant’s own images to prompt further dialogue about their perceptions of the climate in the second interview.

Branch Douglas (1998) used a very similar approach in a study on understanding the perceptions that African American students had about their predominantly White institution. Although not using an explicit lens of campus climate, this study explored constructs that are tied to climate, such as students’ sense of consciousness about their racial identity, experiences with discrimination, and the status of social organizations on campus that were not typically inclusive of African American students. Similar to my approach, Branch Douglas began her data collection with a brief questionnaire about each participant, then an initial interview. Following the initial interview, the participants were asked to take photographs to “illustrate your impressions of [name of University] or that will help you describe your impressions” (p. 419). Once they completed their photography assignment, the researcher provided the images to the participants and met with each participant for a second interview in which she asked them to elaborate on the photographs, the meaning that they held, and other considerations related to each image. Although she did not offer explicit commentary on the efficacy of her methods, it is clear to me that her approach yielded rich and descriptive data about the students’ experiences
and impressions of their university. Like me, the researcher entered into her work with intention to bring about change by illuminating experiences that may otherwise have been unknown or silenced. Because of the similarities in research agenda and methods, this work served to further support the data collection methods for my research.

Second Interviews

Similar to the initial interview, I strove to engage in empathetic interviewing (Fontana & Frey, 2005) as I concluded my work with participants in the second and final interview. The second interview had several distinctive purposes, which differentiated it from the initial interview that was focused on initial rapport building and gathering data about the campus climate. Although I used many of the same approaches that I described for the first interview, the addition of photo-elicitation, as described above, in the second interview was intended to enable me to collect richer, and even more descriptive data about the climate on campus for students of size. Additionally, I used the second interview as a form of member checking (Jones et al., 2006) to see if my preliminary findings, based on the data collected in the first interview “rang true” for participants (Merriam, 2009, p. 217). Lastly, I used the second interview to engage participants in discussion about possible implications of the research, based on the preliminary findings. Note that requests and protocols for consent for transcription, and my own note taking and reflections following the interviews were the same as for the first set of interviews.

Confirmations via email for the second interview included reminders about logistics (time/location) and the participant-generated photos that would be used for the photo elicitation in the second interview. Although eight participants engaged in a second interview with me, only five of the eight (Olivia, Katie, Rachel, Serena, and Jamie)
provided me with photographs with which to facilitate the photo elicitation exercise during the second interview. I attribute the lack of full participation in this aspect of the research process in part to my framing the exercise as voluntary. Certainly, it was voluntary (as all participation was), but I believe that my approach to explaining the photo component of the study was likely a factor in why three participants did not complete this. Additionally, one of the participants who had an early second interview (prior to most of the other second interviews and even before many of the initial interviews were held) shared with me that she wasn’t sure if she should have come to the second interview because she had not completed the photo assignment. I assured her that I was appreciative of her perspective and had plenty of other topics to discuss with her, even without the photos. However, her expressed hesitation about whether or not she should have even come to the second interview without the photos likely impacted how I instructed others on this aspect of participation. Since the second interview had other components to it, besides the photo elicitation, I did not want participants to cancel the second interview on the account they had not taken participant-generated photos to share with me.

In reviewing my audio files and transcripts from the initial interview, during which I provided the instructions on the photo project, I heard myself using terms such as “if you are up for it” (when explaining the photo project overall) and even, “you don’t have to do this piece, but it has been really interesting...” And, in an attempt to try to make it easy to capture the photos (and ironically I thought would have the effect of helping encourage participation), I gave instructions such as, “You don’t have to go out of your way to do this.” In retrospect, I believe that in my effort to encourage
participation I was actually minimizing the importance of the photo project to the
participants, which may have led some to dismiss this aspect of participation. Of the three
participants who choose to participate in a second interview without photos, two
expressed an interest in taking them after the second interview and sharing them with me
electronically. However, to date, neither has done so and therefore I have participant-
generated photos and additional data generated during the second interview through
photo-elicitation from just five participants.

To achieve the above listed outcomes in a single interview, the second interviews
were scheduled for 90 minutes, allowing more time than the first interview. With
participants who chose to generate and share images with me, I began the second
interview with the photo-elicitation techniques to delve deeper into the description and
understanding of the campus climate before I turned to the member checking and
discussion of implications. Appendix G provides the template for conversation prompts
which served as the basis for the second interview. Once we moved past the photo-
elicitation discussions (when applicable), I verbally shared the very preliminary themes
that had begun to coalesce and asked each participant to respond to them. There were
four loose themes that I shared with them: (a) that size was hidden within the climate, (b)
that a fear of judgment permeated the climate, (c) that unique spaces had somewhat
different climates for students of size, and (d) that the intersection of social identities was
relevant for how students of size experienced the climate. I asked each participant to
share the extent to which each early theme seemed true to how they experienced the
campus climate, and/or provide me with examples- whether to affirm the theme to or
present an alternative or different sense of the climate. I found that this portion of the
interviews was some of the most powerful time that I spent with the participants. When a participant confirmed that an early theme that I shared did resonate, it was then common for her to share how the theme aligned with her experience within the campus climate, even if she had not contributed directly to the theme during her first interview. It seemed to me that the experience of hearing common themes, that had been developed with and from other students of size, was affirming to the participants. In my notes following the interviews I had a few notes where participants had been “enthusiastic” and I had jotted down “Yes!!!” to describe their sense of some of the themes. It was my assessment that the experience of hearing that they were not alone in how they experienced the climate at Sporty University as a student of size was both comforting and exciting to them.

Returning to my critical action agenda and social justice lens, I intended to use this dissertation research to encourage any necessary change. That is, for me, it was not simply a piece of scholarship that was to be used to inform other scholars (though that too would be a positive outcome). Rather, it was most important to me that the research serve as a catalyst for action to transform the climate to be more inclusive of students of size. Accordingly, I engaged each participant in dialogue about the utility of the research as the final portion of the second interview. I spent concerted time asking them to share their ideas for how to bring about such change, and specifically what the research might mean on their campus.

**Research Journal**

Although some methodologists call for the use of a research journal of sorts (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009), I was not inclined to take up traditional journaling. This simply is not my style and so to do so felt like it could compromise my authenticity
as a researcher. Rather, I made use of an app that I was already accustomed to using and that naturally helps me organize and reflect on my daily work and observations. The app, while designed to manage to-do lists, served as a quick and easy place to jot my thoughts, questions, and feelings.

The app captured the date of each entry, and therefore became an audit trail of sorts for my research (Merriam, 2009). The brief notes in the app, and my handwritten notes that I had taken both during and immediately following the interviews, was an additional source of data and a reference point for my analysis. For example, it was helpful that I captured the time and date of each interview. When I was then analyzing the data at a deeper level, I knew that when I interviewed Dee for a second time, I had only conducted initial interviews with Olivia, Katie, and Rachel. As such, the themes that I shared out with Dee for her reflections and commentary were not as developed as the themes that I shared with Bianca during our second interview, as Bianca’s second interview was the final interview that I conducted.

My own notes also included a good deal of self-reflection about how I believe I interacted with the participants, and advice that I was offering myself for subsequent interviews. For example, after Katie’s commentary to me about wearing shorts on campus (explained in the subsequent chapters), I made a note that instructed myself to not wear shorts to conduct interviews. Indeed, I had given a good deal of thought to what I should wear to conduct the interviews, as I was hyper-aware of the ways in which my own appearance might impact my ability to build rapport with the participants. My handwritten notes reflected my thoughts about this. In general, I had erred towards fairly casual attire, as I surmised that might help college student participants feel more at ease
with me. After Katie’s interview however, I made sure that my casual choices did not include shorts. These seemingly minor notes offered me helpful reminders about my choices as a researcher that might not otherwise surface but that assuredly contributed to the research process and outcomes. Likewise, there was a lag of almost two years between the time that I collected data and the time that I wrote about the research findings and implications. I found these notes helpful to jog my memory about the experience of being with the participants, in addition to the audio recordings and transcriptions.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis for a qualitative research study takes on different forms and is conducted as an emergent process, much like most qualitative research design itself. Rather than analysis being conducted in a linear fashion after one has completed the data collection process, qualitative data analysis is both “recursive and dynamic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 169) and should occur concurrently with data collection (Gibbs, 2007; Luker, 2008). In this research, this was not only the case because it was congruent with my theoretical perspective, but also because it was a necessity. I had primary sources of data (two sets of interviews and photos), as well as my own researcher notes and decision trail. It was essential that I was both organizing and analyzing data as I was collecting and generating it so I could use the knowledge that I gained from the ongoing analysis to ensure that the second interviews were relevant and useful. The information gleaned from the first interview served to help me focus the second interview conversations to obtain a level of depth and meaning that I might have otherwise missed, had I not engaged in ongoing data analysis.
The audio recordings of interviews, verbatim written transcriptions of the interviews, my own notes from the interviews, and the participant-generated photographs made up the primary data set for the study. My own notes and reflections that I generated immediately following the interviews, as well as the audit trail and notes through my organizational app. comprised the additional data. As is the case with most qualitative studies (Gibbs, 2007), I was primarily working with data in the form of text (the photographs being the only non-textual data). My notes and transcriptions were hefty text documents. Although I briefly considered using a computer assisted analysis program to aid in the analysis, ultimately I decided that this was not a fit for this study. Rather, I chose to engage directly with the data and believe that doing so was of value to me as the researcher and strengthened the study itself. As Merriam (1998) said, “the real learning can only take place in the doing” (p. 156) with respect to data analysis. A visual overview of the process that I undertook to analyze the data is provided in Figure 1 and a narrative description follows.
Figure 1. Overview of Data Analysis Process.
Because some of the second interviews with participants were scheduled just a week following the initial interview, I needed to work quickly on the first phase of analysis. Following each initial interview, I listened to the audio recording of the interview and took notes about what I heard (these notes were in addition to the notes that I took during the interview itself). The early interviews were different, as I was looking for general themes that jumped out and my lens was primarily informed by the literature that I had reviewed in chapter II. As I progressed further along into the later interviews, the way in which I listened shifted somewhat, as I began to listen for information that affirmed or corroborated what I had heard in other interviews. I was also then listening for new or different information that I could then incorporate into my prompts for the second interview with each participant. This early, quick analysis was informal and driven primarily by what I had heard from the participants and which struck me as most interesting or relevant to the research questions. I did not engage in any formal coding or similar activities during this phase of the analysis. The analysis at this stage was primarily to give me adequate information about preliminary themes to member check (Jones et al., 2006) with participants during the second interview. As described above, during the second interview I verbally shared these themes with each participant and asked her to respond to these initial themes and provide feedback about whether or not they reflected their truth and why or why not. The participants’ responses to me then became additional data that helped me refine the themes.

Luker (2008) offered guidance to social scientists on the daunting task of making sense of qualitative data in research projects that buck the canonical norm of a sequential, linear process. Rather, she advocated for a more immersive process in which the
researcher *dances* with the data; that is, where the researcher is responsive to the moves of the research, engaging in a process that is “holistic and attentive to context, conceptually innovative, and methodologically agnostic” (Luker, 2008, p. 3). In regard to data analysis, she offered me an appropriate frame for this feminist case study. Luker described a process by which researchers begin with deep contemplation and reflection on the data. Next, researchers should engage others in dialogue about their data — sharing their inclinations, their suppositions, and their feelings about the data that they have generated. Researchers should eventually arrive at a point where they begin to recognize the initial emergence of patterns — either through one’s own reflection or through the dialogue with others about the data. Luker stated that it is this initial recognition of patterns that signals that the time has come to organize the patterns through the process of coding and subsequently offers a technique for doing so.

Although I did not have time to *dance* with the data in a deep and contemplative way between the first and second interview, I did follow Luker’s (2008) guidance following the second interview. Indeed, I took a lot of time to think, talk about, and process the data over the course of about a year, following the completion of data collection. This timeframe coincided with the pregnancy and birth of my second child, a time in my life when I was particularly reflective and thoughtful about my own identity, my body, and my role as mother of my (soon to be) two daughters. It is not lost on me that it is relevant that this time of deep reflection about the data that I collected for this research was the same time that I was watching my own belly grow and regularly meeting with my doctor to discuss, among other topics, my own body weight. Furthermore, I preemptively thought through challenges that I anticipated with adding
another child to my family, particularly with respect to finding the time to dedicate to this research. In doing so, I sought out opportunities to talk with colleagues and peers about both the research process as well as my findings. And so, as Luker suggested, I engaged my academic peers, my colleagues, and even my friends and family in conversation about the data as a means to help me process aloud and to gain their valuable insight too. These discussions served both as cathartic conversations and contributions to my research, as I was doing the very thing that Luker recommended.

Several weeks after my second daughter was born, I determined that I had indeed arrived at a point where I was ready to proceed with a next step in my analysis. I was confident in what I knew to be the answers to the research questions, though I was struggling with how to organize the data to present those answers. I therefore turned to a more regimented coding process to help me progress. Before delving deeply into the coding, I started writing a series of analytic memos. As described by Saldaña (2016), analytic memos can serve to help researchers organize and process their thoughts while coding data. Following Saldaña’s advice, I wrote the memos in a casual format and allowed myself the space to go down paths that I knew were unlikely to be incorporated into the final research document, but that I felt compelled to explore. I found that the very act of writing the memos, which ranged in topics from memos on particular participants, my own positionality, and my musings about intersections of themes, incredibly helpful. Through this writing, and related reading, I also determined that I needed to define and scope the codes that I would use for my next iteration of data analysis. As such, I also developed an informal document, much in the style of a codebook, to articulate what I
was looking for in the data. The document articulated the characteristics of each code, including what type of data the code would encompass and what it would not, as well as illustrative examples for the code.

Merriam (1998) described different strategies of data analysis and explained the disciplinary link to each. As I prepared to code the data, I returned to my early methodological consideration related to ethnography. Although I was not conducting an ethnographic research study, ethnographic analysis suited my feminist case study well. Ethnographic analysis draws from cultural anthropological traditions to achieve a rich and thick description of a culture. In my study, these techniques were employed to attain a rich description of the climate on the campus for students of size. Merriam’s description of this approach calls for the use of schemes (categorizations of the data) that can be taken directly from the data, and using terminology and descriptors from within the culture. I was therefore drawn to a technique for the coding process that honored the voice of each participant and also allowed me to play with and iterate the codes as I engaged in the process. InVivo coding was an ideal fit, as it “prioritizes the participant’s voice” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 106) and is therefore useful for studies with participants holding minoritized identities. Returning to my awareness of and desire to avoid thinsplaining, using participants’ words as the basis for the codes was appealing to me for that reason as well. Note that although InVivo coding is often used for grounded theory research, it is not exclusive to that methodology and has broad applicability across a variety of types of qualitative research.

Therefore, building from the preliminary themes that I had discussed with participants and the conversations that I had with my peers and colleagues, I culled the
data for the prominent themes and assigned codes, using the words of the participants. I started my coding document (a spreadsheet) with 11 codes: *small things eat at you, obligated, sporty, isolation, maneuver through, brain space, missing dialogue, just wanna fit, stay in the background, thoughts and fears of judgment, and intersection*. As I moved further into the text and assigning codes I added two more: *hidden and physical environment*. I meticulously went through each transcribed page of my 18 interviews, which I had previously highlighted, annotated, and covered with colored post-its at earlier stages, and put clusters of text (quotations) and assigned the most salient codes to the substantive data. At the end of this process I had coded 225 unique pieces of data-ranging from a sentence or brief clause, to paragraphs of explanatory text.

This exercise, while tedious at times, was of tremendous value to me, as it provided me with a way to look across the data and participants and see where I had opportunities to refine my themes. Both the process of coding in this manner, and the product (a massive spreadsheet), gave me new insights into how I would answer my research questions. As I was coding, I realized that some data were challenging to assign just one code. The overlap between codes, while expected at the onset of the process, became more apparent to me and helped me later see how the different codes represented related, and, in some cases, were representative of the same construct. And, while I was not aiming to use a quantitative count of frequency of code, it was helpful for me to see, for example, that *thoughts and fears of judgment* was the most common code that I assigned.

Once I finished the InVivo coding, I visually mapped the ways in which the codes were related and how they could help me answer my research questions. I also grappled
with several areas of uncertainty about how to proceed. For example, I needed to determine whether the behavior that participants engaged in as a result of the climate, which they talked about extensively, was relevant to my research questions or whether I should amend the research questions to explicitly address their behavior resulting from the climate. Likewise, race had surfaced as an incredibly relevant aspect of how many participants experienced the climate on campus. While this struck me as an essential element of understanding the climate on campus, I also realized that a full exploration of this topic was a research study in and of itself, and I needed to determine how to incorporate the data that I had on this sub-topic in an appropriate way — without derailing me from my primary research focus. Again, I turned to trusted peers and colleagues to help me navigate the answers to these questions and others like them.

Visual mapping and the writing of additional analytical memos helped further fuel my findings.

Furthermore, this approach of InVivo coding ties appropriately to the theories used for the study: cultural theories and framing. In many ways, Saguy’s (2013) problem framing, which is a way of organizing different conceptualizations of fatness, is akin to a scheme that might be found within the data. After I coded using the participants’ words (InVivo), I overlaid Saguy’s fatness problem frames on the data to help further guide my analysis and understanding. To be clear, I did not plan to fit all data into a particular frame. Rather, I used the frames to help further organize what I was finding and coalesce the data in additionally meaningful ways. For example, as I began to recognize aspects of
an immorality frame, I was intentional in looking for other data that further supported the existence of this problem frame. Then, I used this frame as a means to understand the implications of the climate for students of size.

Additionally, the cultural theory that I used fit well with Merriam’s (1998) description of ethnographic analysis. I worked to integrate and reflect elements of the culture of the institution into my analysis of the campus climate the climate. As explained in chapter II, I could not answer the research questions about campus climate without keen attention to the culture and context of the campus. The concepts of climate, culture, and context were considerations in all facets of the research process. Related to data analysis, this manifested in the use of the language of the participants themselves as I identified the key themes within the data, a nod to an ethnographic emic perspective.

**Goodness and Trustworthiness**

Traditional quantitative measures of reliability and validity were not appropriate to use in evaluating the quality of the proposed research, yet it was essential that I take steps to ensure the integrity and quality of my work. I was not positioning myself as an objective evaluator setting forth to test hypotheses or to generalize findings to a larger population. Rather, I was positioning myself as a feminist researcher conducting a descriptive study of a single bounded case. When research is based on different core understandings about the nature of reality and knowledge than the dominant positivist frame, it only makes sense that different measures be used to consider the quality of the work. Although some qualitative researchers are comfortable evaluating the *rigor* of research, even this term implies a degree of preciseness that is not always suitable for constructivist research (Jones et al., 2006). Instead, qualitative researchers have used the
concepts of goodness (Peshkin, 1993) and trustworthiness (Merriam, 1998) as appropriate measures of quality in qualitative research. The concept of goodness is linked to the worthiness of the study at hand. That is, does the study have value by contributing to scholarship or practice in a meaningful way? In the case of this study, given the emphasis on social justice and action, an overarching question to gauge the worth of the study would be related to how the work could help bring about action or change.

Merriam (1998) presented a number of strategies for case study researchers working in the realm of educational research to assure trustworthiness. She described the importance of trustworthiness related to the confidence that the researcher and others will have in the study. That is, will the researcher and others feel confident that the research process was sound and therefore does the work have utility for the applicable scholarly and/or or applied functions? Due to the critical-action agenda that I set for this work, the issue of trustworthiness struck me as particularly important. If I, or others, were not confident that the research was conducted with integrity and with sound practices and judgment, it would be for naught, as it would not be useful for practical application. With this in mind, I employed a number of Merriam’s suggested strategies in my work.

First, and as described above, Merriam (1998) suggested the strategy of member checking or respondent validation. This is a process designed to ensure congruence between the meaning that the researcher finds, and the reality experienced by participants. I took her recommendation by sharing early findings with participants and asking that they confirm, modify, or otherwise comment on the extent to which the findings are true for them when I spoke with them in the follow up (second) interview.
Another popular strategy for ensuring that qualitative research is trustworthy is the concept of triangulation. Triangulation can take many forms but is often defined simply as the process of using different sources or perspectives to confirm emerging findings (Merriam, 1998). In some studies, this takes the form of using multiple investigators to interpret the same data, but in this study, it was achieved through the use of multiple sources of data. Rather than relying solely on data from one source (for example, a single set of interviews), I had data from two separate interviews, the participant-created images, as well as my own researcher reflections and notes. All of these data sources were used to holistically examine the climate on campus for students of size. Yin (2009) also highlighted this form of data triangulation in his instructional text on case study research and noted that it is this “convergence of evidence” (p. 117) that is a hallmark of quality case study design.

It is also recommended that researchers employ collaborative or participatory methods through which participants contribute to the research process as another means to enhance trustworthiness (Merriam, 1998). Like member checking, this is a way of linking the participants themselves to the research process and ensuring that the researcher’s work appropriately reflects their experiences or meaning. The participant-generated images that were used in the second interviews are one way in which participants contributed directly to the research. Additionally, in the second interview, I worked alongside the participants to develop and refine the implications of the study.

Lastly, the notion of transparency and disclosure play a role in the trustworthiness of any given study. When readers are clear about how the research has been conducted, the role of the researcher within the process, and the researcher’s own position and
framework, they are able to determine how or if to trust the findings and subsequently are able to determine the appropriate application of the study for their practice or scholarship (Merriam, 1998). Certainly, the dissertation format lends itself to this type of disclosure, as I have had the space to explain my process, as well as share reflections on my own identity and positionality. I believe that I have been explicit and quite thorough with the explanations of both my process and my identity that I have offered here.
CHAPTER IV

THE CLIMATE

She stepped onto campus and quickly surveyed the scene in front of her. It was a sunny May day and the grassy quad was packed with students. She looked down at her baggy sweatshirt, pulled on it to be sure that it was covering all the right places, and started her trek to class. Despite the nearly 80-degree temperature outside, she had changed from the seasonal shorts that she had worn in the relative comfort of her own apartment, to loose pants before she stepped foot on campus. She was hot now, but the discomfort was a small price to pay in order to avoid the stares — or feelings of stares — that she knew she’d get from her fellow students had she chosen to wear shorts on campus.

She didn’t have to look closely to know what was happening in the grassy open area through which she walked, so she kept her head down and tried to avoid engaging with anyone else. The sounds of volleyball and laughter filled the air. Her sporty peers, the girls all stick thin and clad in fitted yoga gear, seemed to be enjoying themselves without a care in the world. Meanwhile, internal dialogue filled her head: “Are they looking at me? What are they thinking? Probably that I’m lazy and fat ... I should have worn something else. Maybe they are laughing at me. Probably not... but maybe. Okay, positive thoughts. Don’t think about that. Hmmm ... what’s the most direct way to my classroom today? I need to avoid walking past that group of girls tanning on towels.”
As she approached the building where her class was held, she looked down at her watch and realized she was late. Not technically late to class, but late for her. She always planned to get to class early. That way, she had her choice of desk and location, and wouldn’t have to worry about getting stuck—literally—in one of those awful chairs with arms or needing to pull a chair that would fit to her preferred spot in the back of the room. She could feel her heart racing—she became really anxious the more she thought about the prospect of being late to class. All those people would turn and stare when she opened the door. She wanted to be alone in the classroom so that she could scout out and secure her seating arrangement. As she rehearsed how she might handle the scenario of being late to class and having people look at her, she was keenly aware that she should be using those last precious moments before class began to review her notes for the test today. As much as she tried to turn her attention to reviewing for her test, her worry about others looking at her—and judging her—overtook her mind.

She knew better—she was aware that no one would actually directly point at her and jeer—but it didn’t matter. She felt ashamed for worrying about something so petty; yet, this was her reality as the fat girl on campus. She reminded herself that she was smart and accomplished. She could rise above the superficial values held by the students at her college, but she was alone here. It was hard to be so disconnected from the norm and in such a visible and obvious way too. For a school that prides itself on diversity, she considered how homogenous the student body really was: wealthy, White, athletic, skinny (at least the girls), and sociable. She wasn’t like them, didn’t belong with them, and so wondered if she belonged at the college at all.
The scenario described above, while a fictional summary, incorporates elements of the experiences that each participant shared with me. Campus climate describes the, “attitudes, behaviors, and standards/practices that concern the access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential” (Rankin & Reason, 2008, p. 264). I entered this research expecting to find aspects of campus climate that were externally manifested, such as obvious or explicitly stated expressions about institutional attitudes towards students of size. While such signals about the climate were indeed found and will be discussed in this chapter, I also learned quickly about the importance of the internal and subtle ways in which the campus climate is also created within the individuals experiencing the climate.

This study is a descriptive single case study, and so it is the climate itself that is the focus of the research. In determining how to best organize a description of the climate I considered several different approaches. I briefly considered using an environmental approach in which I could have selected specific localities within the campus environment to describe the climate, as I learned about unique aspects of the climate in various location on campus (gym, classroom, dining hall, outside green spaces). I considered an approach in which I would have used individual narratives from the participants themselves to share that the climate is not ubiquitous for all individuals who identify as students of size, as certainly it is not. I then returned to the theoretical framework for the study and the specific theory of the problem frames of fatness (Saguy, 2013) and the cultural perspectives that inform this project. Accordingly, this chapter, which provides the findings from the research, is organized in a straightforward fashion. I first revisit the terminology that I use, then introduce the reader to the participants, and
then outline the key themes that emerged from the data, relying heavily on the voices of the participants. I conclude the chapter with a summary explanation of where evidence of Saguy’s (2013) problem frames were found.

Throughout the chapter I have also included photographs (some altered to protect identities) that were taken by participants and contributed to the research. These photographs were used for the photo-elicitation activity in the second interview, but I have curated several to include in this final manuscript as well. I included images so that the reader might experience some of the same rich description that I did when I heard about the participants’ experiences alongside the visual cues. For me, seeing the image served to strengthen the description or otherwise enhance the stories the participants shared. Although I received a total of 24 photographs from participants, I selected just 12 to include in this manuscript. I followed guidance offered by Guillemin and Drew (2010) regarding the inclusion/exclusion of participant generated visual data in [potentially] published research. I took care to not select images that would identify the site institution, the participants, or other individuals who may have been captured in the frame of the original image. I cropped two of the images to protect the identity of the participant featured in each and five additional images to obscure features of the environment that could be tied to the site institution. I also digitally recolored each image so that all images included are presented in black and white. In addition

Note that some of the images that were shared with me were nearly impossible to alter in a way that would mask the identity of the individual(s) and/or institution in the image, while still maintaining the integrity of the image. As such, those images were not included here. In other instances, an image was not particularly germane to the findings
of the study nor did it illustrate the finding(s) as well as another image did. For example, Serena shared two different images with me that related to beverages on campus. I selected the image that she and I discussed in more depth and that I found particularly helpful when she explained why beverages were relevant to her experience in the climate. The other image was omitted from this final manuscript, though our discussion of that image did yield valuable data that contributed to the study. Ultimately, the 12 included images were ones that I believe offered helpful insights about the participants’ experiences within the campus climate.

What’s in a Name? Part II

Before I delve into the findings, I am compelled to readdress the question of terminology, raised initially in chapter I. As anticipated, the issue of terminology about body size was a salient topic for the participants. As noted in chapter I, I was committed to using language that fit each individual participant to describe her body size and I continued to be thoughtful about terminology as I wrote. I asked about terminology early on in my initial interviews. Participants shared a variety of descriptive terms that they tended to use to describe their own body or size, including “plus sized” (Olivia), “fat” (Dee and Rachel), “chubby” (Dee), “my extra chub” (Maria), “chunky/chubby” (Katie), and “overweight” (Valencia and Jamie). The word fat was a polarizing term of sorts, with several participants noting that this term was a negative and disparaging descriptor, and others taking a different stance that the term itself is not actually problematic. Bianca offered perspective on the ways in which the associations of the term fat have become negatively charged. She explained this to me early in our initial interview:

Fat is not a negative connotation. It just is what it is. Although it has that shock, if you say the word fat in front of people who are thin they’re like, ‘Oh god, no…’ It
really doesn’t matter… use whatever term you want. Because I have a daughter I’m trying to train myself to say only good things about myself. Fat is just a thing. It is a cell on your body…I’m just trying to remove the negative connotation to fat.

Bianca’s framework fit with her journey to embrace body positivity, a concept that she shared with me throughout our work together. She actively resisted the negativity that she saw and experienced in her life related to fatness. Her choice to use *fat* to describe her body was one mechanism for doing so. Rachel also used the term *fat* as her body descriptor, and like Bianca, was intentional about the use of the term. She offered that she tries to use a philosophy of “fear the name is only the fear of the self,” an adaptation of a statement made by Dumbledore in the *Harry Potter* book series. Key to this for Rachel was the point that avoidance or fear of a name is only masking a fear of the person holding the name. Rachel, like Bianca, was working on accepting and appreciating her own body and so not shying away from the word *fat* was a strategy in this process. Rachel also was quick to note that the prevailing association of *fat* was indeed negative, and likely offensive to many. As such, while she used *fat* to describe herself, she was hesitant to describe others using this same word.

While no participants offered that they had previously used *person of size* as a descriptor, most expressed appreciation or an interest in the term. For example, Katie responded to my inquiry about the term with the following, “When I first read [the email invitation regarding the research], I really appreciated the terminology. I had never heard *person of size*, but I felt like that fits a lot better than all of these other really negative terms.” Several others responded similarly, citing that the term was devoid of the negative connotations so often associated with more common descriptors, such as *fat*.

Serena drew the connection between the term *person of size* and other person-first
terminology. She shared that she appreciated the subjective and interpretive nature of these types of terms. Bianca was the sole critic of the term, sharing candidly that when she first heard *person of size* in the invitation to participate in the research that, “I may, or may not, have rolled my eyes. I’m not going to lie.” As we explored this more, she explained that she saw the conundrum I faced with respect to terminology. Despite her initial reaction, she realized that the term was more sensitive to many people than her preference for *fat* and so she understood why I would use it for this research. As I had expected, the issue of terminology was tricky, as no single term was uniformly suitable for each participant. However, I maintained my commitment to refer to each using their preferred terminology as I spoke with them, and ultimately was affirmed that *person of size* was the most appropriate general term to use when reporting out on results for the research in the aggregate.

**The Participants**

To achieve the goals of this research, which involves providing a rich description of the case — the climate at Sporty University for students of size — detailed narratives about each individual participant are not necessary or necessarily useful, as I am offering a description of the climate in this bounded case. While I offer illustrative examples from the perspectives of individual participants in order to answer the research questions about climate, the specific individual experiences are not the focus here. However, I offer brief profiles of each participant below in order to showcase whose perspective informed the overall climate described.

I was both surprised and fascinated that the 10 participants reflected such a broad array of social identities and experiences. As outlined in the previous chapter, there were
both graduate students and undergraduate students, students who lived both on and off-campus, students who came from nearby communities and students who had never been to the campus or even the region prior to attending Sporty University. Participants spanned academic disciplines and were both involved in diverse activities and organizations through the university and uninvolved. Although I did not explicitly inquire about sexual orientation or relationship status, several participants described current or past heterosexual relationships and one participant identified herself as pansexual/polyamorous.

Olivia

Olivia was a first-year student at Sporty University. Olivia grew up with early perspectives about college, and specifically Sporty University, as one of her parents was a professor on campus. Although her family lived fairly close to campus, Olivia and her family decided that there was value in her having a residential college experience and so she lived in the residence hall on campus, though she often visited and stayed at home. The cost of college was a salient topic for Olivia, and she felt fortunate to be able to attend the expensive institution, due to the discounted tuition rate because of her parent’s employment with the university.

Olivia had always been a “big kid” and she grew up in a family in which this was normalized, as her parents were also bigger people. Olivia had several close friends from high school and enjoyed spending time being social, though she struggled to find her connection and social niche at Sporty University. Olivia was fashionable and liked to stay abreast of celebrity news and trends. As a psychology major, Olivia was also curious
about human behavior and feelings, and had spent a lot of time thinking about the impact of her body size on her own self-esteem and the impact of this on her life and social interactions.

**Dee**

Dee was a Junior at the university who lived on campus, as she had for the last three years. She was grateful however to be in a campus apartment on her own, rather than the traditional dorm-style set up in which she previously lived. Dee is Native American and had a close connection with two tribes, as her father lived on a reservation in an adjacent state. Dee came to Sporty University without having ever visited campus previously, unsure what to expect. She was awarded a full scholarship to attend Sporty University through an organization in her home state that was designed to support a cohort of her peers.

Dee was unabashed with her distaste for Sporty University. She had considered transferring many times, as so many of her friends had done, but she felt a sense of obligation to complete her degree at the university because of the generous scholarship that she had. She attributed her dislike of the university to many factors, but not fitting in because of how she looks and how little money she has compared to her peers, was a major reason. Dee had just a few friends at the university, mostly people she met through the organizations for students of color. Dee felt a connection to one professor she met during her freshman year but otherwise felt quite isolated from the faculty and other members of the university. Dee had a boyfriend who was also a student on campus. He challenged her to be more positive about herself and her college experience, but it continued to be a daily struggle for her to do so.
Katie

Katie was a first-year graduate student who was enrolled in a two-year master’s program. She was back close to home and family, after having left the state for her undergraduate experience. Katie had always been a high-achieving student and was offered a full ride scholarship to attend a prestigious university for her undergraduate degree out of state. The out of state institution had some similar characteristics to Sporty University and so Katie found herself drawing frequent comparisons between the two. Katie grew up in a very low-income household and knew from growing up in the area that it would be challenging for her to fit in at Sporty University because of the wealth that she knew was omnipresent on campus. Katie’s research interests were related to cultural constructs and so she was excited to participate in a study that also examined culture.

Katie struggled to find friends in her cohort, and she spent as little time on campus as possible. She was quite uncomfortable on campus and her discomfort drove her off campus. Katie’s weight was incredibly salient for her as she considered how she feels on campus. Worry about her weight, and what others may be thinking about her because of her weight, was a nearly constant thought in her mind. She was incredibly cautious about how she presented on campus because of her body size.

Rachel

Rachel was also a first-year graduate student in a two-year master’s program. Rachel moved to the state with one of her boyfriends to attend Sporty University and lived off campus with him in an apartment. Rachel did not feel a particular connection to
her peers in her graduate program, or elsewhere at Sporty University, which she attributes to her weight or her age (she was a few years older than most in her program).

Rachel was bullied as a child for her size and developed disordered eating habits around the age of 15. Her family was aware, but she never received help for this. Although she did not have current eating disorder diagnosis and was in a much better place than when she was younger, she does not think that her thinking about her body and food will ever be totally normal. Rachel frequented the gym on campus but was not currently trying to lose weight. Rather, she was focused on being stronger and healthier as a result of strength training. She documented her progress publicly online and was also active in online communities with shared values related to fitness and body positivity.

Serena

Serena was a sophomore who lived on campus and worked on campus. She grew up in a diverse low-income community not too far from Sporty University, but the difference in the two environments was striking. Serena is Asian-American, and her body size is not congruent with expectations that others have for her race. The cultural norms from her childhood and from her family upbringing were vastly different from what she experienced daily at Sporty University. Adapting to the culture on campus was somewhat of a challenge for her.

Serena’s high school was the site of a project that a leadership program from Sporty University facilitated to help low-income students matriculate to college. She benefitted from this program in high school and was then involved in the same leadership
program as a college student. Serena worked two jobs on campus and kept herself busy between those roles, her RA duties, and as an active spectator at university sporting events.

**Bianca**

Bianca was a graduate student who was two-years into a cohort program that was designed to be completed in two years. Bianca became pregnant and a single-mom during graduate school. She was in the midst of negotiating a plan to complete her program outside of the standard timeframe due to the adjustments she needed to make to her academic schedule during the time that we met for her participation in this research. Bianca had worked professionally in her field for several years after completing her undergraduate degree in another state and moved to the region to attend graduate school at Sporty University.

Bianca had always been overweight, as was her mother. Bianca’s mother’s weight was a factor in shaping how Bianca thought and felt about her own body. Her mother’s recent gastric bypass surgery was a top of mind topic for Bianca as she shared her own perspectives about body size with me. Her Mormon upbringing, and the associated values about modesty and women’s bodies, was also impactful. As the new mom of a baby girl, Bianca had a new motivation to feel comfortable in her own skin, regardless of her weight, and this approach framed how she perceived and experienced the university.

**Maria**

Maria was a junior at Sporty University. Her family lived in the same state, but about an hour and a half drive from campus. Maria lived on campus for the past three years. She planned to commute from her family’s home for the following academic year
— both to save some money and to get away from campus. Maria was very close with her family and is the first in her (large) family to pursue a 4-year degree. After Maria started at Sporty University her mother decided to try to go back to school and recently completed her bachelor’s degree at another institution. Maria was at Sporty University on a full scholarship. She could have attended any institution in the country at no cost to her or her family but chose Sporty University so that she could be close to her family.

Maria was quite critical of Sporty University. As a lower-income and Mexican-identified student, Maria did not feel connected with nor comfortable around the majority of the other students. She traveled to her hometown at least once a month to maintain a job there. She looked forward to the time that she was able to spend away from the Sporty University campus and the associated stress she experienced when she was around other Sporty University students.

**Ayesha**

Ayesha was a senior at Sporty University, and just days from her graduation when we met. Ayesha was an international student from an African country who completed high school and part of middle school in the US, but in a different region of the country. Her father, who was a staunch critic of people of size, lived in her home country but influenced her life from afar in many ways. At the time of our interview it had been three years since Ayesha had seen her parents and her anxiety about her father’s reaction to her larger size was palpable, as he was coming to see her for graduation.

Unlike the other participants, Ayesha had not been a person of size for a long time. An injury that she incurred about two years prior to her participation in the study left her immobile for a period of time. As she had previously been a runner, this change
impacted her weight substantially and once she regained mobility other medical factors contributed to additional weight gain. Ayesha’s perspective and sharing with me was often from a comparative lens — about how things were different within the campus climate, since she began experiencing it as a person of size.

Valencia

Valencia was a sophomore studying a STEM discipline. She lived on campus and was recently offered on-campus employment for the upcoming academic year. Valencia grew up as an only child with her mother in the southeastern part of the country. Valencia’s father passed away when she was younger and her relationship with her mother was very important to her. Valencia had always been a strong and self-motivated student and attended an online public high school. Valencia described her online schooling as intense, and she added a number of extracurricular activities on top of her academic pursuits.

In a face-to-face learning environment for the first time in years, Valencia was very active on campus and held generally very positive feelings about the university. She was involved with a club sport, a multicultural student organization, a variety of dance and fitness classes on campus, and otherwise enjoyed trying out various activities that the university had to offer. As an African American women in STEM, she recognized that she stood out, and generally did not mind the spotlight. Her weight, and her lack of experience with the types of recreational opportunities in the region surrounding Sporty University, occasionally led her to question how well she fit in among her peers, but her outgoing personality and optimistic attitude helped her overcome social challenges.
Jamie

Jamie was a senior at Sporty University, who planned to continue with a graduate program at Sporty University after completing her bachelor’s degree. She grew up near campus but chose to live on campus so that she could experience all aspects of the university. As a social science major, Jamie frequently noticed how people behaved and interacted within the environment. She was very aware of how her own perceptions and feelings influenced her behavior and was knowledgeable about the psychological underpinnings of stereotypes and bias. Jamie was appreciative of the university’s work to create a more inclusive climate, as issues related to equity and inclusion were very important to her.

Jamie was average weight until she was a teenager, when her sister developed a very serious eating disorder that required long-term intensive treatment. The pressure that Jamie then felt in her family, and the messages that she received around food, were difficult for her to manage and contributed to a lot of weight gain when she was in high school. Jamie recognizes that her perspective on her own body and her observations of the campus climate are likely heavily influenced by her experience with her sister’s disease.

The Hidden Climate

There is a single word that continuously surfaced as a description of the climate on the campus for students of size: hidden. Size is a hidden construct within a community that has otherwise taken significant strides to be an inclusive and celebratory place for diverse individuals. Hidden is also an ideal state for many students of size within the community. That is, participants sought to stay clear of the public view on campus and
generally preferred to be hidden. The hiding of size- and students of size- is further elucidated with an understanding of some of the key dynamics at play and a central sentiment of judgment that exists within the climate. And, the impact of the hidden — yet judgment-laden — climate on students of size within the community contributes to behaviors and actions taken by and towards students. These actions are both a result of the climate and simultaneously contributing to the climate, as will be explained in detail below.

Sporty University is an institution where athleticism, beauty, and wealth are entwined and represent the dominant ideal. A large body size is incompatible with this ideal. As I learned from the participants, fitness and wellness are ingrained cultural values at Sporty University and the concept of inclusive excellence is ubiquitously known as an espoused priority of the university. Yet, the participants felt anything but included on campus. While students of size do not regularly experience overt discrimination, microaggressions are so common that they are challenging to discern as anything other than just the way things are at the university. Students of size face a nearly constant fear of being judged on campus, as their body size is seen as a signal to their peers that they are lazy — the antithesis of the sporty and active dominant culture.

This judgment, and the very fear of judgment even in the absence of active scrutiny by others, drives students of size to the sidelines. They often opt out of university experiences in order to avoid being visible and calling attention to themselves. Or, when they do participate, they are often uncomfortably in the background, an attempt
to avoid the critical eyes of their peers. For students who hold other minoritized identities, in particular racial identities, the judgment and associated discomfort is even more pronounced.

Students of size navigate the campus with incredible intentionality, carefully maneuvering through spaces to avoid being seen. The climate is therefore also one of lonely isolation. The judgment that they experience, and the fear of such judgment, also sparks an internal monologue of hyper-awareness of their actions and how their actions might confirm negative stereotypes associated with being a person of size. This monologue distracts students from focusing their mental energy on other topics, such as their studies.

In addition to the thoughts and fears of judgment, there are palpable examples within the university’s built environment and communication channels that serve to reinforce that students of size do not fit in at Sporty University. These examples, which are detailed below, are both symbolic and actual barriers to comfort within the university setting.

The remainder of this chapter provides a rich description of this climate and addresses the secondary research questions regarding how size related bias and stigma manifests within the climate, the inclusion of students of size within the environment, and the messages that students receive within the university community to this end. The description is organized by key themes within the data and an explanation of the relationships between the themes. True to the framing of this study as a descriptive study that honors the voices of the participants as central to the work itself, participants’ words will be used as much as possible to convey the climate and answer the research questions.
Sporty

As the pseudonym of the institution of this case implies, Sporty University is a place where athleticism and fitness are very apparent features of both the culture and the climate. Whether through the intercollegiate athletics program, the active club and intramural offerings, the prominent campus recreation center, or through casual social fitness related gatherings, athletic activity and fitness are central to the university atmosphere. Each of the ten participants in the study spoke about this feature of the climate as they explained the university to me during our initial meeting. Indeed, sharing this with me was often the very first element that participants honed in on in helping me understand Sporty University and the student body. As they described the dominant body type of the student body (thin or skinny) they also described the associated sport-related activities that were linked to this body type, in addition to other attributes or characteristics that were representative of the university and student body. Oliva explained the other students at Sporty University to me in this way, “…They are also thin. That’s just how I see a lot of people here is that they're thin and you know they work out a lot — they are active and they [are] going skiing and hiking and all of that.” Dee described this too as she explained what she sees on campus on a regular basis.

On this campus, you see people running around all the time. You can tell when someone's walking to the gym. They have their water bottle in their hand, they've got their tennis shoes on, they got their exercise pants on. They're heading to the gym, you can tell.

Ayesha reiterated the dominance of activity and fitness on the campus, sharing that it is obviously the case. Her use of the word obviously, and her accompanying tone in the interview about this, signaled to me that activity is such a dominant feature of the climate that it is almost not necessary to describe as it is so embedded in the Sporty
University culture. She offered the following description of other Sporty University students.

…the typical [Sporty University] student obviously is very slim, very fit. I feel like most of the time [they are] in some sort of workout gear with long hair. Most of the time [they] are gonna be White. . . Okay so club involvement, gym activities, going to the mountains, skiing.

The link between the dominant body type and the associated activities that the participants described is not insignificant. As will be explained below, this is related to the ways in which students of size are excluded and isolated from their peers for formal and informal activities. Additionally, Ayesha’s mention of race (White) in her explanation of the fit, slim dominant body type is also related to the experiences that she, and other participants of color, have as dually minoritized members of the Sporty University student body. Dee, also a student of color, also placed race at the forefront of her description of the student body as she responded to my question about the typical Sporty University student.

White. They're white. They're rich. They're in a sorority, they're in a fraternity . . . They're white and rich. I feel like they're always pretty fit. Skinny. Or the guys are pretty fit and muscular, and the girls are skinny. I feel like they're all pretty. They're all blonde. And they all seem to know each other.

Dee’s mention of the other students all knowing one another was also a relevant comment that foreshadowed what she shared with me later about her experience feeling like an outsider on campus because of both her race and her size. Dee struggled to make friends at Sporty University and many of the friends that she had made, fellow students of color, left the university because of the climate. Dee did not match any of the dominant identities that she saw at Sporty University and this contributed to her feeling hyper-aware and uncomfortable on campus. In turn, she spent most of her time outside of class
in the relative comfort of her own apartment on campus so that she did not spend time in the environment where everyone else seems to look alike and know one another.

Katie, who was White, also identified the dominance of White students on campus as she initially described her experience as a student of size to me. She, too, linked size with the fitness and sport activity and coined the term *sporty* as the most appropriate word to describe the fit, athletic, and active lifestyle that permeates the student body.

Definitely White, fair skinned…hiking every weekend…It is a huge thing…Like a weird way of how I look at it is like through Tinder. I was really on that in the past year and it’s just like if I were to do a Tinder profile for [Sporty University] it would be, ‘Oh yeah, I like to go hiking every weekend and you know, let me know if you want me to go to a party. Here’s this nature picture and I’m also very studious.’ Whether or not it is that their fashion or what they are wearing, they are always wearing like gym clothes — that’s a big thing here — always out for a run or just came back from the gym, about to head to it after class . . . I would say sporty is a great way to describe it.

Katie’s use of an example based on a Tinder profile, a popular mobile application that is designed to facilitate quick connections between people looking to date, have sex, or otherwise connect, was one of my favorite descriptors of Sporty University. Tinder is inherently a surface and superficial way to broach relationships, as it calls for users to make quick judgments of other users based on a brief profile that is primarily comprised of photographs (Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). Unlike some other dating technologies, Tinder makes no pretense of a deeper mechanism to connect individuals based on personality, relationship style, or similar. Rather, it encourages quick judgment about possible compatibility based almost exclusively on aesthetic qualities. Katie’s choice to describe a
hypothetical Tinder profile for Sporty University itself offered further insights about the nature of Sporty University (active, social), and also highlighted the dominance of appearance-based judgments at the university.

Students are not the only ones contributing to the sporty climate at the university. The emphasis on being active and fit is also coming from administrators and even the top official at the university. In our initial interview Ayesha, who worked in an administrative department on campus, shared that, “Here everything is pushed about being active. From the chancellor to every faculty member. Even people who I work with . . . they're all very fit, abnormally good-looking people. From work to school life . . . it's something that's very stressed here.” Indeed, the chancellor of Sporty University has a specific initiative to promote fitness, entitled the Chancellor’s Challenge. Both Rachel and Ayesha shared information about this program with me as a way of illustrating just how important fitness is to the university. The Challenge is a series of fitness-related goals in which the chancellor challenges members of the university community to complete particular fitness activities each month. Rachel had given a lot of thought to this, and the way in which the message was framed.

The Chancellor's Challenge, or whatever it is, stares you in the face when you're in the lady section [of the gym on campus] . . . I didn't do it. I haven't done it. . . . I think it's monthly. It changes out, and it'll say, do 20 lunges, and 30 jumpies . . . Like, it's just a list of exercises.. but, it stares you in the face. The poster is the same. And I read it a lot, I'm like scrutinizing it, and trying to find fault in it. Or trying to find some kind of insensitivity in it, because that can be dangerous. And I think the wording is okay.

Rachel was aware that the chancellor’s engagement in this challenge was significant and set a tone for the university. As she spoke about the Challenge the fervor in her voice was palpable. As a graduate student working on her own research in a field with roots in
sociology, Rachel’s attention to the wording and the impact on the climate was not a surprise to me. She had clearly given this a significant amount of thought, even before she was a participant in this study. She very much recognized the significance of the embedded message about being active, fit, and sporty — and not overweight — coming from the senior leader of the university.

Ayesha shared more with me about the Chancellor’s Challenge and the role of the chancellor in contributing to the climate at Sporty University. She described how her daily observations of her peers on campus were connected to the expectation that the chancellor set for the university community to be fit.

[the chancellor] has the Chancellor's Challenge and a lot of things [they do] on campus to be active … [the Chancellor] was known for always being there [at the gym] at five in the morning … trying to spearhead to make it known like students need to be active, so I'm going to be really active so you guys also be active. [The chancellor] has signs and big posters and stuff that talked about exercising and good weight loss or maximizing your workout and all of that stuff … [the chancellor is] very small … it's definitely the thing of making sure to be fit and have that fitness and have some sort of exercise every single day. That's kind of the stressor on campus. You should be at the gym at some point every day or doing a sport every day or running outside every day. Especially when it's sunny, the amount of sports bras and shirtless men on campus is ridiculous. It's a little much running around and exercising. It's very, very common or all of the greens will be covered with people that … A lot of the girls will be in swimsuits sunbathing or guys playing on Facebook or with frisbees and all of that. It's something that's just constantly there. It's almost like people take it as there's no excuse to why anyone should not be fit … On campus, it's very much like in this state, there's no reason why you should be overweight type of thing.

In her explanation above, Ayesha also referenced the state in which Sporty University is situated. The athletic opportunities in the surrounding area to the campus are plentiful and are points of pride for many people living in the state and region. Although other participants were less explicit about the connection between the sporty climate at Sporty University and the state or region, there was evidence of the influence of the state in
others’ explanations about campus. For example, Valencia told me, “Most people are into fitness and slim. A lot of them have [participated in regional sport]. For example, I had never [participated in the sport] before until I [participated] once my first year here. Into hiking, into the outdoors.” While hiking and [regional sport] are not totally unique to the state where Sporty University is located, the dominance of these types of activities in the region is noteworthy as it provides relevant context and assuredly contributes to the Sporty University climate.

Sporty University has a national collegiate athletics association (NCAA) athletics program. Although this was not commonly cited in the interviews that I conducted, it did come up periodically and is also a factor in the sporty climate at the university. Serena previously worked for the university’s athletics department and was familiar with the athletics on campus. She shared the following.

Since a lot of students live a healthy lifestyle, they go to a lot of these sporting events and are huge supporters of the athletes. I feel like there's definitely that component of growing up playing the sport to maintain this health image, not just in appearance, but again, status.

Serena’s reference to status is an important one. Although others did not use this term per se, there is a subtext to much of the commentary about the sporty climate on campus. Being fit and thin, and participating in the activities associated with thinness, is essential to being accepted within the campus community. And, on the contrary, not being thin is an exclusionary factor and contributes to lack of status within the social sphere at Sporty University. This will be further explored in the section(s) below on judgment and isolation within the climate.

Sporty is both a descriptive term to describe the climate, and a delineation of status within the university. Those members of the university community who encompass
and demonstrate the sporty ideal are lauded and propelled to the highest status within the university. Individuals who are not sporty, as perceived by their peers, are unable to attain the highest echelon of status within the university. On the contrary, students who fail to demonstrate the sporty ideal are either shunned or ignored altogether. Body size, in this environment, becomes a proxy for one’s sportiness, with students of size othered because they are assumed to not be sporty. In actuality, all but one participant was indeed active and engaged in fitness activities. Yet, because of their body size, students of size are typically precluded from being a part of the Sporty University ideal.

The Small Things Eat at You

As I worked to understand the climate at Sporty University for students of size, I heard a common refrain from the participants about the lack of overt discrimination they experienced. With one possible exception (and even the exception was qualified as perhaps unrelated to body size), none of the participants identified what they might describe as concrete discriminatory treatment or bias tied to their body size. When I queried each participant about possible discrimination that she may have faced at Sporty University, I typically got a response that I would summarize as, “No, but…” That is, each woman was quick to tell me that she had not been discriminated against on the basis of her body size, but then offered examples throughout the interview, or in some cases immediately after telling me no, that illustrated the many hurtful and harmful comments, actions, and environmental cues that she had experienced related to her body size. That these experiences were minimized and not perceived as discriminatory or biased may be connected to the shame and sense of blame that so often is held by people of size about their body types (Farrell, 2011).
Although a full explanation of the psychology of blame and internally held shame is well beyond the scope of this research, the hurtful and biased actions towards students of size at Sporty University is firmly within the scope of the research as these actions contribute to the climate experienced by students each day on campus. Only one participant, Olivia, described what she experienced using the common term *microaggression*. Others were quick to dismiss that they experienced targeted discrimination, but then described the impact that such targeted treatment had on them.

For example, Serena shared the following with me during her first interview.

> There are of course fat jokes that go around, but then again … yeah, I guess one can interpret it if I'm the only one in the room that's a student of size that it is related to me. In those sense, yeah, I'd be indirectly, but never has anyone straight up and like, ‘You're fat. Lose weight. Go and eat these vegetables … What's the term? Quit stuffing your face.’ I've never experienced anything like that here at Sporty University.

Serena’s use of the term *of course* in relation to fat jokes is another signal of the ubiquitous nature of the hidden anti-fat climate. She initially glossed over this as she was sharing with me, almost as though it was not even worthy of reporting on, given how common fat jokes are on campus. She further explained that because no one at the university had directly told her that she is fat and should lose weight, she did not identify that weight-based discrimination or bias was present within the environment. As I will share in subsequent sections in this chapter, Serena, and others, are impacted by the anti-fat climate at Sporty University in significant ways, and the sometimes daily — yet subtle — jabs that they experience accumulate and are harmful. I coded these jabs in the data using Katie’s language of *the small things eat at you*, but they could otherwise be classified as *microaggressions*. None of the examples shared are ones in which the person or group perpetrating the harm are intentionally seeking to harm students of size. On the
contrary, it is safe to assume that in almost all cases the perpetrator is actually unaware of the impact of their speech or action on others. However, as will be discussed in the subsequent chapter, the impact of these types of actions or words was significant for the participants.

Among the most common of the small things that ate at students of size as they went about their daily lives at Sporty University was the experience of being subjected to anti-fat sentiments or statements from their peers. Most often this was in the form of other students, who participants perceived as standard-size/not students of size, audibly lamenting about the woes of having body fat and seeking to commiserate with other standard-size peers. Although none of the examples of this that were shared with me were directed towards the participant, the individual(s) engaging in the anti-fat speech were doing so publicly and without any obvious attempt to shield the participant, or others, from their anti-fat statements. Dee explained the impact of hearing this type of statement:

> It contributes to my personal issues on my body weight on this campus. I've heard other students, women, commenting on their own weight, like, ‘I'm so fat’ and they're this tiny. I'm like, ‘Oh, my gosh. They must think I'm humongous.’ I don't want to judge them, because they're not happy with their own weight or they're dealing with their own issues, but at the same time, what does everyone else think of me, then?

To be clear, in this example, Dee used her hands to provide me with a visual cue that the women saying this are thin (*this tiny*). And, it was also clear from her tone in sharing the example, and context of the example, that their disclosure about being “fat” was both exaggerated and disparaging. That is, these were thin female students who were complaining to one another about a miniscule amount of fat on their body. It was noteworthy that Dee’s mindset immediately upon hearing this was to then conclude that they were critical of her too, given her much larger body size.
Dee’s example was echoed by Serena, who described very similar experiences. Serena explained the experience of standing immediately adjacent to another student (perceived as not a student of size), and hearing, “‘Ah, I look so fat in this.’ Then I'm just standing there and it's like, ‘You're like half my weight, half my size. Then by you saying that, it kind of makes me feel bad and insecure.’” Both Dee and Serena shared their internal dialogue with me in recounting these examples. While they were both retorting and questioning their peers silently in their head, neither woman responded out loud. Serena went on to tell me a bit more about the impact of these experiences on her. She shared another example in which another student was commenting about another woman’s breast size and qualifying this in a negative way based on her body size (“because she is fat”). Serena explained that while this may not have been an intentionally hurtful statement to Serena (as they were not talking about her body), the impact of hearing this was significant to her. “Even though I don't have an initial reaction to it that would show on my face necessarily, inside, I would still be really insecure about it. It's like, ‘I am a person of size, what are you trying to say?’” Serena and I spoke in more detail about these types of statements. She shared with me that she has even considered confronting the statements and sharing the impact that they have on her with her peers who flippantly make these sorts of comments. However, she has determined that calling attention to the problem would not garner a positive result and so she chooses to say silent. She explained this to me in the following way:

If I were to confront them and say ‘Hey, that hurt’ or something like that, they'd be like ‘Well, no, I wasn't even talking about you. What are you trying to say? You're basically saying that you're fat. I never said that’ type of thing. And it's like that would not work out well. It's one of those things that is up for
interpretation, but also, there's the intent versus impact … Yes, I've run into those a couple times. I don't know if I would classify that necessarily as discrimination or being treated poorly.

It is notable that while the impact of these statements was that Serena felt insecure and bad about her own body after hearing them, she maintained that these experiences were not an example of being treated poorly. She offered that perhaps the interpretation was off and emphasized to me that she did not believe that the intent was to cause harm.

Jamie too had the experience of being around disparaging fat-talk by her standard-size peers. Jamie, a psychology major, had given a lot of thought to how this impacted her and her own sense of her body.

It feels really invalidating because it makes me feel like … a lot of times I'll feel like I don't have a right to feel the way I feel. Or for example, like if someone were to say like they feel like they're overweight, or they perceive themselves as being overweight and they want to lose weight, and I don't perceive them as overweight, it makes me feel really stuck in the sense that I feel like I'm over here actually overweight, but at the same time I don't want to invalidate their feelings.

In a rare instance of body size being discussed in class, Jamie also had a difficult experience when a classmate made numerous assumptions about binge eating disorder.

We were talking about eating disorders. And then we were talking about the difference with anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating disorder, and someone in my class said, ‘Binge eating disorder is not a real disorder. It's just people being lazy. It's just the American way of living, and then people end up saying it's a disorder so they can get away with it.’ … Naturally, if you don't understand something, you'll jump to conclusions.

Jamie was frustrated by her classmate’s assumptions and the assertion about binge eating disorder being a front for laziness was particularly upsetting to her, even though she herself was not diagnosed with binge eating disorder. The negative stereotyping of one group of people afflicted with one disorder, juxtaposed to the empathy expressed to others (anorexia and bulimia) was telling. Jamie and I both speculated that this was likely
because binge eating is often associated with people of size whereas anorexia and bulimia tends to be associated with underweight individuals. This is also in line with the study reviewed in chapter II which found that the public generally perceived underweight individuals who are diagnosed with anorexia or bulimia as victims of their respective diseases, but perceived overweight individuals as having made poor choices (Saguy & Gruys, 2010).

In some cases, even the tone and word choice used to describe others left students of size feeling anxious and marginalized. Olivia shared an example with me in which an acquaintance was talking about another student, who Olivia did not know.

…She was like oh the fat girl she was like doing this, this, and this. And like oh yeah you know the fat one the fat one like she kept like using that as a descriptor, rather than being like oh do you know that girl who has like the brown hair and was wearing this on this day she was just oh like the chubby one the fat one. And it wasn't ever directed at me but it did make me feel very uncomfortable because I was sitting with them and then I had this thought like ‘oh … when I'm not there is she going to be like oh the fat one that was sitting with us’? I felt very uncomfortable because she kept saying all these descriptors of people as just being fat and chubby and all this. And I was really uncomfortable by the fact that she kept using that as a descriptor.

As Olivia recounted that particular example, from weeks or months prior, I could readily see the discomfort and hurt that this had caused. Later in the interview Olivia shared with me that this same student was someone who she might encounter if she chose to spend time with another classmate, who she did enjoy. With this in mind, Olivia had intentionally avoided the classmate that she liked, so that she could minimize the risk of running into the student who seemed to lead with a description of body size when talking about others.

Katie too picked up on how others used the term *fat*, explaining to me that, “No one's really said to my face ever anything, but there are small things, especially around
the term fat where that infliction of how they us it is always negative.” Again, the seemingly innocuous ways in which their peers talked about body size was not lost on the participants. I can attest to the intonation that Katie described through my own experience conducting the interviews and listening closely to the words the participants used. While it is difficult for me, without any formal linguistic training or similar, to describe tone in written form, my best descriptor is that the tone that I often heard, and that Katie was describing, was an accusatory tone.

Of the actions that were described to me that ate at the participants in subtle and not so subtle ways, two examples that came from the health center on campus were the most striking to me. As she was thinking about coming to meet with me for the first time as a participant, Olivia shared that she was running through a number of examples that she wanted to offer me when we met. Of these, an experience that she had at the on-campus health clinic was most striking. She was eager to recount her story with me when we met for the initial interview.

Olivia had come down with what felt like a persistent cold or sinus infection that she determined she could not remedy on her own. Like many people of size, Olivia had a bit of hesitation about visiting medical providers because of the often-patronizing tone that clinicians can project on people of size about their body weight. That said, because her purpose in seeking medical care was so specific to her cold (rather than a general physical in which weight would assuredly be a part of the conversation), Olivia decided to go in to be seen at the campus health clinic. Likewise, she had high hopes for the medical providers at the university (figuring they would be more sensitive than what she had experienced in the community at large). Unfortunately, it did not go well. The
clinician she saw managed to steer the conversation quickly away from her sinus infection and instead lectured her on the benefits of visiting the gym on campus and initiated a conversation about the need for her to lose weight. Olivia explained how this made her feel.

I know who I am. I look in the mirror every day. I can’t believe she would have brought that up when I didn’t even ask for it … if I really felt like I needed help for that I would’ve asked … and I just felt really like ‘oh well, now I have one more thing to deal with when I’m already sick and now I am basically being fat shamed in the health center.’ It was frustrating … I don’t think she realized that was potentially damaging to my self-esteem and how I was feeling.

The impact of this experience on Olivia extended beyond her one visit to the health center and even beyond the health center itself. As a result of this one experience, Olivia will not only avoid the campus health clinic in the future, but she is also leery of taking advantage of other campus resources where she might encounter similar fat-shaming. Specifically, she was unsure if she would be comfortable at the counseling center on campus.

…cause a little bit of apprehension going to the counseling service because I don’t know if it will be acceptable for me to bring that up — like talk about my weight issues and how that’s effected my self esteem … I don’t know. Like what am I really going to get myself into? So I’ve kind of been holding back from that and not really wanting to delve into that. Because I’m afraid that I’m just going to get shamed again for my issues…

It is important to emphasize that this stemmed from a single interaction from the provider who Olivia noted probably did not intend to cause any harm. These types of regular and unintentionally harmful interactions within the campus environment are indicative of the climate for students of size.
Olivia’s interaction at the health center on campus was not totally unique to her. Valencia also experienced something similar in the on-campus health clinic. She explained,

I went to the clinic one time for a different reason. And they told me, ‘Hey, just make sure you're watching your weight. We noticed that you increased your weight since you've been here.’ And so sometimes those scary moments also affect my psyche. I'm like, ‘Oh, no, I don't want to be unhealthy, let alone do I not want to look good.’ … So when she said that, it just kind of was scary and upsetting at the same time.

Although Valencia did not elaborate in as much detail about the impact of this experience on her as Olivia did, her account serves as another example of the way in which well-intending professionals can cause harm. Like Olivia, Valencia was quick to offer that she figured the person with whom she interacted was just doing their job and trying to be helpful. I found it interesting that Valencia actually told me about this one experience twice — initially in our first interview and then again in our second interview — as she was not certain if she had already shared it with me or not. This duplicative sharing was a signal to me that she may have thought that this was such an important interaction that she wanted to be sure to bring it to my attention.

Other examples of the small things within the campus climate eating at students of size can be found throughout the campus, even in the absence of a live interaction to perpetuate a microaggression. The above-mentioned Chancellor’s Challenge is an example of the messages in the environment that, while not overtly anti-fat, carry with them a clear message that students of size are not as accepted, or valued as their standard or smaller sized peers. Valencia shared another poignant example with me that she had observed. There was a longstanding tradition at Sporty University in which a charitable beauty pageant is held. Valencia was fairly sure that the event was put on by one or more
of the fraternities on campus but explained to me that it has wide appeal, and many participate and attend who are not affiliated with the fraternities. The event, as described to me, was a social and cultural mainstay at Sporty University. Valencia shared that because of her participation in the current research study she had been more observant about happenings and features on campus that may affect students of size.

We had a pageant - a beauty contest through photos. And I was thinking about that today. I never think about it otherwise. We had so many beautiful women of so many different races that were pictured on that. But none of them were overweight, for example. And so I just think sometimes, those type of things, like … What is the word I'm looking for? Like it's not deliberate. It's like accidentally affects the way you think. Yeah, it's like not with that purpose.

Again, note that she emphasized that the exclusion of diverse body sizes was not an intentional effort, but the fact that larger body sizes were not included in an event that was explicitly set up to celebrate beauty is telling. Valencia explained the link between size and attractiveness to me as, “In college, you want to be viewed as attractive and as someone that is fun, outgoing … sometimes overweight can take away from that … You don’t see overweight people being advertised as very attractive.”

Rachel shared another example of a “small thing” that bothered her, but which was not actively perpetuated by another person: the bathroom stalls in the public restrooms on campus. To illustrate her concern to me, Rachel shared a picture of herself trying to maneuver into the stall (Figure 2).
Rachel explained to me that because of her body size, she could not fit into the standard restroom stalls while wearing her backpack. While she could remove her backpack, needing to do so felt “weird.” When I asked her about why she had chosen to share this particular image with me, Rachel offered the following, “it was things where I realized I had to contort myself to do things, or adjust myself to do things that maybe other people wouldn’t have to do … just focusing on how easy or difficult something was.” While she acknowledged the existence of the larger “handicapped” stalls that conceivably she could have used, she was quick to share that she was not comfortable using those either. She explained that, “I’m not a handicapped person” and also shared that she had an experience as a child in which she was yelled at by a woman in a public restroom for using a larger stall.

The climate for students of size is peppered with many examples of these small and not so small messages that a larger body size is not valued, is abnormal, or otherwise
problematic at Sporty University. Based on the examples that were shared with me, and the ways in which these examples were so often minimized, I suspect that there were countless other instances of such occurrences. However, students of size at Sporty University were so accustomed to experiencing these types of interactions that they may not have been able to readily identify them to share with me during our interviews.

**Thoughts and Fears of Judgment**

At the core of the climate at Sporty University for students of size was a pervasive fear of being critically judged as a result of one’s body size. This fear, and thoughts related to the fear, permeated the climate and manifested throughout students’ experiences on campus. As Dee explained, “Everywhere I go I think maybe someone's thinking something about … my body size, the way I'm dressed or anything like that. Everywhere I go I'm conscious of what people are saying about me or what they think of me.” Judgment, whether actual or perceived, was a powerful force that impacted students’ comfort on campus, their behavior, and their associated experiences at the university. All participants, in unique ways, spoke with me about this fear of being judged because of their body size. They each offered poignant examples of how judgment — or the possibility of judgment — detracted from their university experience. Indeed, as I coded the data across all participants *thoughts and fears of judgment* was the most commonly occurring code that I assigned in the data.

As I engaged further in the data analysis I began to contemplate the difference between judgment that participants had experienced directly and the fear of possibly being judged (even if said judgment had not actually occurred). Were these distinctive constructs? After reviewing the data countless times with this question in mind, I arrived
at the conclusion that such a distinction was not necessary nor useful, as the participants did not differentiate. While some of them had wondered about this very same thing, most participants did not distinguish or were unable to untangle their own fear of judgment from actual experiences in which they had been judged. Rachel explained this to me as she was talking about feeling excluded and disconnected from the rest of her cohort. She told me, “I just feel like I don’t connect with people…and I’m not sure if that's lack of opportunity or if that's me hiding in my house.” When I asked her why that might be the case she responded that, “In my head it is always my size … I dunno. Just self-criticism probably. So whether they are judging or I’m afraid they are going to judge then I hold back.” In essence, regardless of whether they were actually judging her, or if she was simply fearful of this occurring, it was a barrier for her in connecting with her peers. Rachel had a similar sense about how she experienced the campus fitness center, which she frequently visited. “I feel like people look at me like, ‘why are you here?’ But again, that’s maybe just my own head- perceiving things in ways that people don’t mean them.” I found similar examples with other participants. Jamie shared with me through an image that she took depicting a street corner in the residential area that surrounds the Sporty University campus (Figure 3).
Figure 3. Jamie's Picture of an Off-Campus Street.

Jamie explained to me that she needed to leave the campus itself when she wanted to relax and get exercise. She liked to walk and explained her choice of location for her walks as follows:

It’s more of a safe space for me when I’m off campus … I don’t feel comfortable getting my physical activity at the gym. And, I feel … and it’s probably just me … I know they’re probably not looking at me but it’s my perception that maybe people will look at me and judge me, and so I prefer to go on walks far off campus just because that’s somewhere that I feel more safe and more comfortable.

It was common for participants to share an example with me and then qualify the judgment as in their head, as Jamie did (probably just me), or otherwise somehow not real.

Katie shared an example with me that illustrated why she feels uncomfortable on campus because of the fear of being judged due to her body size. She began her story by stating, “Even though I know that there’s not that spotlight, it is still there like people are going to be looking and I feel so out of place.” Regardless of whether others are realistically judging — or even observing — them, the ways in which the participants
thought about how others might perceive them was striking. Despite attempts to rationalize or reassure themselves that others may not actually be concerned with them or their body size, the thoughts about the possibility of such judgment clearly contributed to their experience within the campus climate. Jamie offered an example about how she felt in the dining hall that addressed this.

In the dining hall, especially … Sometimes I feel like people are judging what I'll put on my plate even though, logically speaking, I feel like they probably don't care. But then inside my head, I'm thinking, oh, people are looking. People are judging me. And then I think to myself, well, they don't judge people who are not overweight. They'll judge me because of who I am.

With these examples, and others like them, in mind, I ultimately did not separate out incidents of actual judgment experienced by participants and fears and thoughts about the possibility of being judged as I analyzed the data.

Thoughts and fears of judgment were particularly pronounced in two locations on campus: the dining hall (and other campus food venues) and the fitness center (gym). Given the primary activities happening in these locations — eating and working out — both socially connected to body size, this was not surprising. As I learned about the campus climate through the voices of the participants, I also learned more about these locations, and the judgment associated with each, through the photographs that the participants took to further illuminate the climate. Of the 24 photos that comprised the photo-elicitation data set for the study, seven of the images were either taken inside a campus dining hall or the fitness center, or were representative of eating or working out. Through the conversations with the participants about the images that they selected, I gained an even deeper understanding of why these spaces feel like particularly judgmental zones on the Sporty University campus.
Sporty University had a spacious and bright fitness center. The Center was conveniently located in a central area of campus. Students at Sporty University have access to this facility included with their tuition and fees (so that students do not have to pay to use the service at the time of access). The facility had generous hours and many amenities. Yet, it is far from a welcoming or comfortable place for Sporty University’s students of size. Ayesha, who was a frequent patron of the facility, explained this to me.

When a big person walks in to the gym, people do look at you and you get many glances and many stares and all of that. Whereas if you're kind of a person who's working out and you're thin, nobody pays you any mind … It doesn't feel very comfortable for a lot of people who are of size. It's all the skinniest of skinnies are always there. A lot of girls will look at you or you'll hear someone make a comment as they pass by or whatever and people comment.

Of the ten participants in this study, all but one chose to share about her experience in the student fitness center with me. Without exception, their fitness center experiences were similar to what Ayesha described above — particularly uncomfortable and judgmental for students of size.

Olivia took a photograph of a treadmill in the fitness center and shared her insights about the fitness center with me (Figure 4).
Figure 4. Olivia's Treadmill.

She explained that as a person of size, working out is always accompanied by this fear of being judged for conceivably taking action to lose weight. Olivia shared, “… you always hear stories of people saying things to people of size on aerobic machines like, ‘Ew, they're so fat’ — even though they're in the gym actively trying to stay healthy and fit, that's just so hypocritical and weird.” She went on to explain that, “it's really upsetting. I've never personally actually been shamed, but in the back of my head, I'm thinking, ‘There's people behind me talking.’” In this case, it was clear that the fear of judgment was difficult for her — and not an incident that has been directed at her per se. Yet, despite this, Olivia maintained her own commitment to continue to use the facility. She, like several other participants, had chosen to push past the discomfort of working out in the facility as a person of size.

The elliptical machine is right in front of the stairs that leads to the room. Everyone who comes up directly sees you. It's a little like, ‘Oh my gosh. They're watching me work out.’ It's uncomfortable, but, at the same time, you're like, ‘I got to do this because I got to maintain my health and all of that.’
Dee also used the campus gym, but her use of the facility was contingent upon the crowd level at the time that she wanted to work out. She, too, was fearful of being judged for working out as a person of size. With this in mind, she described it as a “good experience when there's not a lot of people to look at me. [laughs] If it's packed I'll like go in, turn right back around and leave. But if it's like pretty empty then I'll stay.”

Like Dee and Olivia, Serena had also given a lot of thought to the gym on campus and her use of it, as a person of size, and the associated judgment that she may experience.

At the beginning [of her time at Sporty University], actually, I would avoid it and then be like [to her friends/classmates]. ‘Oh no, you go to the gym yourself. I don't want to go because I don't want to be that one fat person being made fun of or possibly being made fun of on the treadmill and trying to live a healthier lifestyle type thing.’ I would shy away from it at the beginning, but then when my friends said that they were going to go, I felt like a social obligation. It's like, ‘Oh, I'll go with you too.’ Then that's when I brought a different perspective, where it's like, ‘If I go to the gym with them even though people would be making fun of me, it shows an effort that I'm trying to live a healthier lifestyle.’

Serena shifted her thinking about use of the gym during her time as a Sporty University student, but the thoughts of how she may be judged by others for using the gym were still salient for her.

Bianca and Maria had both also used the on-campus gym, but their discomfort with it, and their fear of judgment in this particular space, led them each to consider and in Maria’s case to act, to avoid the campus fitness center altogether. Bianca explained that “I don't want to cave in to that fear of being around other people while I work out, but a little privacy would be really nice. I spend a lot of time judging other people while I'm there.” She was observant and judging others and so was acutely aware that she too was likely being judged. She therefore considered forgoing the campus gym (for which
she had already paid to use via her university fees), and instead had considered finding an off-campus alternative. Maria had a similar sense of the on-campus gym and had actually taken the step of finding (and paying for) an off-campus gym to escape the judgment that she felt in the on-campus facility.

I've kind of gotten to the point, where I pay for my … even though I pay for the gym here, I'd rather go and get another gym membership just so I don't have to [go to the university's on-campus gym] … You would think they're focusing on their fitness and doing what they need to do, but instead, everyone's people watching … It's all competition there. When you see groups of people, it's because they're competing to see who's the better, when I just want to go in and jog for like 15 minutes, work out a little bit and then go back and do my thing. But the whole time you can't really do everything because you're looking over your shoulder to see who's there watching you.

Maria’s decision to seek out and purchase a separate gym membership in order to avoid the judgment that she felt in the on-campus facility is particularly telling when considering the financial strain that she experienced in order to attend Sporty University. Although she did not share the cost associated with her off-campus/unaffiliated gym membership with me, it is safe to assume that there is a cost associated with this and that this is not an insignificant amount for Maria.

The other space in which the thoughts and fears of judgment were particularly pronounced was in the dining halls. Olivia explained to me that, “Obviously, for a person of size, eating can be a very stressful thing because you don't like to appear like you're taking too much or too little of one certain thing. Yeah, choosing meal options without being judged is stressful.” Olivia took a picture of the dining hall and we discussed her experiences in the space at length. The image (Figure 5), showed a plate of food, including a salad, and empty seats in the background. Olivia was incredibly thoughtful about how she framed this image. The picture represented that she often eats alone in the
dining hall. Olivia would prefer to eat in her residence hall room, which she oftentimes chooses to do, but sometimes ventures to the dining hall by herself. In these circumstances she chooses her table very carefully, opting for a section of the large space that is somewhat partitioned from the main area, giving a sense of relative privacy. She described the stress of eating in the dining hall as a person of size to me.

…but eating alone, at least, for me, it's a big stressor. It's eating alone because I feel like you're more noticeable when you're alone versus when you're in a group. If you're more noticeable while you're eating, it's like double stressors on top of each other. You're just like, ‘I'm not really hungry anymore’ because I'm so stressed about eating, and people watching me eating, and things like that.

Figure 5. Olivia's Dining Hall.
Eating, in and of itself, can be a stressful experience for a person of size, but to have to manage this stress while also worrying about other people noticing you eating, and what you are eating, and potentially judging you for it, adds to the difficulty of the situation. Olivia also discussed the pros and cons of eating alone versus with friends or acquaintances.

Even though I'm super stressed out about what everyone else is thinking, I don't have to worry about what my friends directly are thinking about me. It's still stressful, but less so because I don't have a group of people following me around watching what I pick out.

In short, she determined that eating alone, although stressful as well, was preferable to eating with others. It was readily apparent from talking with Olivia that these decisions about with whom to eat, and what to eat, were significant ones for her. She carefully contemplated this for some time and was calculated in her approach to eating in the dining hall because of what she thinks others think of her when they observe her eating.

Although Katie did not live on campus, and therefore did not use the campus dining halls, eating on campus brought about particular fears about judgment for her. In our initial interview Katie talked with me about the challenges of navigating meals out with her classmates. She too was hyper aware of the ways in which others might judge her food choices. In our second interview Katie continued in this by sharing a picture that she took of her computer sitting next to a beverage and branded paper bag from a donut shop (Figure 6). The picture was taken in her workspace on campus.

… I needed to take a picture because I am very conscious about what brand I bring to school. If it's [another coffee shop/non-donut focused], I will take it to class. I don't care. It's whatever. This is the first time I brought [donut shop brand] on campus. I don't know why, but I just think it's … it's so sugary and [non-donut focused coffee shop] is this froofy kind of thing. It's just as bad, but for some reason, [donut shop brand] you have that creamer and I have sugar. It's got that stereotype to it. Like I don't bring that or another one is [taco fast food brand]. I've
gotten breakfast and my coffee from there because it's another place. I like variety in my meals that I eat in the car. I would not bring [taco fast food brand] … I wouldn't bring certain brands on campus.

Figure 6. Katie's Donut Shop Food on Campus.

Katie’s level of attention to the brands that she would — and would not — bring to campus because of the associated stereotypes and related judgment that she worried others would pass about her struck me. The associations tied to particular brands of food and beverages was interesting and not something that I had considered prior to this research. Serena also spoke with me about brands and the perceptions tied to certain products. As she recounted her experiences in the dining hall on campus, Serena honed in on the different beverage choices available at the dining hall and the ways in which she feels singled out for being the only one not drinking water.

… it makes me feel guilty when I go to the drink section and get soda and they're always getting water. That's a thing that I noticed when I came to Sporty University as well is that everyone has a water bottle … People always drink water… It's like that feeling that I'm the one person not getting water. There's a station where it has two sets of dispensers of drinks. There can be two, three people here getting drinks. It's not just me and another person at the same station getting different drinks … and everyone [but me] is drinking water, yes. That's good. Water is a healthy alternative. It has no calories. It's really good for your body … And refilling their water bottles. I don't think I've seen many people even drink apple juice or orange juice … Or even Gatorade, which we have … Aside from all the other Pepsi, Cherry Pepsi, Root Beer, Dr. Pepper and all these other sodas, we have orange juice, I believe cranberry juice, apple juice. We have Lipton unsweetened tea, which people don't get, and Gatorade. All these other
ones. There is definitely an assortment. It's not just soda. It's all these different options, but yet everyone gets the water … Then I'm just like, ‘You know what? I'm just not going to get a drink at all,’ is what I literally tell myself.

In essence, Serena’s fear of being judged in the dining hall for selecting anything but zero-calorie natural water was so great that she would choose to go thirsty over selecting a beverage that she had available to her.

In her follow-up interview with me, Serena shared a photograph (Figure 7) that she took of a particularly expensive brand of reusable water bottle that was the popular type to have at Sporty University. She reported that the bottle cost $50. This symbolic water bottle represented the climate on campus to her as it was a signal of the importance of both indulgent wealth and sporty fitness at Sporty University — neither of which were familiar or comfortable for Serena as a student of size from a low-income background. She also shared another photograph that was a new brand of antioxidant infusion beverage that had only 5 calories. She explained that image to me as, like the reusable water bottle, representative of the healthy and nutritious lifestyle at Sporty University of which she is not a part. Serena purchased one bottle of it to try it. She reported that she did not care for the taste, but that she felt badly about throwing it away and so it sat in her room. For Serena, the section of beverage that one selected to consume was much more about communicating one’s status and alignment with the dominant profile of the Sporty University student than it was about quenching one’s thirst. Not only did Serena not look the part of the Sporty University student, she also did not have the material goods to convey a front of being a part of the culture. For these reasons, Serena felt further judged among and by her peers.
Figure 7. Serena's Image of an Expensive Water Bottle.

Taking up Brain Space

One of the most interesting aspects of the thoughts and fears of judgment experienced by the participants was the mental energy expended on preparing for and responding to the judgment. The fear of judgment, and preparing to be judged, was so pervasive that the participants were thinking about this even in instances during which they were not judged or not apt to be judged. Ayesha described this to me as, “I'm taking up brain space thinking about my image and so that's why things augment in their impact on me.” She was so conditioned to expect to be judged by her peers that she would preemptively think about her image, how others would perceive her, and what she could do to minimize the possible impact of being negatively judged by her peers.

Shortly after she shared her experiences with me about worrying about getting to class on time in order to have her pick of chairs in the classroom, Rachel too reflected on the energy that she was spending thinking about these issues. Rachel astutely juxtaposed this time and energy spent worrying about her seat selection to the time and energy that
she could have spent studying or engaging in similar productive activities. In her words, Rachel explained this to me.

…It would just be nice to be like, ‘gosh, at least I don’t have to worry about where I sit’ or ‘at least I don’t have to worry’ … especially in an academic situation where there are so many other things in [my] brain, like so much that I need to accomplish and so much that I’m striving for, it would be nice to be like ‘oh but, at least I don’t have to think about getting to class early.’

Rachel’s graduate program was a challenging one and so for her the mental energy exerted on this was not insignificant. She continued to ponder this over time and returned for her second interview with additional reflections on how the worry about how others might judge her interfered with her attention to other tasks. She offered the following in a follow up during her second interview,

…it's interesting to think about how much mental energy … what would I be like if I could devote my mental energy that I'm putting towards thinking about things like this, towards school work … what could I accomplish? I don't know.

Given what I learned about Rachel, I share in her wonder about what she could accomplish if she was not shackled by the constant worry of how others might judge her because of her body size. She was a smart and insightful woman. While she certainly was offering much to her studies, she was also clearly hampered by her worry about her body weight and the ways in which others might and were judging her.

Katie was another participant who identified that her worry about being judged interfered with her ability to be fully engaged in her academic program. Katie was particularly anxious about judgment about her choice of attire, as she was cognizant that someone with her body type was generally expected to be hidden by baggy clothing (which was indeed her outfit of choice). Yet, Katie enjoyed fashion and she wanted to be
comfortable too. Reflecting on how her experience at Sporty University might have been different if she was a thinner student, Katie shared the following,

…If I was a thinner student just not worrying about that I could focus on so much more stuff. Like, oh, I have to go to the library to drop off these books, uh, but say I’m wearing shorts that day, won’t do it — so like that little thing in the back of your mind just effects all the actions that you do, and I feel like it cuts off so many doors that I can do or go through.

This topic of wearing shorts resurfaced during her second interview too, which was on a particularly hot day in May. Katie was not wearing shorts that day, though I noticed that the vast majority of the students that I saw on campus that day were wearing shorts or other similarly sparse attire to combat the heat. Indeed, Katie made a point of telling me that she very rarely wore shorts on campus (though they were a regular part of her wardrobe when she spent time off campus). Katie recounted an example about one of the only times that she had dared to wear shorts to campus. She had justified wearing shorts that day because she only had to be on campus for one hour to hear a particular guest lecturer speak.

It was an after-school thing, so people aren't on campus at that time. I was like I'm going to try … [to wear shorts]. I could have had my full attention on the lecture, but it was like how do I sit? How do I move? Constant pulling them down. . . Even if it was the slightest little thing that caught my attention, I wasn't fully there. I was there, most of my attention was there. It wasn't all of my attention was on this, but it still caught my attention quite a bit.

Here the shorts themselves caused the distraction, but her internal dialogue about what others might think about her, in shorts, caused her mind to wander away from the lecture. Her brain space was monopolized by the concern about the shorts and not able to focus on the academic task at hand. It is worth noting that Katie was clear to me that she was fully comfortable wearing shorts off campus; however, within the Sporty University climate, those very same shorts caused such internal distraction for her. This difference in
how she attended to, or did not need to worry about, the shorts in the two different settings (on and off campus) really struck me as it was a clear indication of the unique nature of the specific Sporty University climate and the ways in which this climate impacted students of size.

**Intersection of Identities**

The judgment experienced by students of size was not experienced across all participants in the same manner. Naturally individual students experienced the climate in unique ways based on their unique lived experiences. The various social identities held by participants intersected with their experience as a student of size in important ways and shaped how they experienced the campus climate. While gender assuredly was one aspect of identity that interacted with size, this was not something that the participants articulated as such. Perhaps it was because size is such a gendered construct it was almost impossible to break apart gender from size. Or, it may have been the case that because all participants identified as female this was not a factor about which I had data that would naturally lead me to highlight gendered experiences. Regardless, while I am operating with the assumption that gender absolutely impacted participants’ experience as students of size at Sporty University, I did not ascertain much data that explicitly addressed this. I did however collect data from participants about the intersection of race and socio-economic class that was compelling.

Maria, a student of color who came from a low-income family and struggled to make ends meet while enrolled in school offered perspective on how body size fit into the social structure of the university, as related to wealth and economic status.

For the students of size, you're kind of walking around at the bottom of everything, because at Sporty University it's really about where you are in life as
far as money, entitlement, all that stuff. As a student of size, you might have the most money in the world, but nobody wants to be talking to the chubby girl when they could be talking to the skinny girl. That's just how it is. I don't [know] why. It's just Sporty University … You can look at it however hierarchy you would want to look at it, but it's still the people of size are on the bottom.

For Maria, though size, wealth, race, and other factors all contributed to how students were perceived by their peers, body size was the most significant culprit in denigrating a student’s status on campus. A similar sentiment was expressed by other participants who also acknowledged that while honing in on the precise reasons that someone did not fit in at Sporty University was challenging, being a person of size was a sure thing to ruin a shot at attaining a positive status at Sporty University.

Jamie, a White participant, affirmed this through her discussion of a photograph that she had taken for the study. The photograph was of a bulletin board in one of the residence halls that was designed to highlight the diversity of the university. While the board’s title is simply [Sporty University’s] Diversity it showcases only racial/ethnic diversity through a chart that demonstrates the proportion of students within the student body. Jamie offered this photograph to me as an example of how even though she was a White woman, and held a dominant identity in that regard, she felt left out as a student of size, an aspect of her identity that’s incredibly salient for her and her experience at the university, but a facet of diversity that is not acknowledged. She explained this to me.

…The reason that I took the photo is because it also makes me realize that as important as this is, there's not an equal representation for all different types of diversity, which of course might be impossible because diversity comes in so many different areas, but in terms of physical diversity that people can see, it's something that's not represented … it just makes me think that even as somebody who's White and seen as a majority, not a minority, on campus there are aspects of my life where I still feel like I'm either left out or not represented on campus.
Just as Serena linked wealth and size as she described the campus climate through her depiction of the expensive water bottle, others saw the linkages of these concepts.

Katie offered the following explanation of the connection between her body size and her economic status.

Yeah, oh man … There is that stigma that I grew up with. The idea that poor people don't eat healthy. So that's why you're this way. That's something that I think about a lot. If I maybe had more money that I could make better choices or my life would be more organized or better if I had that financial stability. I think that's maybe one of the biggest intersection[s], especially going out. You could eat at these fancy places that might have healthier options.

Katie touched on the different ways that money can promote purchases that are perceived as healthier options, whether food or experiences. As a student of size who also identified as low-income, Katie was unable to participate in some of the shared experiences such as eating at more expensive restaurants. She also felt further distanced from her peers because of these two variables, size and wealth, at Sporty University.

Serena described a similar sentiment when reflecting on the differences between her and her former roommate, who was both smaller and wealthier than she. She considered how this impacted her now at Sporty University, but also how her upbringing factored into her food decisions.

My roommate last year, she would eat granola bars and oatmeal and have a lot of vegetables as snacks. Me growing up, I ate Fruit Roll-Ups, Gushers, those Cheez-Its, Goldfish, Oreos and I guess more of the unhealthier foods. Aside from that, growing up in a low-income environment, I'd buy Ramen noodles versus a lot of people here at Sporty University, they eat organic vegetables and these I guess healthier alternatives. I would look at when I go to the grocery stores and check out these natural, organic foods that people were talking about that they're eating and I'm like, ‘$7 for bananas? What? They're more expensive. I think I'll take the ones that are not organic that I weigh by the pound and are cheaper.’ Definitely I feel like income has been a different change. Coming into college has been a drastic changing environment. I feel like adapting to it has been also a challenge.
Later in the interview, Serena shared with me more about her mother’s struggles to adjust to Serena as a Sporty University student. As Serena spent more time at Sporty University she assimilated to the dominant culture in a number of ways. She shared how dismayed her mother had been when Serena had told her that she had eaten a smoothie for lunch.

I remember calling my mom one day and she was like, ‘Did you eat lunch yet?’ I was like, ‘Yeah.’ She's like, ‘What did you eat?’ I was like, ‘I had a Caesar salad with a peach smoothie.’ She's like, ‘You had what? … You're becoming whitewashed. You didn't eat a meatball marinara sandwich from [sandwich chain store]? You ate a Caesar salad with a peach smoothie. Wait, what? … A smoothie, not a milkshake?’ I'm like, ‘That's what they had. They don't have milkshakes.’ She already gets this feeling and sense of me adapting to the culture here … She makes fun of me for it.

For Serena and her mother, what she eats is closely tied to her cultural upbringing. Serena navigates Sporty University as a student of size, a student from a low-income background, and an Asian-American woman, and these identities are not always or often distinctive from one another. As her mother harps on her for changing to adapt to the climate in which she now lives and studies, she is acutely aware of the differences between her home environment (just a few miles away from the Sporty University campus), and her current environment.

As Serena shared examples with me throughout our time together it was clear that her identities did not operate in isolation from one another. Furthermore, all aspects of her identity were at play and contributing to her sense that she was not the norm at Sporty University. Serena explained to me that she often sensed that people were looking at her on campus because she did not blend in with the other students. She told me,

I do get self-conscious like, ‘Why are they looking at me?’ but then again I am also a person of color. Maybe that’s the other reason. It definitely has instilled some insecurities because the majority [of other students] are of different size.
Regardless of whether it is her size, the color of her skin, or her different socio-economic status, Serena often felt like an outsider at Sporty University.

Ayesha also considered the ways in which her different identities were connection points or isolating factors in her experience at Sporty University. She identified the intersection of body size and race as central to her experience as an outsider, stating, “I'm not just big, but I'm also black.” These two factors seemed to have had an unquantifiable multiplicative effect for Ayesha, as she found herself questioning why she was feeling like an outsider at Sporty University. She was never able to completely determine if it was her body size or her race that was the key factor in her sense of difference from her peers, but regardless of which was primary, she clearly identified that both aspects of her identity were working against the norm at Sporty University. In sharing about her experiences, Maria, a Latina, explained to me how students of color at Sporty University cluster together in solidarity. She shared how the White students always hung out together and that students of color, “even though we’re not all the same, we know what it’s like to be ignored by others.” Maria spent time thinking about and even analyzing her various social interactions at Sporty University. In doing so, she had come to the conclusion that it was her race and her body size that were “most relevant and into play” in the scenarios in which she felt like an outsider.

Dee also found herself wondering if it was her race or her size that contributed to her feeling judged and isolated from her peers at Sporty University. Dee told me that for the most part she thought that the color of her skin was a primary factor in feeling targeted and separated but that it was not always clear to her if her race or her size made her a target for being singled out on campus. She shared a jarring example about a time
that she had been walking down a street on campus just minding her own business when
a white Jeep pulled up next to her. Several White girls in the vehicle (presumably other
Sporty University students, given the location of the incident) had rolled down the
window and shouted something indistinguishable at her and had then thrown a baked
good at her. Dee was not positive about what exactly they had yelled, but she was certain
that it was disparaging and that it had some reference to social media (which did not
make sense to her). Dee explained that she had wondered which aspect of her identity had
led them to target her.

I don't know what it was- if it was 'cause I'm big, if it's 'cause I look like a student
of color, I don't know … they hit me with like a muffin or a cupcake, I don't know
what it was … So I don't know if that was towards like my race, towards my body
size, I don't know.

As she processed this experience with me aloud, she talked about feeling *bothered, so
lonely, and invisible*. It was apparent that these feelings were connected to both salient
aspects of her identity, as neither were validated or honored at Sporty University and both
set her apart from her peers, leading her to feel judged and isolated.

Although Dee did not have many friends at Sporty University, she told me about a
time that one of the few friends she had invited her to participate in a dance that was
being held on campus. Dee immediately declined, knowing that she would have felt
uncomfortable at the event. She explained, “…I don't want to be seen … I don't know if
that was my weight, or if that's part of like just being in an atmosphere of around so many
White people (laughs). I don't know.” Following our initial interview, Dee continued to
mull these considerations related to body size and race in her head. When we returned to
this topic during our second interview, she explained that she had been thinking about
how her experience at Sporty University might be different if one or both of these aspects
of her identity were different, and she also considered her gender intersecting with her size and race. She explained to me,

I think if I was just overweight and I wasn't Native, maybe I would fit in more on this campus, or even if I was overweight but a male and not a White male, I would fit in better here on this campus ... It's mostly a personal thing, but I think both of them together make it even worse, but they both have their ups and downs.

Dee’s reflections here were astute and I believe would apply in similar ways for the other participants who were also both women of size and women of color (though Dee was the only Native American participant). Her thoughtfulness here also signaled the importance of the ways in which her different social identities played off one another in her Sporty University experience. There were points throughout the time that I spent with the participants when it was apparent that my questioning probed topics that the participants had contemplated for some time. This was one of those times with Dee.

Dee’s distaste for Sporty University was palpable and probably the most pronounced of all of the participants in this study. Like many of the participants she was constantly subjected to glaring judgment and feelings of being an outsider. She told me several times that had it not been for her generous scholarship to attend Sporty University, she would have left long ago as the few people she had befriended had done. She was clear that she longed for an environment where she fit in and where she could connect with other students like her and that a more diverse campus, particularly where she could find other students of color, would offer her some solace. Dee had grown up in a diverse community and spent time with her father on a reservation in a nearby state. She had not felt like an outsider until she came to Sporty University — where she was both larger and darker than her peers.
Like Dee, Serena had grown up in a diverse community. She too was struck by the critical judgment that she experienced on the basis of her body size and her race since coming to Sporty University. While she was not immune to judgment in her home community, she felt that she fit in more at home and was therefore buffered from some of the critical eyes that she experienced at Sporty University. Serena also explained that her family’s income level was the norm in her home community but was yet another reason that she did not fit in at Sporty University where thin, wealthy, White students prevailed. Serena, like Dee, experienced feeling like an outsider for the first time when she came to Sporty University.

I grew up where the majority of the population is low-income Hispanic, undocumented families. There were a lot of people who were also persons of size. So not only in terms of income and racial background, but in terms of size when I came to Sporty University, I became a minority … Rich, White, thin, athletic, fit people is how I would describe the majority of the population here at Sporty University.

The various aspects of her identity all came into play together and factored into her experience as a minority at Sporty University.

Valencia’s experience, as both a student of color and student of size, at Sporty University was a bit different from her fellow participants. Valencia had been intentional with her efforts to immerse herself into the Sporty University culture, despite being a visible outsider. When she first started at the university Valencia signed up for a special program that was designed to introduce students who had not had much access to the outdoors to the outdoor recreation opportunities in the vicinity of the Sporty University campus. While the program was not overtly targeting low-income students or students of color, Valencia’s understanding of the program was that it was indeed for students like her — who were not the Sporty University norm.
Because it's like research has been done to show that a lot of people of color or people from different like I guess financial backgrounds don't experience the outdoors in the same way as others. So for example through them [the program] I was able to have my first hiking trip … And even on that trip … I've noticed most of the people that participate are a lot thinner than me.

Valencia continued by speculating that a lot of other students of size who might have also benefitted from the program would have likely shied away from the activities because being a person of size and participating in outdoor recreation activities is oftentimes challenging.

Valencia chose to cite research on size throughout her interviews with me. She had clearly spent time considering many aspects of her body size and had an awareness of medical and social science that informed her perspective. She was thoughtful about how her body size impacted her and she brought historical cultural context to our conversations. She explained how cultural aspects of her upbringing within an African American community impacted her body size.

Being a person of color, there are certain statistics I guess about certain health concerns that are more predominant in my culture — the African American community specifically. Some of it might be continued on from the diets that we had back in the 1800's. A lot of the soul food type of foods that are particular to my culture came about during slavery times when they were given scraps of things and they had to make do, make it taste good based on what was given to them and so they made it work, it's delicious, but it may not be as healthy because of the diet that they were given and the food they had access to and it just kind of transferred over. Now, it's not much of an excuse because we have a whole lot of research about healthy eating, but that is a part of the culture, so that is, I think high blood pressure and certain things are more seen in our community, which can be reversed and slowly but surely will be reversed. It's not just the African American community, but the Latino community, and just other communities in general for different reasons.

Valencia’s mention of blood pressure, above, was not the only mention of a concern related to her health. Valencia was active with a club sport and with fitness classes on campus. Valencia also previously lived in a section of a residence hall on campus that
was focused on wellness. Her involvement in these activities was specifically to ward off possible future health concerns and combat the strain that she believed her body experienced due to her weight. She recognized that her size might have led others to make assumptions that she would not have been interested in such activities. She shared that people “may assume, ‘oh because you’re overweight, maybe you’re not really as into doing X, Y, and Z.’” As an African American woman, she also knew that she was subjected to assumptions and biases because of her race and found herself in the minority on the basis of race too. However, she was intentional in her work to fit into the Sporty University scene. She told me, “I try to fit in wherever I’m placed … I may not be like most of the students here, but I consider myself to be fitting in.” While Valencia reported a much higher degree of comfort within the Sporty University climate, because of her size and her race, she needed to work to develop this comfort and acceptance. Later Valencia told me that she learned to tolerate certain things in order to find acceptance at Sporty University, for example, “certain jokes are always going to be said, either to your face or behind your back …” She developed an acceptance for this in order to fit in with her peers. While Valencia’s experiences were different from her peers the intersection of her identities were clearly relevant in her experience too.

**Isolated and in the Background: Being Unseen**

Due in large part to the experience of fearing and feeling judged and uncomfortable under the critical eyes of their peers, the small things that ate at them on campus, and the ways in which their various social identities intersected with their body size, participants explained that they often moved to be isolated in the background on campus. In some cases, this was a literal move to the back of a group setting in order to
avoid the oppressive spotlight that is cast on them and in other situations it was to move to the relative comforts of their personal spaces to avoid the same. When I coded the data for this study, I initially had two codes: “stay in the background” and “isolation.” As I worked through my analysis further, I realized that these two constructs were really driving at the same thing—avoidance of being seen and therefore avoidance of being judged and subjected to harmful microaggressions. In most cases, though not all, this was accomplished through an intentional action initiated by the participant. In other instances, this was due to exclusion by their peers and not necessarily desired by the participant. My coding initially drew a distinction between being present in a particular space or activity but on the outskirts (in the background) and being absent altogether from spaces or activities with other students (isolation) but this distinction became less relevant the more time that I spent with the data. And, when I considered further the implications of these actions and outcomes (to be discussed in the subsequent chapter), I merged the data from the two initial codes.

The codes evolved into a theme that encompassed the ways in which students of size were both placed into isolation or into the background of a particular activity or place, as well as the participants’ own actions to move to the same spaces. Additionally, the data that contributed to this theme began to address the implications of being in such a space and the impact that it had on participants’ experience at the university. For example, Katie shared that due to her body size, she distanced herself from campus activities. She speculated about how her college experience might be different if she were thinner, sharing that,
I’d be more free and open to doing things. I wouldn't have that voice in the back of my mind watching every move that I take or every little thing I do … I could move around campus much more freely.

Rachel’s experience was similar, explaining to me that, “I don’t engage with people as much as I could, or maybe should. I’m concerned about how they’ll treat me or perceive me. So, like speaking in class — I don’t speak up much.”

Because she was plagued with feeling constantly watched and judged for her body size, Katie, like many of the other participants, chose to disengage from campus activities, and stayed away from campus whenever possible. In addition to being excluded from activities by her peers (discussed below), she was intentional about trying to be in the least visible space (often the back/side of a group setting) when she was involved in university activities, sometimes to the detriment of her learning or her comfort.

The great lengths that Katie went to in order to stay off the radar were illustrated to me through an example about where she parked on campus. Before she started her classes earlier that year, Katie had done her homework on parking options on and near campus. Knowing that she would be financially strapped as a Sporty University student, Katie had purchased a parking pass for an inexpensive lot. The lot, while on campus, was a bit of a walk from the main area where her classes would be held. At the time, Katie recalled that she thought that this had been a wise and financially prudent decision. Once she arrived on campus and began to experience the climate however, Katie became uncomfortable with her parking arrangement. While the physical walk was not a concern to her, she hated the feeling of others watching her as she made her way across campus from the distant parking lot to her classroom building. She felt vulnerable, exposed, and
uncomfortable with the prospect of others looking at her. She much preferred to be in the background where she was less visible. In response to her discomfort, Katie told me how she coped, “so I end up just paying for more parking, that way I can just get out of my car and walk right into my building that I’m comfortable with, and then go to class, and then don’t have to walk back over campus.” For Katie, being hidden in the background (and ideally hidden from other Sporty University students) was so important that she was paying double for parking. The gravity of her discomfort was particularly striking to me when she shared this example and it caused me to recalibrate my expectations and understanding about the ways in which the climate might impact students’ actions.

Photo elicitation proved to be a powerful tool for several participants to share their experiences and feelings with me related to this theme. Four of the five participants who shared photos with me included images that represented both the actions associated with staying in, or the feelings associated with, being in the background and isolated. While I heard a bit about both actions and feelings along these lines during my initial interviews with participants, the value of photo elicitation became readily apparent as I explored this theme through photos with participants in the second interviews. It was then that I was able to engage in much richer conversation through the discussion of their photos.

Jamie shared a lot about her being isolated from her peers with me. She used an image to explain some of her feelings. Her picture showed her electric keyboard in her room in her residence hall on campus (Figure 8). Jamie did not have a roommate and so this was a truly private space for her.
Figure 8. Jamie's Picture of Her Keyboard in Her Room.

She explained how this picture represented the campus climate at Sporty University, “I feel like that's somewhere that's safe for me to be, somewhere I feel really accepted, somewhere where I'm completely free to just express myself … And so, that's why I took the photo of the keyboard.” This was in opposition to how Jamie felt when she was spending time with her peers on campus, where she felt constantly judged and sensitive to criticism. Like Jamie, Katie also felt most comfortable in the confines of her private space. Katie, unlike Jamie, did not live on campus, though she had access to an office space on campus that she rarely used because using the office would mean spending time with or near her peers. Katie used an image (Figure 9) of her futon in her off-campus apartment to explain this to me.
Katie told me,

As much as I want to be a student on campus out there, I just really feel comfortable at home … my comfortable spot … I’d rather just stay there [home]. Once you step on here [campus] you’re this person or you have to be the ideal student ….

For Katie, the pressure to be perceived like the ideal Sporty University student on campus was stressful. Rather than subject herself to this stress she preferred to keep to herself in the comforts of her off campus apartment. “This whole time I've had an office, and yet I still come home and decide to sit on the couch … I feel like less people are watching.”

Dee expressed a similar preference for the comforts of her own space where she could be away from the watchful eyes of other students, versus the relative exposure of the campus. She explained,

I definitely feel more comfortable in my own apartment alone by myself … As soon as I step foot on campus and I see other people … even if they're not looking at me or anything, I'm like, ‘I shouldn't have worn this.’

Maria also spoke to this by comparing how she feels on campus versus off campus settings. She told me,
It's like when you're on campus, you feel like you have to be real quiet. You don't want to be too loud to bring attention upon yourself or anything. But then when you're not on campus, you can be yourself. You can act naturally. You can act how you feel most comfortable.

For Maria, isolating herself meant leaving campus whenever she had the chance. She hated having time between classes when she had little choice but to remain on campus. Rather, she preferred to block her classes so that she could minimize the time that she needed to spend among her peers each day, preferring to retreat to her apartment or drive to her family’s home over an hour away from the campus.

Rachel also offered an image to help further explain how she felt on campus. Her image (Figure 10) depicts her sitting alone outside of an academic building on campus. While Rachel did not share as many details about her feelings of isolation as some of the other participants, perhaps because she lived with her partner off campus and found solace in spending time with him away from Sporty University, she shared similar feelings. Rachel stated, “The main thing I was trying to get at was just isolation, which is mostly how I feel since I've been here. I haven't really developed any friends yet, or anything.”
Isolation also occurred when students of size were excluded from activities with other students or choose to step back and not participate from such activities. Katie explained that she was often excluded from social activities with her peers. At an institution such as Sporty University, where the climate is dominated by athleticism and fitness, these types of activities comprised the majority of the social activities that Katie saw or about which she heard. She told me about a time that she overheard two classmates talking about going for a run after class. Katie asked about the details, implying that she would like to join them. The two women did not shift to include her, and she was hurt. Reflecting on this she explained,

There are certain things where I'm usually excluded. Do you want to go hiking? Do you want to go biking or do this? I'm usually not included in that. I don't know if that is because I don't stay on campus a lot, or if it is how I look.

The assumption that students of size are not interested in active or fitness-related activities or hobbies was particularly troubling for participants, given the prevalence of these activities in the social scene at Sporty University.
Ayesha had similar experiences related to exclusion from activities, particularly those focused on fitness, with her peers. Unlike the other participants, Ayesha started her time at Sporty University as a thin student and gained weight about halfway through her college experience. Because of this, she had a unique comparative perspective to offer. She explained the difference between how she had been treated when thin, compared to how she was treated by her peers as a student of size.

When I was first here, especially when it comes to things like athleticism or whatever, I would always be quickly asked to do stuff and it would be like, ‘Oh, we're doing this marathon. Oh we're doing this. We're doing [regional running event]’… I noticed later on . . . you notice that they wouldn't consider asking people who are larger. Which I've gained a lot of weight, but I can still run the same time that I used to run at my smaller weight but they just assume that you are a couch potato when you're a not … Even if I was, it's still not fair. Ask people to participate in things.

Ayesha’s experience was not exclusive to athletic events and it was not just a matter of others not inviting her to participate (though that was clearly a factor). Additionally, Ayesha shared that her own comfort, or lack thereof, had shifted as she had gained weight. While she was once a self-proclaimed joiner type who loved to try out different types of activities in the realm of the performing arts, she now avoided those experiences. She explained this shift.

I realized [after gaining weight] that I started to back away and shied away from things … I used to automatically be like, ‘Oh, yeah I'll participate,’ but because I'd be getting up in front of a lot of people who could see my whole frame and I wasn't okay with that anymore. It's like my voice hasn't changed. I haven't changed as an individual or character, but somehow because my body size, it changed, I didn't want to participate in singing or fashion shows or stuff that people would ask me to do. I would say no.

Katie did have one experience in which she participated in a fitness related activity with her classmates — a hike. She spoke with me in detail about this experience during our second interview together. Katie also brought a picture of the group’s hike (see Figure
11). In it, Katie is pictured in the back of the group with her hood up, in long pants, with her body as covered as one could reasonably be for this type of activity.

![Figure 11. Katie on Group Hike.](image)

Katie’s account of the group’s hike included tremendous detail about the painstaking decisions that she made that day and that related to how she would be perceived by her fellow student hikers because of her weight; for example, what to wear, what sorts of snacks to bring, and whether or not she should bring a water bottle, and the various assumptions that would likely be drawn by her peers based on her decision to each. The mental effort that Katie put into preparing for this experience was tremendous.

I did feel like part of the group, but I also was still in my whole head. I thought about what outfit I would wear even though we're going to work out. It doesn't really matter. I still paid attention of what I was wearing and I'm in the back of the group ... You see me in the back and that's because I was apart from the group. They all were having conversation, and I was in the back. Just had them lead the way because I don't want the attention of leading the way ... I always take that role, I guess, to follow rather than lead in this situation.
Here, even though Katie chose to stretch her comfort and participate in the activity, it was a stress-laden experience for her and one in which she was still unable to fully engage or enjoy herself. When I asked Katie if this was a reason that she often chose to not participate in such activities, if she was even invited to do so in the first place, she responded emphatically in the affirmative.

Like Katie and Ayesha, Olivia was sensitive to how she was included, or not, from activities that had an athletic or fitness element to them. She was conscious of when she was invited to participate (non-athletic events such as study groups were usually fine), and when she was not. However, she wondered if being excluded from physical activities could be attributed to her own fear of participating in these activities, rather than exclusion by her peers. Olivia explained that she was once invited to go on a hike and acknowledged that the students organizing the hike were making an attempt to be inclusive of different levels of hikers.

They were like, ‘We're going to pick one that's good for the difficulty of everyone.’ I was like, ‘Probably, it's not my difficulty — I'm going to bring everyone down, and be panting, and sweaty and hot.’ They're going to be like, ‘Let's go for another five miles,’ or whatever. Yeah, that fear of not doing it. Definitely not trying that.

Rachel too had been excluded from activities with her peers. Like Olivia, she wondered if the exclusion came from them not wanting to include her or from her choice to step away from opportunities. She wondered about this aloud with me during her second interview.

…but they do things outside of school too that I'm not involved in. Or asked to be involved in. But, I think that I've sort of, I feel partially responsible for that. Because, I feel like I laid the groundwork where I'm not here. I'm not around … There's a lot of self-responsibility about it. And I'm like ‘you dug this hole for yourself, and now that you maybe know them a little bit better and might feel more comfortable being around them than you did in October, you sort of missed
your chance.’ I don't know … whether it's my fault or their fault. Like whether it's me being self-conscious and withdrawing. Or them looking at me and saying, ‘Nope, don't want to.’

The sense of blame that Rachel felt about being excluded from activities mirrored similar feelings that she and others shared about their body weight. The shame and self-blame that can weigh on people of size about their body manifested in these statements. Jamie had a similar perspective to Rachel, wondering where the fault for her exclusion lied.

I noted Jamie’s tone of voice when she shared this example with me. There was sadness in her voice as she explained this predicament to me. It was apparent that Jamie wanted to build genuine connections with her peers, but her fear of not fitting in prevailed and often led her to stay away from social activities, opting instead for her keyboard and her single room. The sadness was palpable in Jamie’s voice and I made a note that it seemed like she was grieving a loss. She further explained what was going on as she grappled with this loss in her own headspace.

On one hand, I feel like, oh, it would be nice to go out with my friends and just have the whole college experience, but on the other hand I think to myself, well, once I got there, I would start to get self-conscious and then I wouldn't be able to participate as much as I normally would. Like if it was a club, I wouldn't feel comfortable dancing. If it were a dinner, I mean, I would eat, but I would feel judged the whole time. I would feel like, oh, what should I take? What should I eat? How much of it should I eat? And it would be something that would be constantly on my mind as opposed to just eating what I enjoy, feel comfortable with, and stopping when I'm full. You know?

The fear of being judged by her peers was such a powerful force for Jamie and many of the other participants. Despite her strong desire to connect with friends, have fun, and
experience the college life of which she had dreamed, the fear of judgment prevailed, and Jamie ended up isolated and alone in her residence hall room or at her parents’ house on most weekend evenings. She had a straightforward explanation of this, “there’s weekends where I’ll go home, and those tend to be the weekends where a lot of my friends are going out and doing things that I don’t feel comfortable doing because of my body size.”

Olivia, whose family home was a close commute from campus, also spent a significant amount of her time at her parent’s house. She further elaborated on her decision to be less engaged with the Sporty University social scene.

…going out and being very active in the student body requires me to overcome some of that apprehensiveness I have about being seen. Like I spend a lot of my time trying to stay very unseen cause I feel that’s connected to my body and how I look. Like, if I’m not seen then no one will notice that I’m a bigger person. That I’m bigger than everyone else…I always sit in a room and I look around and I’m like ‘Oh I’m like the biggest person here.’ So, if I stay hidden then no one’s going to notice that I’m this giant person … At least compared to everybody else.

In order to maintain her comfortable state of being unseen, and therefore away from the critical judgment of others, Olivia needed to sacrifice being active in the student body. Based on what I learned of Olivia, this did indeed seem like a significant sacrifice, given her interests and enthusiasm for a myriad of activities. Yet, because of her body size, she was uncomfortable engaging in these activities, else risk calling attention to herself. Instead, she opted to step away from the risk of the spotlight and be alone.

Valencia’s experience mirrored that of Rachel, Jamie, Katie, Olivia, and Maria. She too felt excluded from activities by her peers, and in other instances chose to self-select out of particular activities. She also wondered aloud about the opportunities of which she was not even made aware because of how people perceived her based on her
body size. “I also think about how often I might not be invited to participate in some of these activities, because they may assume, ‘Oh, because you're overweight, maybe you're not really as into doing X, Y, and Z.’”

While Bianca did not have specific examples of being excluded from activities with her peers, she made some astute observations about students of size since deciding to be a participant in the study. She had begun to pay attention to where she saw students of size around Sporty University. Not surprisingly, she had not seen many examples at the visible campus activities.

I think that they [other people of size] all are in a closet somewhere … Either people of size, in your term, don't come here because they don't feel comfortable here, or they do and they really just aren't involved in anything on campus … Actually, since your email, I've started trying to observe who is even around [and] available that has any variation in body type. It's very few.

Bianca’s observation of the absence of people of size may indeed be because students of size step away from being seen on campus or in related social settings.

An important experience in which several participants were intentional about either being in the background or avoiding altogether was class. I learned about instances in which participants avoided attending class for reasons that they attributed to their size. Specifically, the issue of seating within the classroom setting was a factor that seemed to drive class participation and attendance. For Rachel and Dee, concern about being late to class, related to their body size, sometimes resulted in them choosing to miss a class, rather than experience being even a little bit late to class. Dee explained, “I don't want everyone to stare at me … and I can tell all these skinny girls, and I just hate walking in the class late 'cause everyone's gonna stare at me.” Dee reiterated this concern when we spoke a second time, noting that in addition to the feeling that people would stare at her
when she walks into the classroom, the seating options are more limited when she is late to class. Her strong preference has always been to sit in the back of the class so that she’s less conspicuous.

I try not to walk into a class late so everyone doesn't have to stare at me. I try not to sit too much in the front. I try to stay a little bit in the back. I think there's different ways inside the classroom where you can avoid that sitting way in the back or coming in really early so no one looks at you. Not leaving early, things like that.

Dee also described how her chair selection within the classroom also factored into her comfort within the classroom setting, noting that,

Sometimes I get in chairs where you barely move and they're really squeaky. I don't know if it's because I'm putting so much weight on it that. I try not to move a lot so I don't make a lot of noise and it doesn't call attention to myself.

With this in mind, when Dee is unable to get to class early, she considers skipping class altogether and, in at least one instance, recalled doing this. The worry about having others stare at her when she walks in late, about perhaps not having a seat in the back of the room, and not having her choice of specific chair was sometimes so great that she would rather not attend class that day, despite being a serious and committed student. She coped with the anxiety associated with potentially calling attention to herself by going to great strides to get to class early, but at times avoiding class altogether when she could not arrive early.

For Jamie, the relative comfort of the classroom was dependent on the style or setup of the class itself. She preferred the classes in which she could be hidden and considered those akin to the safety that she felt when she was isolated in her residence hall room. However, when she was unable to be hidden in the background because the class required visible interaction, she was far less comfortable.
I know for me my dorm room is a space that feels safe for me. Similarly, for a classroom, it depends. It depends on the organization of the classroom. If it's more of a lecture style, then I'm just invisible then that feels like a safer space. But if it's a classroom that's focused heavily on presentations and it's very engaging, then maybe not as much for me because I feel like I'm going to be looked at or judged.

Given the importance of class attendance and engagement (discussed in the subsequent chapter), the feelings of wanting to be invisible in class are significant when considering the impact of the campus climate for students of size.

For Rachel, her decisions related to where to sit in class, were driven by a different factor related to body size: the chairs in the classroom. During her first interview with me, Rachel explained the problem with the chairs to me. In short, there are two types of chairs that she has encountered in classrooms on campus — those with arms (standard classroom chairs) and those without arms attached to them. For Rachel, and presumably other students of size, chair type matters, as the chairs with arms do not fit her body, resulting in both physical and emotional discomfort while seated in them. She explained how she discovered this, before she had a “strategy” for managing the seating in class.

I sat in the regular chairs — the ones with the arms — and it hurt and it was uncomfortable but I didn’t move, I didn’t get up, I just like dealt with it for the four-hour class. And then I just thought, ‘well, I have to plan ahead and I have to get in here early so that I can score the chair that doesn’t have arms.’ And, I always feel weird about it. I don’t think that anyone notices, cause I’m like paranoid that they are looking, but if the armless one isn’t where I usually sit I’ll pull it over but I’m worried that someone is going to look at me and go like, ‘why?’ Um, and figure out why … Sometimes it is over by the window or something like that and so I will need to pull it around, and like I said, I’m sure nobody’s looking at me, but in my head everybody is looking at me. And being like, ‘oh, you have to do that because you can’t fit in the regular ones comfortably.’

During her second interview, Rachel and I spoke more about the chair issue, as she chose to take a picture of herself sitting uncomfortably in the chair with arms (Figure
She further explained to me that not only was the chair itself important (she developed a plan for how to secure the armless chairs so as to not subject herself to the physical discomfort for hours on end), but the placement of the chair itself within the room was also important. Rachel, like the other participants, much preferred the back of the room, so that she minimized the risk of others realizing that she was intentional in selecting the armless chair. Again, the desire to be in the background in order to avoid being seen, and therefore judged, was shaping Rachel’s experience in the classroom. This image was so important for Rachel to capture for this research that she needed to stake out the classroom in order to find a time when it was both unlocked and unoccupied. She needed this so that she could capture the image without being seen by anyone else as she squeezed herself uncomfortably into the chair for the sake of the picture. As we talked more about how she felt about the chair situation, I noted that her voice sounded frustrated and tired. It was clear that she was drained from having to even consider this issue, when she should have been able to concentrate on other aspects of her classroom experience, such as her learning.
Missing Dialogue

In addition to students of size being hidden and isolated from the majority population at Sporty University, dialogue about body size is missing from the rhetoric at the university. In this way, body size was a hidden construct at Sporty University and the participants noticed this omission. Throughout my interviews, I was struck by the degree to which participants were able to articulate university values related to inclusion and equity. Several participants were almost able to recite the university’s goals and stance on inclusion verbatim, to the point where I found it somewhat eerie that they were so indoctrinated with this language. Almost all participants used the term inclusive excellence when talking about institutional diversity, and this was without any mention of that term or direct prompting from me. It was readily apparent to me that Sporty
University had done a good job of educating students about institutional priorities and values related to diversity, as that term is not one that I believe is common vernacular outside of higher education and so the use of it by the participants was striking.

When I inquired further about inclusive excellence and the diversity work happening at Sporty University, I learned that while the university had clearly gone to great lengths to address inclusion of students holding diverse social identities related to race, gender, and sexual orientation, other minoritized identities were often missing from the conversations being had at Sporty University. I was also cognizant that recent occurrences within the campus environment, or in the broader contextual communities in which Sporty University is situated, may have influenced the perceived and actual priorities. Indeed, several participants shared that they were aware of a situation involving a student, or group of students, expressing hateful racial slurs on campus several months prior to the time that I collected data at the university. This had been a contentious occurrence, both in terms of the incident itself, and how the university responded. Consistent with the explanation of climate that incorporates how contemporary events can shape the climate (Peterson & Spencer, 1990), racial tension was a prominent aspect of the campus climate at Sporty University, I believe in large part because of the recent issues. As such, I acknowledge that participants’ perception of the ways in which diversity and inclusion work was carried out at Sporty University may have been heavily swayed to focus almost exclusively on race-based initiatives and related work, in part due to those circumstances. Olivia explained,

…that inclusive excellence thing, I think that, a lot of times, that’s targeted towards race, ethnicity, being very inclusive of international students and people of color because it’s a very White campus. We’ll just be upfront about it. It’s very
White and has this homogenous group. When others come in, I think that they definitely want to avoid those situations where there’s any racial tensions or marginalization of different races.

In engaging with the participants, I recognized early on that they may not have considered their body size as a facet of their identity. With this perspective in mind, I posed direct questions to them about how size fit into the institutional commitment to inclusion of students holding diverse identities. Given what I learned early on in my data collection related to feelings of exclusion, isolation, and fear of judgment, I knew that inclusion of students of size within the campus climate was a relevant consideration at Sporty University. And, in an environment with such a known and prioritized commitment to inclusion, I was curious to understand how, or if, size was incorporated into the diversity work at the institution. What I learned was that size was not only not included in the university’s diversity and inclusion efforts, but it also was missing from the dialogue altogether on campus, with the exception of the frequent fat shaming that was oftentimes occurring by standard size students. Katie explained it in the following way,

…there’s just this thing that no one wants to talk about size …We can talk about race, we can talk about gender, sexual orientation … they’d rather gravitate towards talking about gender, or sexual orientation, or race … but no one still talks about weight or size.

Olivia, who told me that she had given this topic of size as an aspect of her identity significant thought already, had similar observations as Katie. She went on to speculate the reason why size was missing from the University’s work related to inclusion.

We always hear inclusive excellence but I don't necessarily think that we’re always talking about all aspects of it. Like including body positivity… I don't think that's something that we're actively talking about. It's not a conversation that
people have on campus. I don't know if they're just like too uncomfortable to talk about it because it is, it's very touchy for some people of size that's very off limits so don't talk about it?

Regardless of the reason that it is missing, and I would speculate that the reasons include Olivia’s theory, but other factors as well, it was clear to me that the omission of size in diversity and inclusion efforts was not something that most participants had ever explicitly considered until the dialogue that ensued in our interviews (Olivia was the exception to this as she had considered it).

Following our first interview, when this issue came up in fairly general ways, Jamie spent time reflecting on this. She then returned for her second interview with new insights about this topic and had taken a photograph to help further explain this to me (see Figure 13). As mentioned earlier, the image shows a bulletin board on display in one of the residence halls. The board is labeled “[Sporty University] Diversity.” The image shows a visual representation of the diversity of the student body at the University — as represented exclusively by racial/ethnic breakdown. Different colored icons represent the proportion of students who hold various racial identities (i.e. the majority of the icons are the color that the key on the board indicates represents White students).
In explaining the image to me, Jamie had the following to say,

I think the reason that I took the photo is because it also makes me realize that as important as this is, there’s not an equal representation for all different types of diversity, which of course might be impossible because diversity comes in so many different areas, but in terms of diversity that people can see, it’s something that’s not represented…

As she continued to reflect on this, she shared her acknowledgements of the privilege that she held as a White student at Sporty University. And, she astutely commented that while she absolutely benefitted from White privilege, she struggled, felt left out, and not cared for because of her body size. Jamie’s observations, and the realizations that she came to about her own identity and experience within the interviews, were powerful.

Because of the hidden nature of the topic of body size at Sporty University, most participants had neither the space nor opportunity to dialogue about, or process their feelings about, being a student of size at Sporty University. For Jamie, the interview experience served as a powerful and identity-affirming experience as it was the only time
that her identity as a student of size was recognized within the university setting in a positive way. She used another image to help me understand this. Her image surprised me at first, as I recognized my own handwriting in it. Jamie had taken a picture of the thank you card that I had written that accompanied the gift card that I had given each participant at the conclusion of our initial interview (see Figure 14). In explaining why this was symbolic for her, Jamie told me the following,

This is the one time where I feel like being a student of size is something that can be beneficial towards the campus climate. It is the first time that I’ve been appreciated for being a student of size … It something that’s not often talked about, or something that maybe people don’t view as such a positive thing … This is the first time where it’s been something that’s been spoken about and used in an advantageous way. Thank you.

![Jamie's Image of the Thank You Card](image)

*Figure 14. Jamie's Image of the Thank You Card.*

Jamie’s demeanor as she spoke about this was unmistakably one which signaled her profound appreciation for this identify-affirming experience. I was struck in this interview by how powerful taking body size out of the hidden metaphoric shadows could be for students of size. This is discussed in more detail in the subsequent chapter related to recommendations for practice.
Serena and Rachel also both identified that size was missing from the dialogue on campus about equity and inclusion. Each woman speculated that perhaps there simply were not enough people of size at Sporty University in order for the institution to be concerned about their experiences. Rachel, who had shared that she had to endure the pain of sitting in a chair that did not fit her larger body, offered the following,

…In my brain there’s kind of a thing where it’s like well, ‘yeah, well, there’s not that many bigger people here, so, wouldn’t it be a waste for them to sort of spend extra time or extra money trying to accommodate when it’s not really that present? And if I can just deal with it and sit in a chair with arms that’s not comfortable and I can just deal with it then why, like why fix it? If it is a rare occurrence and it’s not really having an effect mostly on the majority of students.

Dee too noticed the lack of attention paid to body size by Sporty University leaders. Dee had been involved in some of the student activism following the racial slur incident (referenced above). Due to her involvement in challenging the administration related to the response to the prior incidents, she had a keen awareness of the administration’s stance on equity and inclusion. Like Rachel and Serena, she also speculated that the minuscule number of students of size may have been the reason that size was not included in the university’s work in this area. Dee also offered that the context of the location in which Sporty University was located, and the culture of the state, may have also contributed.

Maybe they think it's not an issue on the campus, because we are in [Rocky Mountain region state] and it's where people are active. On this campus, honestly, I don't see a lot of people that I would think that would consider themselves overweight or chubby or anything like that. Yeah, for individuals and obviously there are other people that feel that way, but when I walk around, I feel like I don't see anyone.
I contend that in this environment, where being a person of size is less common than in some other settings, bringing size into the conversation regarding equity and inclusion on the campus is that much more important. This will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Lastly, I want to clarify that not only was size missing from the inclusive excellence work, the participants felt that an overall awareness of size was also missing and that this lack of awareness likely was the reason it was not addressed at Sporty University. That is, they did not perceive this as an intentional omission in which an individual or group made a decision to leave body size out of the sphere of the university’s work in this area. Jamie’s explanation was helpful to me in understanding this and also addressed how she could envision this changing.

Like regarding racial tensions … yes, there are tensions, but it helps that they're discussed because then students can work together to make sure that people feel more accepted. So I feel like that dialogue is missing, and I feel like having that dialogue on campus would be something that would be extremely beneficial for students of size … It's like when you talk about something overtly, it's going to be hurtful because you need to address something that's difficult, but at the same time, it's so important … it's beneficial because at least it brings out more dialogue and it brings an awareness to the issue, whereas I feel like surrounding students of size, there's really a lack of awareness.

Jamie’s hopes for change, and other participants’ similar sentiments, were the basis for several of the recommendations for practice outlined in the following chapter. While the missing dialogue may not have been intentional on the part of institutional leaders or other members of the university community, I found this to be an example of a scenario where the impact of the action (or inaction, as the case was here) was significant and harmful, regardless of the intent.
Problem Frames

Stepping away from the InVivo coding of the data, I used Saguy’s (2013) problem frames to identify the dominant ways in which size was conceptualized at Sporty University. As explained earlier, the frames are ways of problematizing fatness. I chose to secondarily code using Saguy’s (2013) frames because I wanted to understand how I might use the concept of problem framing to recommend a path forward for the institution. As explained in the subsequent chapter, framing the climate may be beneficial for institutional leaders, as doing so can serve to help organize work related to this topic in both a theoretical and applied fashion.

Public Health Crisis Frame

The first frame that was apparent in the data was the public health crisis frame. Simply put, this frame is predicated on the assumption that fatness is inherently unhealthy. Furthermore, this frame assumes that, in addition to the assumed individual’s health concern, that fatness is a concern for society at large and that the magnitude of the broader public concern is at crisis level (Saguy, 2013). This therefore compels the public to act in ways that would help thwart fatness, including intervening to address individual’s bodies. The most apparent examples of this frame came from two stories that Olivia and Valencia recounted and that I detailed above regarding the on-campus health clinic. Both participants had experiences with the university’s clinical providers that indicated that the medical staff was operating from a public health crisis frame. In both instances, the women visited the health clinic for reasons unrelated to their body weight. Yet, once there, they were chided for their size. Both Olivia and Valencia were certain that the health care providers were well intentioned and thought that they were being
helpful. Indeed, I am confident that they did think this was the case, as their experience fits well within the public health crisis frame. When a person or a system operates from this frame, they are apt to actively work against fatness, using a medical pretense to do so.

The previously described example of the Chancellor’s Challenge is additional evidence of the public health crisis frame at Sporty University. As detailed earlier, this program is a public-health exercise program for the campus that is designed as a university-wide wellness initiative. The messages that are embedded support the notion that healthy bodies are fit and slender bodies, that larger bodies are better if changed to smaller bodies, and that it is a community responsibility to promote this (which is in line with the tenets of the public health crisis frame). Although I did not research the extent to which the university invested in this initiative, or presumed other wellness initiatives similar to this one, I think it is a fair assumption that Sporty University did funnel resources into this program, which is also in line with a frame that posits fatness as part of a public health problem.

**Immorality Frame**

Perhaps less obvious than the public health crisis frame, but more prevalent than it, I found ample evidence of the immorality frame in the data. The immorality frame suggests that fat people are gluttonous and lack self-control (Saguy, 2013). Unlike the public health crisis frame, this frame is focused at the individual and not community level. With roots in historic Christianity, this frame today is one in which fatness is generally associated with laziness and met with disgust. Whereas thin bodies as seen as virtuous. It was more challenging for me to pinpoint specific evidence of this frame as
individuals were not regularly naming the participants as lazy, excessive, or similarly
disparaging terms directly. Rather, it was the assumptions that were made, and the subtle
microaggressions that contributed to this at Sporty University.

Some of the initial indications that I saw of this problem frame were related to the
assumptions that participants shared that others were making about their ability, interest,
or willingness to engage in athletic or fitness activities, which were such a cornerstone of
the social scene at Sporty University. The dominance of athletic activities as a means of
social connection at Sporty University is noteworthy when considering this frame. It is
not as though participants were being excluded from serious or particularly strenuous
professional-caliber sporting activities (though presumably if those were happening the
participants would have been excluded too). Rather, the examples that were shared
seemed to be of a low to moderate intensity activity level where a primary purpose of the
activity was social and not necessarily physical. Examples of exclusion shared by
participants highlight how they believed they were fully capable of the physical exertion
associated with the activity at hand. Yet, their peers neglected to invite them, presumably
because they believed they were incapable, or perhaps lazy. Katie’s account of not being
invited to go running with classmates (shared above) was one example of this. Olivia and
Valencia had similar experiences in which they believed that their peers excluded them
from activity-based social events (hiking and skiing). In both instances the participants
believed that their peers were drawing assumptions — either about their ability or their
willingness to work hard at something physical, based on their body type.

Bianca experienced this same sort of exclusion from a member of the faculty. Her
discipline and her role as a graduate assistant periodically called for active work that
could be somewhat physical in nature. As shared earlier, a faculty member in Bianca’s department did not care for her, and this was troubling for Bianca who in turn spent a lot of time pondering why this might be the case. Ultimately, Bianca decided that it was likely due, at least in part, to her body size as the faculty member seemed to like her smaller peers much more than Bianca and one other student of size.

It's the kind of attitude that she projects towards me that she doesn't project towards all of the other in-shape students. It's more of like a, ‘I don't trust that you're going to get anything done’ … I think it's just when you see a person of size and you think they're lazy, so it’s this ingrained, ‘I need to check on you because I don't trust you to get the things done.’ Then I take it very personally. Bianca went on to explain that she believed that the faculty member’s judgment of her likely held her back in intangible ways, as she did not believe she was offered the same opportunities for fieldwork as some of her smaller peers.

Overall, concern for being perceived as lazy because of their body size was further evidence of the immorality frame. Bianca, Dee, Jamie, Serena, Olivia, and Rachel all referenced a concern about being perceived as lazy or not hardworking by their peers, based solely on their body type. The ways in which this manifested for each woman was nuanced. In some cases, as described above, it was that they believe they were excluded because their peers characterized them as lazy. In other instances, it was the knowledge that being a person of size is oftentimes associated with laziness that drove the participant to act in a particular way to combat this association. Serena, Rachel, and Olivia all shared the choices that they each make daily about whether or not to take the elevator or stairs in campus buildings. Olivia took a photograph of a staircase on campus (see Figure 15) and this served as the basis for her sharing about this experience.

As a person of size, I feel obligated to take the stairs because I don't want to be seen as lazy or like, ‘That fat person is just taking the elevator because they are
lazy, or out of shape, or anything.’ I always have to force myself to take the stairs even though I might be exhausted that day, or I'm just not feeling like going up the stairs. I always feel like they're going to think that she's lazy. I try to push myself to go up the stairs…

Figure 15. Olivia's Stairs.

Similar examples were shared about the use of the fitness center on campus, in which participants were active at the center and felt a sense of obligation to disprove assumptions that people of size are lazy or inept. Olivia told me that while working out on campus she would remind herself that, “Well, hey, even if I'm a person of size, I do work out. I do take care of my body and stuff like that. I'm not lazy.” Rachel, who was an almost-daily user of the recreation center on campus, had a similar strategy of positive self-talk to combat the assumptions that she knew others were making about her as a person of size at the gym. She told me, “it's just a way to feel accomplished … I have
something going for me. And even though, I may be fat, but I'm not lazy. Like, countering the stereotype, and stuff like that.” Neither Rachel nor Olivia reported any overt fat shaming at the recreation center, yet both were hyper aware that they were apt to be judged as lazy by their peers, on the basis of their body size. Both women were proud of their fitness commitment and accomplishments, but the assumptions that clouded their experiences indicated the presence of the immorality frame at Sporty University.

**Conclusion**

While the themes emerged did not surprise me, elucidating them from the data was both affirming and incredibly distressing. My very first interview was with Olivia. Immediately following our time together, I jotted down my additional notes and reflections from our conversation, and then had lunch with a friend who I had used as a sounding board while preparing for data collection at Sporty University. I recall that lunch vividly. On the one hand, I was exuberant. I recall telling my friend how thrilled I was that so many of the concepts that I had chosen to include in the initial literature review had been topics on which Olivia had touched. Although I thought that I had decent coverage of the relevant literature I was really unsure what the participants would share with me. So much of my preparation had involved reviewing literature that was related to the topic of campus climate in higher education, and people of size, but was not at the intersection of these areas. After all, my motivation to undertake this particular research was, in part, because it had not yet been addressed. I can recall telling my friend over lunch how satisfying it felt to hear Olivia discuss aspects of her real experience that were indeed topics that I had toiled over in the years leading up to that moment. On the other hand, I shared with her how disheartened and overwhelmed I was after hearing the reality
of her experience within the campus climate. All of a sudden, the responsibility that I had to her—and the other participants that I would meet shortly—set in for me. At times, her experience was nearly unbearably painful for me to hear. I fully recognized that if it was that difficult for me, that her lived experience was that much rawer. I recall feeling glad that I had established a critical action agenda for the research early in my planning, as I felt an incredible calling to use the research to mitigate the pain and discomfort that she experienced within the climate.

This sense of responsibility that I felt continued to develop over the next 17 interviews that I conducted. I imagine that for some readers, reviewing these themes, particularly as described in the voices of the participants, may yield a similar feeling of duty to change the campus climate. The subsequent chapter discusses the implications of these themes and offers guidance and contextual perspective on how change may be implemented.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND NEXT STEPS

She wakes up and thinks about the day ahead — a test, a group project, and presentation are all on the docket. Tired from the late night out with friends, she gets dressed for her busy day. She’s excited to wear a new outfit that she got last weekend while shopping with her friends. In it she feels confident and proud, an ideal state of mind for the presentation she will be giving in her class later that afternoon.

She heads to the dining hall and is glad to see a small group of her friends who she often meets for breakfast. The food on campus is basic residence hall fare — nothing noteworthy, but that is just fine as she is more interested in chatting with her friends and cramming a few extra ideas into her brain before her test. She gets caught up laughing and joking with her friends and does not realize that she is going to be late to class. Only slightly worried that her professor will be upset that she is late she hurries off to class. Being just a few minutes late is no big deal and she confidently takes her spot in the front of the room, where she can engage most readily with the professor and her peers. Her chair is spacious and comfortable, and she settles in to focus on the class material.

After class, she has about an hour to spare and heads to a popular hangout spot on campus to see who is around and to catch any of her friends. On the way, she notices a new poster hanging on the wall. The title has something to do with a wellness workshop series. The picture catches her eye because she sees a diverse group of Sporty University students pictured in it, including a classmate who is an acquaintance she admires. The
A classmate is someone who presents as she does — a fellow student of size. She looks more closely at the poster and realizes it is advertising an upcoming lecture on stress and time management hosted by the counseling center. Since she has so many on-campus commitments through her various involvement points she could surely use the time management tips and so makes a note to plan to attend the workshop.

Now at the lounge she sees a diverse group of women she worked with last semester to plan a body-positive dance fitness class at the recreation center on campus. She walks over to them and they invite her to join them. They have had such an interest in the class that they are now planning on expanding the offerings. A faculty member is with them too. She is advising their group and encouraging them to shift from a single focused class to an approach in which all campus fitness instructors will be trained to adopt body-positive approaches in their co-curricular classes. She is excited to see this approach, as it is indicative of a shift to a broad-based inclusive climate. Not all of the students working on this initiative are people she would identify as students of size, but all share a commitment to creating an inclusive and equitable campus environment.

As she heads out, a girl she knows from her residence hall catches her and invites her to join a group that is going on a botany hike that weekend. She loves to hike and is considering a minor in botany, and so readily agrees to join the group. She has been on this particular hike before and offers that she would be happy to lead if others are not familiar with the route.

She heads off to her next class now. Walking back across the quad now she smiles at the other she passes. She is feeling good today — confident, at ease, comfortable in her own skin, and ready to nail the rest of her day and the academic challenges that lie
ahead for her. Occasionally she is reminded that her body type is one that might otherwise be shameful or stigmatized. While she is not so naive to think that this will not ever be the case, generally at Sporty University she feels comfortable, affirmed, and accepted for who she is. Her identity as a student of size is an asset that enhances the diversity of Sporty University. She is unencumbered by her body weight and able to focus her experience at Sporty University on the pursuit of her educational goals - and having a bit of fun along the way too.

The scenario described above is fictitious. It does not match the experiences of the participants who shared so much with me during our time together. However, I offer it as an aspirational vision for the future. As noted in the introductory chapter, I designed this research from the onset with a critical action agenda. I sought to call attention to the experiences of students of size as a means to incite further exploration, discussion, and action to create campus environments that are inclusive and equitable for students of size. As I explored this topic alongside the participants, I was struck by the many opportunities to engage with others about ways to better the climate for students of size. Indeed, participants were quick and eager to assist in this area, with several even citing their motivation to participate in the study was fueled by a desire to help make improvements.

This chapter includes an analysis of the implications of the findings informed by the relevant scholarly literature, as well as the perspective of the research participants. The implications, and, in particular, the potential practical applications of this work, are far-reaching. There are changes that could be considered for implementation at the individual, institutional, and systemic level. The implications encompass opportunities for improvement in very practical and applied ways, as well as many opportunities for
further scholarly inquiry. This chapter addresses the impact the climate may have had on students of size within the case, as well as the associated next steps that could be considered to better the climate on campus for students of size, both at the site institution and in other higher education environments. While the purpose of the study was not to generalize the findings to settings outside of the case at hand, I do encourage readers to considering the implications from this one case with higher education settings in mind as well.

The Adverse Effects of a Hidden Climate

The hidden climate, fraught with subtle and not-so-subtle weight-related stigmatizing elements, was not insignificant for the 10 students of size who participated in this study. Although they did not often — or ever — speak about it outside of the research process in which they participated, their experiences at Sporty University were heavily impacted by the climate. My discussion of the findings outlined in the prior chapter is framed around this impact, as this is congruent with my approach to feminist action-oriented research. This is also the approach that I chose to take here because I felt a strong sense of responsibility to the participants to do so. Rather than solely reporting out on the climate and dissecting the elements within it, I am compelled to discuss the climate in terms of the way in which it manifests for the women with whom I worked on this research. It is my hope that through this lens, others will join me in working towards more equitable and just campus climates for students of size.

Those Small Things Really do Eat at Them

As Katie so aptly shared, “those small things really do eat at you.” The impact of being subjected to small things — microaggressions — over time, and in so many
settings within the Sporty University climate, was significant and merits discussion here. A *microaggression*, a term to explain an unintentional and seemingly minor jabs minoritized individuals are subjected to, was first coined by Charles Pierce in the early 1970’s (Hunt & Rhodes, 2018). Microaggressions occur as behavioral manifestations of implicit bias (Friedlaender, 2018), rather than overt or intentional acts of discrimination or harm. Numerous contemporary definitions of the term *microaggression* exist today, but I like the following version that was written to explain racial microaggressions, in particular. Racial microaggressions are, “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). I prefer this definition to the many others that exist because it calls attention to the fact that environmental factors can themselves be microaggressions. For the current research study, the environmental indignities, along with the verbal and behavioral attacks, are important to address.

The initial concept of a microaggression was used to describe the aggressions that people of color face, though the term quickly expanded to include aggressions directed towards members of the LGBTQ community, women, and other minoritized groups (Sue, 2010). Although there is little published work that expands this phenomenon to people of size (Senyonga, 2017), I have drawn on what does exist in this area (see below) and believe there is good reason to expound upon the research on the impact of microaggressions towards people of size too.

While a singular microaggressive act may certainly be incredibly debilitating for an individual, it is most often cited that the cumulative effect of these small, oftentimes
unintentional acts is harmful (Friedlaender, 2018). Research on weight-related microaggressions is quite limited, though some recent work in this area has been published. Hunt and Rhodes (2018) studied weight-related microaggressions targeting fat faculty in higher education settings. Their work found microaggressions experienced by faculty of size contributed to struggles with the tenure and promotion process. Senyonga (2017) studied the experiences of Black fat women in the academy. Her work revealed the oppressive experiences Black women of size experienced over their lifetime stayed with them and impacted their experiences in higher education. Specifically, issues of verbal taunts, not fitting into furniture, and the discomfort of generally being visible as someone outside of the norm spanned participants’ lives, including within the academy. Also in a higher education context, Salk and Engeln-Maddox (2011) focused their work on understanding fat talk (audible expressions of anti-fat sentiments) among college women. Their work is quite relevant for the current study, given that overhearing disparaging comments about fatness was a specific microaggression participants cited. In addition to learning more about the impetus for fat talk (which, incidentally, was rarely initiated by women of size), Salk and Engeln-Maddox (2011) learned that hearing others engage in fat talk could have the effect of leading to increased body dissatisfaction, making those subjected to hearing it feel worse about their own bodies. This finding is in line with the examples I shared in the prior chapter. When Dee, Serena, and Jamie shared their experiences of overhearing fat talk, each also immediately offered perspective on how this made them feel about their own bodies (not good).

Outside of the higher education setting and veering away from the limited body of work on microaggressions targeting people of size, research on the impact of being
subjected to microaggressions is compelling and concerning. In particular, there is a relationship between being subjected to racial microaggressions and mental health concerns (specifically depression, anxiety, poor behavioral control, and a negative view of the world) (Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, & Rasmus, 2014). Similarly, high rates of depressive symptoms have been found with Black women who have experienced race-based microaggressions (Donovan, Gablan, Grace, Bennett, & Felicié, 2012). The impact of being the target of microaggressions has also been documented for LGBTQ individuals, with similar findings. For example, a study of LGB participants who reported a range of microaggressive experiences found being a target of microaggressions was associated with negative impact on one’s self-esteem, sadness, distress, hopelessness, and related negative feelings (Nadal et al, 2011).

Although the current study did not delve deeply into the psychological impacts of the climate on students of size, between the participants’ commentary about how they felt being subjected to the size-oriented microaggressions Sporty University and the research on the impact of microaggressions, I extrapolate similar impacts likely manifested for the participants. The cumulative effect of experiencing fat talk, fat jokes, and other forms of fat shaming, such as what Olivia and Valencia experienced in the Health Center on campus, was painful. Add to that the environmental indignities, such as chairs that do not fit and sidewalks that wrap around the perimeter of campus grounds in a manner that requires extra steps and visibility, students of size are hurt even more. Participants described these types of experiences as hurtful and shameful when they experienced them in the moment. I offer that the impact of these microaggressions was likely not limited to
a bad experience that moment, that day, or even that week. Rather, these experiences, in sum, were likely contributing to deeper impact on students’ psyche and mental health, as described in several of the studies noted above.

**Coping with the Climate**

Individuals who are the targets of negative stereotyping and discrimination often experience significant associated stress (Major & O’Brien, 2005). To manage such stress, a variety of voluntary and involuntary responses may arise for the individual. Voluntary responses can include intentional strategies for lessening or mitigating the stress (Myers & Rosen, 1999). The participants in this study employed such strategies, often called coping mechanisms (Miller & Kaiser, 2001). This section discusses the potential impact of these coping strategies on students’ education.

As discussed in chapter II, individuals who are subjected to discrimination may choose to employ a variety of coping strategies in response to the discrimination. This is the case for individuals who are subjected to microaggressions. Some of the coping strategies are positive (i.e. positive self-talk, becoming empowered) and others could have detrimental or adverse effects. In their study on the coping responses to weight-related stigma, Puhl and Brownell (2006) found some of the most common coping strategies used by overweight individuals targeted by others because of their weight included seeking social support from others, heading off negative comments, and eating. The social support strategy was more commonly used by overweight women than men.

To understand the implications associated with being subjected to microaggressions, I also drew from existing literature with other marginalized groups to understand and explain what may have been occurring with the participants. For example,
Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Browne Huntt (2013) explored the ways in which Black women coped with gendered racial microaggressions. Unsurprisingly their work found these individuals used a myriad of techniques and strategies to manage and deal with the challenges of being subjected to microaggressions. Of particular relevance for the current study is the finding they encountered that their participants (who were also college women) turned to social networks that were outside of their college setting for validation and support and to literally and figuratively escape the negativity through avoidance. In the absence of work on the ways in which those who have been targeted by size-related microaggressions cope, I turned to Lewis et al.’s research to help explain the linkage between two major themes from the current research. I also note that half of the participants were also women of color and so the findings from their work, and other similar research on race-based microaggressions, may be applicable to the participants in this regard too. The intersection of participants’ identities of body size and race were often intersecting and unable to be untangled from one another.

In addition to the potentially adverse effect of experiencing microaggressions on one’s mental health, as described in the previous section, being subjected to degrading experiences was likely also contributing to students’ opting out of university experiences, and to their isolation in the background. Whether it was the fat talk Dee overhead, the fat jokes Serena came to expect to hear from her peers, the subtle messaging from the Chancellor that a fit, small body was the ideal, the fact Valencia noticed no students of size were ever included in the campus beauty pageant, or the countless other microaggressions present in the Sporty University climate, the effect of being exposed to these likely contributed to their isolation and exclusion from the Sporty University
community and the opportunities within. Additionally, the thoughts and fear of judgment each participant experienced likely stemmed from the ongoing and seemingly ever-present exposure to these acts. Accordingly, each woman, in her own way, employed salient coping strategies to either intentionally or unknowingly protect herself from further victimization in this way. Being isolated in the background was a form of an avoidant coping strategy. Unfortunately, the secondary effect of this type of avoidance was participants were not therefore maximizing the potential gains that can be associated with student involvement and other forms of engagement.

**Opting out.** As detailed in the prior chapter, participants were often either excluded from, or chose to, avoid particular spaces, situations, or opportunities that might call attention to their size or even existence within the Sporty University environment. In several instances, this practice of avoidance, or the exclusion students experienced, had very real negative consequences the participants themselves could identify directly; yet, the tradeoff was worth it, as the stress of being seen in certain settings or situations was even more problematic than the consequence of avoidance. In other instances this impact may not have been something the participants identified themselves, but which can be understood by referring to the research on how and where students benefit from college.

Colleges and universities go to great lengths to create campus communities where students feel as though they belong. Like so many terms, belonging in the context of higher education can have many different definitions, but is ultimately about the extent to which students feel as though they are integrated into the context (i.e. the campus community; Strayhorn, 2019). The interest in cultivating a sense of student belonging is fueled by the research that indicates a relationship between students’ sense of belonging
and their likeliness to persist to graduation. Furthermore, per Strayhorn’s text on the topic, the relationship between belonging and persistence may be particularly pronounced for students who hold minoritized identities and in particular contexts, such as students of color enrolled at predominantly White institutions.

I did not explicitly examine sense of belonging with the current study but the findings do raise flags that indicate the students of size with whom I spoke did not feel a strong sense of belonging at Sporty University. Furthermore, their feelings aside, the actions they took to be unseen, and which were taken against them (i.e. exclusion), were indicators they were not well integrated at the university. The findings outlined in the prior chapter, in particular the themes of being isolated in the background and unseen, the small things eat at you, and the thoughts and fears of judgment, point to a climate in which students of size may not feel a strong sense of belonging to the institution. On the contrary, in the Sporty University climate, students of size felt unwelcome, not a fit with the standard or norm at the university, and relegated to a hidden background; indeed, the antithesis of belonging. This is problematic for a number of reasons, as detailed below.

**Class.** At a fundamental level, participating in class is a key element of college. And, in order to participate in class, at least for classes held in the traditional in-person modality, a student must attend class. In a meta-analysis of close to 100 independent samples on the relationship between class attendance and academic outcomes (as measured by course and overall GPA), class attendance was strongly correlated to GPA, and with a stronger relationship than standardized test scores and GPA or high school GPA and college GPA (Credé, Roch, & Kieszczynka, 2010). Although not a causal relationship, the association between class attendance and academic outcomes is so
strong that it is apparent attending class is a positive and important part of college student success. Missing even a single class meeting could result in missed learning, missed fundamental knowledge, and missed information that could be key to success in the course or beyond. Lin and Chen (2006) affirmed attending class lectures had a positive impact on students’ performance on associated exams. At least one participant, Dee, skipped class to avoid drawing attention to herself.

*University resources.* Participants also reported choosing to not use resources or services that were available to them, even in some cases when they were paying additional fees to be able to access such services. Their discomfort with being seen, or calling attention to themselves and their bodies, was sometimes so great it was not worth the experience of using the resource and gaining the associated benefits. In some cases, this discomfort was attributed directly to a negative experience participants had that they attributed directly to their weight. In other instances, it was due to a fear or stress associated with what they expected might occur within that space or resource as a person of size, regardless of whether or not they experienced a direct insult or specific stigmatizing experience. I heard evidence of avoidance from the following resources and/or spaces from the participants: the dining halls, campus recreation center/gym, on-campus health clinic, and a myriad of co-curricular opportunities.

At the time of the data collection, Olivia, Jamie, Valencia, and Serena all lived on campus in residence halls that required they carry (and pay for) a meal plan that included a set number of meals each week in the campus dining hall(s). Each of these participants, and others who also lived in university-affiliated housing but with more flexible dining arrangements, shared insights about the dining experience on campus. The dining halls
were reported to be among the most stressful places on campus for the participants. Concern about being watched, and judged, by peers in the dining hall was held by all participants with meal plans. Several participants described the dining hall layout in great detail, with particular attention to where the presumed healthy options (i.e. salad bar) and unhealthy options (i.e. dessert station, ice cream machine, soda fountains, and grill/fry area) were located. The open-concept in the dining hall, and the resulting concern about being visible to others, sounded similar to descriptions other participants had about the open concept of the campus as a whole. In both settings, participants expressed discomfort with the openess and visibility that led them to feeling exposed and vulnerable to the watchful and judgmental eyes of their peers.

The discomfort Olivia felt about the dining hall resulted in her avoiding it whenever possible. As mentioned earlier, Olivia’s hometown was about 30 miles from Sporty University’s campus. She would often go home for the weekends to stay with her family and to get away from campus. When she would return to campus on Monday mornings, she would bring assorted microwavable foods from home that she could heat up in the privacy of her residence hall room, thereby avoiding the dining hall for at least a few meals each week. Olivia recognized this was not the most cost-effective way to eat, given she and her family were paying for the dining hall meals, whether she used them or not; however, this cost was well worth it to her in order to avoid the stress associated with eating in the dining hall. It was noteworthy that Olivia was also a participant who shared her family’s relative lower socio-economic status as another salient aspect of her identity. She realized she and her family were making financial sacrifices in order for her to attend Sporty University and at times her financial status was another differentiating factor
between her and the other Sporty University students, along with her weight. Accordingly, her choice to periodically avoid the dining hall in favor of buying extra food from home is indicative of the level of discomfort she had with the dining hall.

Maria, who no longer lived where the comprehensive meal plan was required, also reported similar avoidance. Although her family was not as close as Olivia’s, she shared her use of the dining hall during the time she had a full meal plan was “50/50” (noting that about half of the meals that she ate were ones that she prepared in her residence hall room in order to avoid the dining hall experience). She estimated the cost of the meal plan to be $1200 each quarter. Maria was another participant who shared concern about the financial toll her private university education had on her and her family. Letting hundreds of dollars of meals go uneaten was not insignificant for Maria.

Similar to the dining halls on campus, the gym (fitness center) on campus was another space that was commonly cited as an area or resource participants approached with caution and/or avoided altogether for reasons related to their size. All participants but one chose to share experiences with and/or observations about the gym during their first interviews, even without any direct line of inquiry from me about this particular space or the programs(s) within it. Dee described how she does not like being in the gym when there are other students around who might be watching her, and questioning why someone her size would be at the gym. She reported when she walks in and notices that it is busy, she will turn around and leave; whereas if it is relatively empty, she is apt to stay and use the gym. She clarified this decision was related to whether or not other people would be apt to look at her (and potentially judge her). Maria shared similar sentiments, citing the people watching at the gym on campus was so uncomfortable, “even though I
pay for the gym here [through mandatory student fees], I’d rather go and get another gym membership just so I don’t have to [experience the on-campus gym].” While presumably uncomfortable people watching could occur in an off-campus gym as well, the relative anonymity of the off-campus location was important to Maria and drove her off campus. Maria’s discomfort with the on-campus gym, juxtaposed to her willingness to pay for an off-campus gym membership, highlights the specific climate at Sporty University was problematic for Maria. Her concern was clearly not about general discomfort in a gym setting (otherwise she likely would not have paid to access a separate facility); rather it was the specific climate at Sporty University that made for a problematic experience in the on-campus facility.

**Co-curricular engagement.** While only one participant shared she actually missed class due to her body size, almost all participants shared examples of choosing to veer away from co-curricular experiences on campus because of their body size. The value of students being both engaged and involved in their college experience has been articulated as a fundamental element of student learning and development (Kuh, 2001; Pascerella & Terenzini, 2005). Astin’s (1999) seminal student involvement theory posited that students’ learning and personal development (both curricular and co-curricular) was positively related to the quality and quantity of their involvement in their college or university experience. While Astin’s work did not imply a heavy volume of student involvement will result in gains in student learning in of itself, it did indicate spending time on campus (being involved in one’s own education) was a key component of student
learning and development. Simply put, students cannot achieve the benefits associated with student involvement if they do not put forth the time to be involved in learning activities both in and outside of the classroom.

Students, such as students of size, who strive to spend as little time on campus as possible, are therefore apt to miss out on the positive outcomes that we know to be associated with involvement. Bianca, Katie, Dee, Maria, Olivia, and Rachel all shared they preferred to spend time off campus than on campus or they felt the need to periodically physically distance themselves from the campus environment. Examples of this include Katie’s preference for studying off campus even when she had a convenient on-campus space to do so, Jamie’s off campus walks, and Maria, Jamie, and Olivia’s frequent weekends at home. This preference to be off campus was maintained even when spending time off campus was inconvenient or otherwise difficult, such as Maria’s fairly substantial commute for her weekends at home.

Likewise, both student involvement and student engagement have been associated with student persistence (Astin, 1999; Harper & Quaye, 2015; Kuh, 2001). Colleges and universities offer co-curricular engagement opportunities because of this benefit. Students who are not engaged or involved in their university experience may miss learning and development opportunities (Astin, 1999; Kuh, 2001; Pascerella & Terenzini, 2005), and they may also leave the university without a degree, also missing out on the benefits associated with holding a college degree, such as increased earnings (Abel & Deitz, 2014; Perna, 2003). Indeed, Dee shared she considered leaving Sporty University altogether because of how much she disliked her experience.
As detailed in the prior chapter, participants were actively avoiding both the campus environment itself, because of their experience within the climate, as well as avoiding engagement opportunities during the limited time they did spend on campus. As such, participants may have missed the opportunity to gain the skills and related outcomes of student involvement. Likewise, the institution, other students, and the community as a whole may have missed out on the benefit of the involvement of the participants. When Jamie chose to stay alone in her room, rather than engaging in the residence hall, what was she missing, and how did this impact her residence hall community? When Katie chose to circumvent the area of campus where other students promoted their clubs and events so she could avoid their judgmental stares, what was she missing? When Valencia dismissed student organizational involvement because she assumed other students would not want a big girl, what did she miss? When Bianca limited her time on campus as much as she possibly could because of how she felt when she was on campus, what opportunities did she miss? I surmise that had I asked each woman explicitly what did you miss?, they would have told me they missed (avoided) the negative aspects of the climate — judgment, exclusion, worry about being judged, fat shaming jabs, and related negative experiences. Yet, I offer that the lack of opportunity to realize the benefits of campus involvement and engagement is significant when considering the experiences of students of size. Students of size are deserving of the same benefits that all other students can gain from their university experience. When we have a climate in which students who hold a particular identity are not able to access the full array of opportunities or are not comfortable doing so because of the oppressive climate, injustice exists.
Towards a Size Justice Frame

As discussed in the prior chapter, there was evidence of Saguy’s (2013) public health crisis frame and immorality problem frame at Sporty University. As I intended to do, I used Saguy’s frames to help me understand what I was learning about the Sporty University climate. I also found the concept of framing, and the frames themselves, useful as I considered the practical application of this work. In particular, as I reflected on the recommendations participants offered to me when I asked them about next steps for this research, I realized there was a compelling case for Sporty University to adapt many elements of the fat rights frame. While the recommendations offered in the remaining paragraphs of this section could stand alone, I instead suggest that institutional leaders use it as a model to guide work to improve the campus for students of size. Doing so could result in a shift that would extend beyond the specific recommendations that I offer here. That is, a shift to a campus in which members of the community shift their worldview, or way of thinking about people of size, could offer protections and benefits for students well beyond what I can detail here. Likewise, a shift in the dominant frame on campus would potentially alleviate, or at least lessen the adverse impact of, challenges in the future, as the community would be prepared to address what I cannot predict.

Saguy’s (2013) fat rights frame positions fatness as an identity category, alongside other identities that are protected classes — either at the federal or state level. Rather than a primary concern with how fatness is viewed, and why that may be the case, this frame’s focus, as the name implies, is advocating for fat people’s rights. This frame then draws heavily on the work from the civil rights movement, and more recent LGBTQ rights work, to engage others in a fight for rights for fat people. Individuals and/or groups
operating from this frame and advocating for such rights often draw direct comparisons to other identity-based work, as I have done throughout this research. Advocates working from this frame have had some positive inroads with employers and large corporations. For example, NAAFA (2016), which appears to operate primarily from this frame, created a *Size Diversity Toolkit* to educate employers on the rights fat people should enjoy in the workplace. This document, like the higher education companion, focuses on practical things employers can do in order to create a better working environment for fat employees.

Much of the fat rights frame resonated for me and I considered a recommendation that institutions of higher education use it to inform and drive their philosophy and association actions related to inclusion of students of size. However, I am instead suggesting a somewhat different approach — but one that is in line with the core fundamental assumptions of a fat rights frame. Rather than focus explicitly on rights for fat students (which I do hope gets necessary attention and action), I offer a recommendation that institutions move to what I refer to as a *size justice* frame.

As introduced in chapter I, social justice is both a process and an outcome for institutions of higher education (Bell, 2010). While a fat rights frame centers on the rights of the individual, a size justice frame, based on key tenets of social justice, more broadly considers the environment and cultural considerations that may impact the rights of individuals. A social justice-informed approach to this work is necessarily one that accounts for the intersections of social identities and factors identity into work towards equity. A *size justice* frame addresses the rights of people of size but goes beyond the individual rights to encompass the experiences people of size have within the community
in a more holistic way. As I read several of the resources produced by the NAAFA, for example, I was struck that feelings — such as fear and shame that I know commonly manifest for people of size related to their bodies — were not accounted for or addressed. I was also struck by the difference between creating, for example, a policy that says that a minoritized group has a particular right or access to a particular benefit and doing the difficult work of shifting the climate to allow these individuals to feel affirmed, safe, and secure accessing this right or benefit.

Lastly, a size justice frame accounts for the historical and contemporary inequities which are oppressive to people of size, brings these inequities out of the shadows, and attempts to mitigate these inequities. Considering these goals, each noble and important, the difference between a fat rights frame and a size justice frame is apparent. The latter accounts for a broader set of considerations in an intentional way. Size justice work considers not only the rights of people of size within a particular setting, but also the context, emotions, and other variables that influence the experiences of individuals. Combining Saguy’s (2013) framing work with Bell’s (2010) definition of social justice, a size justice frame is both an outcome (a more just and equitable environment), and a process that the community undertakes to work towards this outcome. Akin to other social justice movements, this work will indeed need to be a movement, rather than a finite destination.

A size justice frame is in line with recommendations made by Nutter et al. (2016), who also advocates for weight bias to be considered and included in social justice work. In their overview of different research perspectives used to study weight related stigma, Nutter and colleagues offered while there is ample research that points to the need for
social justice related to body weight, a social justice orientation (which is inherently action-oriented) is thus far absent. They point to the “broad social forces that continue to reinforce the power and privilege given to thinness, which serve to deny natural body diversity” (p. 6) as a compelling reason to include body weight in social justice work. In their concluding paragraphs, Nutter’s team called for future researchers to push forward in doing so.

We have invited researchers to recognize weight bias as an important social justice issue and to consider ways that our unique and combined efforts might address the aversive conditions under which body size is demarcated in our society … we called for researchers from various areas to work across professional boundaries in a joined effort for social change. Working towards increased interdisciplinarity between the various research areas and increased recognition of weight bias as an important social justice issue will serve people of every size (p. 7).

While Nutter’s call was to fellow scholars related to future research, it stands that their message is just as, if not more, applicable for scholar-practitioners and for those involved directly in applied social justice work with diverse individuals — such as student affairs practitioners. Accordingly, the remainder of this chapter is dedicated to the recommended practical applications that stemmed from the research findings.

Recommendations for Practice

As planned, I engaged the participants directly in identifying the practical implications of this work. Of all of the lines of inquiry I explored with the 10 women who contributed to this research, this area was where participants tended to be the most loquacious. Each of them freely offered me insights, mostly without pause, as several noted they had already given this thought, either as a result of having chosen to participate in the research or prior to this involvement. With several participants, I
noticed an audible shift in their voice, tone, and cadence. They seemed to be excited to share their ideas, and they seemed to be hopeful about the impact of some of what we discussed.

While a massive shift on campus to a place where students of size are not only widely accepted and welcomed by their peers, but are also acknowledged as valuable members of the diverse community may be an aspirational and longer term goal, I was struck by the relative ease of implementing some changes that are apt to contribute to a more positive climate on campus for students of size. Some of the recommendations outlined below are ones I perceive as institutional responsibilities to implement, which should be carried out by university administrators. Others are initiatives or resources I believe students of size themselves would like to facilitate and/or lead, but which may require infrastructure from the university and/or assurance from the university that their efforts will be supported. All recommendations are predicated on the assumption that a climate that feels more inclusive, welcoming, and affirming would be of value to the university and the diverse students it serves. Put another way, the current climate, in which size is a hidden topic, students of size opt out of opportunities and favor the relative safety of the background, and are regularly subjected to degrading comments should change. These recommendations are designed to prompt movement towards change.

During the time I was working on this research, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) (2016) published a helpful resource for institutions of higher education entitled the *Size Diversity in Higher Education Tool Kit*. This guide offers excellent considerations and recommendations for institutions related to
“understanding, respect, and support” (p. 2) for students of size. The tool kit addressed a variety of facilities/physical plant topics, academic, curricular, and classroom considerations, and overall policy considerations for higher education. While not all topics covered in the tool kit were explicitly addressed in this research, I wholly endorse the tool kit’s recommendations, based on the findings from this research. The elements related to the findings of this research are outlined below, but I also recommend that administrators working to create more inclusive and equitable campuses read the NAAFA document in full.

That said, the NAAFA (2016) tool kit, while both helpful and practical, was limited in that it focused almost exclusively on physical challenges, and their solutions, that may be present for students of size on campus. The recommendations did not take into account the social and emotional challenges of being a student of size on a campus where a dominant thin ideal is lauded. As such, the tool kit should be considered as a reading and guide for university administrators, but not held up as a comprehensive document to fully address climate reform. For example, while the NAAFA document does refer to size (“fatness”) as an identity, the recommendations do not address how to shift culture to acknowledge, accept, or celebrate it as such. Likewise, while there is an embedded assumption that people of size experience stigmatization and discrimination on campus, there are few recommendations about how to begin to mitigate this and peer-to-peer considerations are absent from the tool kit. Lastly, the tool kit, and the association that produced it, seem to rely heavily on a disability frame of fatness. Many of the recommendations within are rationalized with nods to or direct linkage to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). As an example, the resource section for students at the end
of the tool kit includes just two referral links and both are additional resources specifically for students with disabilities. While certainly there are some excellent resources from the disability services community that are largely applicable to students of size, not every student of size identifies as student with a disability. Likewise, documents tied to the ADA are necessarily framed from a compliance lens, as opposed to being resources for equity and inclusion for the sake of social justice.

While the goal of this research was never to generalize findings from Sporty University to other settings per se, the recommendations outlined here are apt to be broadly applicable to other institutions of higher education. To be clear, these recommendations have indeed been developed by the participants and me for the Sporty University case, but I offer them for consideration more broadly. As discussed in chapter II, institutional climate is shaped by a myriad of factors such as the surrounding geographic region and specific incidents that may have occurred within a particular setting. With this in mind, it is plausible not all recommendations are applicable in the same way across other institutions of higher education. However, it is my hope fellow higher education administrators, student affairs professionals, faculty, and staff will reflect on these recommendations for other campus settings and that they will offer some value to others. True to my critical action agenda, I will share a summary of my findings and key recommendations with specific Sporty University administrators who may be well positioned to implement changes.

**Size as a Social Identity**

A first step in operating from a size justice frame is to recognize and embrace body size as a social identity. In a primer chapter on social identity, Tatum (2010)
defined the complex construct of social identity simply as the answers (plural) to the question *who am I?* These answers are embedded in social, cultural, and historical context in which individuals have been socialized. Furthermore, Tatum points out the aspects of an individual’s identity that are apt to be a focus are those other people notice (Tatum, 2010). Whether Sporty University recognizes it or not, body size is indeed a salient social identity for members of the student body.

I posit that Sporty University, and other institutions that strive for size justice, would be a more inclusive space for students if size were to be acknowledged as a social identity alongside race, gender, sexual orientation, and other domains of identity. Several participants noted they wished the university would take strides to educate the community, to acknowledge, and to validate their identity as a person of size. For example, Jamie shared this sentiment when she thanked me for inviting her to participate in the research, and also when she shared the photograph of the bulletin board depicting a limited definition of diversity. Embracing size as an identity (indeed, one held by all members of the university community) would be a strong early step towards a more inclusive campus climate for students of size.

There is a small body of work which positions fat as identity (Hopkins, 2011; LeBesco, 2004; Pausé, 2012), and on the process of individuals publically embracing (coming out) with a fat identity (Saguy & Ward, 2011). Although assuming a fat identity may be a fit for some people of size, I find this approach limiting. In addition to not all people of size identifying as *fat*, a body size identity is held by all individuals — both people of size and not. While this aspect of identity may be particularly salient for people of size in certain contexts, all people have a body size and this contributes to their social
group membership, interactions with other people, their environment, and more. As such, I suggest body size, as a spectrum, is considered a facet of social identity; rather than this being only considered for people of size. Note that a full examination of naming a social identity and the ways in which individuals both benefit from and may be challenged by doing so is outside the scope of this research. However, from a systems perspective within institutions of higher education, and with an orientation towards improving the campus climate for students of size, claiming body size as a social identity is recommended.

As discussed in the prior chapter, most participants were able to recite the university’s *inclusive excellence* edict but were quick to point out students of size were not included in this. Several shared participating in this research was the first time anyone ever inquired about their experiences as students of size. In order for the university to initiate and support several of the subsequent recommendations, there should be a move to acknowledge that students hold a social identity related to their body size and an acknowledgement that students experience the university differently related to this aspect of their identity. From there, work can commence to create a more inclusive, equitable, and just community for students of size.

I return to Bell’s (2010) definition of social justice as both a process and an outcome, in which the goal is

Full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure.

In order to engage fully in social justice work, there must be a fundamental understanding of the identities within a community for which social justice is the goal. Put another way,
in order to attain the full and equal participation Bell references, it is essential to understand who is currently participating and benefitting, and who is not.

For these reasons, at a minimum, institutional leaders charged with setting the agenda for inclusive excellence, should educate themselves on size as a social identity, and the experiences of diverse members of their community related to this identity. From there, a plan can be crafted to further integrate size into applicable inclusive excellence initiatives and broader social justice goals and processes at the university. The specific recommendations (below) will be best implemented as a part of a comprehensive strategy for size justice that the university adopts, once body size is recognized as a social identity and the institutional diversity and inclusion efforts include this identity in the scope of work. Additionally, I recommend work in this area be led by the same individuals and groups who are involved in other diversity and inclusion efforts at the university. Because of the intersection of size with other social identities, it is important that work related to body size be integrated and coordinated with other social justice efforts.

**Training**

Several participants shared they wished their faculty and peers could be trained to understand their experiences and the ways in which others’ actions and words shape their experience at the university. Most of the suggestions for training were related to wanting others to have a sensitivity and understanding of the ways in which body size impact some students at the university. Participants who spoke about such training assumed the people who said or did things that were hurtful were largely unaware of the impact of their statements or actions. Participants assumed others were naïve about the impact they had on people of size and others did not intend to cause harm. As is so often the case, the
impact of a particular act is not always aligned with the intention behind it. And yet, if the impact is harmful, the intent may not matter as the harm has occurred nevertheless. Although I did not always share their optimism, several participants figured if training was offered to educate others on the impact of expressing anti-fat sentiments or overtly privileging thin people, harmful instances would be lessened. I am of the opinion such training would be an excellent early step in working towards a more visible and therefore more inclusive climate for students of size. As such, I endorse a recommendation to develop training for employees and students alike that educates the community on the experiences of students of size and the ways in which all community members can help promote a more inclusive climate. For example, a training that may already exist on microaggressions, on challenging implicit bias, or otherwise on dismantling systems of oppression could be expanded or adapted to include body size if it does not already cover this specific topic. More specifically, additional training for employees in unique functional areas is also advised. For example, a health at every size frame or body-positive lens could be used to train university employees who are working most directly with students related to their bodies. Reflecting specifically on Olivia and Valencia’s experiences in the health center, there appears to be a need to educate providers about the ways in which their well-intentioned commentary about weight loss and body size can impact patients/students of size. This could likely be extended to trainers and related staff in the fitness center and athletic departments, as well as any others with roles and responsibilities that relate to students’ bodies. There are indeed trainings for the medical
communities that have been developed to address this topic and it is advisable clinicians and others on campus working in similar capacities receive such training.

Similarly, staff working with infrastructure in areas such as furniture procurement, facilities space planning, and related areas could benefit from tailored training to their field/discipline that raises awareness of the experiences on students of size on campus and challenges them to determine inclusive approaches to their work. While making discipline-specific training recommendations is outside of the purview of this research, it is recommended that campus leaders in diverse functional areas raise their own awareness of the relevant issues for their respective areas and train employees accordingly.

Lastly, as broad-based campus messages are being disseminated, it would be valuable for diverse individuals to be trained to recognize and challenge the implicit anti-fat bias that may be informing some of the public messaging on campus. For example, being thoughtful about how fitness and wellness campaigns may be perpetuating stereotypes or marginalizing students of size within the community. The observations Rachel and Ayesha had about the Chancellor’s Challenge come to mind here, as do comments Valencia had about the student-led beauty pageant that did not include any students of size. Although I did not delve into topics such as representation of diverse body types in university publications or media in the current study, this may be another area that could benefit from intentional consideration.

**Use of Student Services**

In an effort to create equitable learning environments, institutions should assess students’ experiences and outcomes by relevant variables such as social identity (Harris
& Bensimon, 2007). Rather than simply knowing the number of students who visit a particular office, for example, an understanding of the demographic differences of those student visitors can help point staff to inequities in access and attainment. By disaggregating data by social identity, institutional leaders can begin to elucidate where students who hold particular identities are and are not receiving services, if and how enrollment patterns differ, and otherwise gain insights that can be used to address inequities. Institutions can gain powerful data about student success when they disaggregate institutional data about the student experience based on race (González, 2009), and I purport the same would be true for body size.

With this in mind, I recommend institutions assess students’ experiences, use of services, and related outcomes by body size — in addition to other social identities. Practically, I recognize this is not apt to be an easy variable by which to disaggregate existing institutional data. However, body size could be an added demographic variable on relevant assessment instruments, such as overall institutional climate surveys. Additionally, given the findings of this study related to the experiences of students of size in the dining hall and the fitness center at Sporty University, these two functional areas should examine how students access and experience their services with attention to possible disparities related to body size. For example, a self-reported body size variable could be added to the demographic section of program surveys. Data collected could then be analyzed to determine if significant differences exist in use or experience based on this variable, in addition to other relevant variables. If so, institutional leaders responsible for oversight of these services could consider how to adjust aspects of the program to work
towards more equitable access and outcomes for their respective functional areas.

Engaging in this type of size-informed assessment would be a useful tool for institutional leaders operating with a size justice frame.

At Sporty University, dining and recreation services were funded through payments required of all students, or for dining services, of all students living in student housing, as opposed to a point-of-service payment model. That is, students did not choose to opt in (or out) of payment for the service based on intended or actual use; rather, all students were assessed the relevant charges. This approach is a common funding model across the U.S. for recreation programs (Stier, Schneider, Kampf, Wilding, & Haines, 2005) and residence hall-based dining programs (Mathewson, 2017). Furthermore, according to Mathewson, the average cost of required meal plans for college students living on campus was higher than the average cost of food for a single person in the U.S.. Mathewson estimated college students with required meal plans paid as much as 70% more for campus meals than it would cost them to eat on their own (i.e. grocery shopping and preparing meals in a kitchen).

Given the findings of this study, and the funding model for dining and recreation services at Sporty University, an analysis of student use of dining and recreation by body size is particularly important. Maria and Bianca were not using the recreation program that they were paying for through their tuition and fees because of the discomfort that they felt as students of size. Maria was even spending her limited funds on an alternative fitness facility in lieu of the on-campus recreation program for which she already paid. Olivia frequently surrendered her meals in the dining hall, for which she and her family already paid, because of the climate and associated experience she had in the Sporty
University dining halls. Maria, who was grateful to be freed from the requirement of the
dining hall because she no longer lived on campus, had similarly forfeited meals for
which she had already paid when she had been required to have a meal plan. For these
participants, their income-level, compared to their Sporty University peers, was a relevant
and intersecting aspect of their identity with their body size. As such, an analysis of use
of services disaggregated by relevant social identities is even more compelling.

While the specifics should be informed by such an analysis, and related follow up
to better understand any disparities that may exist, dining hall administrators might
consider how the layout of spaces impact students’ experiences, the food and beverage
offerings, and even how the meal plan requirement itself may contribute to inequities.
Similarly, recreation program administrators might consider signage and messaging in
the recreation center, layout and related environmental factors within the center, and the
funding model which requires all students pay for the program. Ultimately, the goal at an
institution operating with a size justice frame should be equitable participation in student
services, regardless of individuals’ body size.

Facilities Fixes

One of the institutional responses detailed in the NAAFA (2016) tool kit and
which strikes me as relatively easy to implement, over time, is to change the furniture
that the university procures for classrooms and study spaces. Simply put, moving to
armless chairs and/or desk and chair arrangements in which the desks are not attached to
the chairs would add tremendous physical comfort and emotional relief to students of
size. The students who spoke with me about the discomfort of sitting in a chair with arms
that were too narrow for their body and/or the notorious attached desk/chair combinations
all wondered why the university could not universally adapt this seemingly simple change. Each woman who addressed this noted there was indeed some comfortable seating for students of size on campus (i.e., certain classrooms and/or specific seating options within a class that otherwise had problematic chairs). With this in mind, it seems logical to move to have this type of inclusive seating across all classrooms and/or public spaces on campus as doing so would offer suitable options for a range of body sizes. Indeed, the chairs in the library where I sat for most of the interviews for this research were chairs without arms. This was not intentional on my part (though I was glad that it happened to be the case), and I did not notice this until Rachel pointed it out to me during one of her interviews. While I have the privilege of not needing to notice the chair’s arm arrangement, the armless chair was perfectly comfortable to me, and presumably to other students, regardless of size. While I understand that armless chairs and/or a move to disconnected desk and chair duos only may have some drawbacks (possibly more costly and/or may take up more space), moving away from chairs with arms and chairs attached to desks would be a significant move to be more inclusive of people of size in a university setting and is therefore recommended.

Although only mentioned by one participant, Rachel, the size of bathroom stalls was also raised as another area of concern pertaining to the campus facility itself. This example served to illustrate everyday activities, such as going to the bathroom, can be more difficult on campus for students of size. As explained above regarding microaggressions, while the act of having to remove her backpack to go to the bathroom, in and of itself may not have been catastrophic, the cumulative effect of these challenging
circumstance may indeed take a toll and have negative consequences for students of size. As such, I also recommend the university consider the structures and arrangement of bathroom stalls to better accommodate students of size.

Both the recommendations about chairs and stalls are in line with the concept of universal design, a principle that stems from, and is associated with, compliance and support for individuals with disabilities. While universal design is a vast field with extensive research and recommendations, in most simple terms, it is the approach of design accessible both to individuals with a particular disability and also suitable and functional for individuals who do not have a disability (Null, 2011). While the concept is now used for curriculum and pedagogical approaches within a learning environment, its roots are in architecture and facilitates/space planning. Note that I am not thereby indicating all students of size are also students with disabilities (though certainly some students of size also hold this identity); however, the concept is applicable for people of size, regardless of ability. Chair and desk seating arrangements that are accessible and comfortable for many students of size, and larger restroom stalls, are also apt to be accessible and comfortable for all other students, regardless of size.

Adopting universal design principles can save students from the shame and embarrassment that can be associated with making a request for a particular arrangement or accommodation. Indeed, as I was working on writing this very section of this manuscript, a student at the institution where I currently work contacted me to inquire about where to direct a complaint about the desks in a campus classroom, because they were too small for her. She told me she missed class because there were not suitable options in which she could sit. By the time we exchanged a second round of emails she
had already made her way to the department on campus responsible for setting up special accommodations in classrooms. Still, in her response to my offer to help her she noted that having to make this request proved to be embarrassing and discouraging. Had the university had universally accessible furniture in place in the classrooms, this student likely would have not missed class, nor been subjected to the embarrassment she reported to me.

While chairs, desks, and stalls were cited as a concern for some participants and other furniture and/or facilities related needs were not brought into the conversation, this should not lead to the assumption that other physical and/or structural elements of campus are therefore helpful, or even adequate, as is. Rather, I recommend Sporty University, or institutions striving for size justice, conduct a comprehensive examination or audit of furniture and environmental features of the campus through a size-oriented lens. Likewise, I recommend the adoption of universal design principles developed for students of size, which are apt to result in a more comfortable learning environment for all students.

**Positive, Visible, and Connected in the Campus Community**

Related to the training described above, but different in focus and purpose, additional work could be undertaken to bring size out of the shadows on campus and into the light in a positive manner. Doing so would offer affirmation to students of size, and also set the stage for communities to come together to share and connect around body size. In considering the visibility of size, or lack thereof currently, at Sporty University I want to call attention to the context of the university being situated in a state with one of the lowest reported rates of obesity. While clearly students of size are indeed enrolled at
Sporty University, in addition to the participants feeling alone, isolated, and unaware that there are fellow students who also identify as students of size, there are actual demographic factors to consider as well. There are likely fewer students of size at Sporty University, and perhaps at other institutions in the region, than one might find at a university in a region with a higher proportion of people of size. Participants told me they felt as though they were one of the only students of size on campus.

As detailed in earlier chapters, Crosnoe’s (2007) study on the experiences of obese high school women found the adverse effects of body size were pronounced when the obese women were in a high school environment with very low obesity rates. In settings where being obese was more common, there was not a difference in the college enrollment rates of obese and non-obese women. This study struck me as particularly relevant when considering the findings that dialogue about size is missing and that students of size are both hidden and hiding — isolated and alone. The women who participated in this study were mostly convinced they were the only student of size on campus. Considering Crosnoe’s (2007) findings, the sense of being the only student of size on campus may have amplified the detrimental effects related to size stigma. With this in mind, bringing visibility to body size, and helping students of size see they are not the only ones on campus who hold this identity, strikes me as particularly important.

For several participants, the research itself, and specifically participating and sharing their experience, was indicative of the direction towards which they would like to see the university move. That is, they would like more opportunities to talk about their experience as a student of size and would like size to be included in the university’s diversity and inclusion agenda. Jamie’s appreciation for the opportunity to participate in
the research was one such example of this. Several other participants also chose to share their gratitude to me, not only engaging in the research, but also for involving them directly in it, as a means to funnel information back to Sporty University to help improve the climate. Their appreciation and excitement for the work affirmed my initial plan to share the research findings with Sporty University leaders and encourage them to consider application of the recommendations outlined in this chapter. There are several specific recommendations related to positive visibility and connections that are outlined below. A body-positive campus community could be considered an aspirational state for the Sporty University campus and would require a holistic approach to shifting the climate to reflect this.

Bianca shared her thoughts and specific recommendations related to this during her initial interview. It is worth noting that Bianca previously explored some of this on her own and prior to any knowledge of, or participation, in this research. Her interest in body positivity led her to follow several body-positive community leaders via social media. One such woman, Jess Baker, known as the Militant Baker, tours the country and speaks on college campuses about body acceptance, mental health, social justice, and related topics (Bianca, personal communication, May 23, 2017). Bianca had reached out to Baker to inquire about a speaking engagement at Sporty University, as she saw tremendous potential value in bringing a powerful and positive voice to campus to challenge the dominant norms about body size. Bianca’s familiarity with Baker from watching her videos through social media led her to believe that having her speak on campus would lead to positive change.
At the time of our interviews Bianca had not heard back from Baker about a
speaking engagement at Sporty University but she was still interested in pursuing this
kind of program. I have read Baker’s work (Baker, 2015), and while I have not heard her
speak in person, I endorse Bianca’s recommendation to have her speak. Baker’s website
even calls for interested students to pitch her as a speaker to student activities, gender
studies, and multicultural offices on campuses (Baker, n.d.). Rather than such a program
being solely student-led (as I imagine she may have significant speaker fees and/or
require logistical assistance that is beyond the scope of students to coordinate), I
recommend university staff charged with campus programming consider bringing Baker,
or similar speakers from the body positivity community, to campus. Adding diverse
voices, including those of people of size, to the array of social and cultural offerings
would be an additional way of promoting social change and improved climate.

Many participants spoke about an interest in connecting with other students of
size. Given the findings of others regarding the coping strategy of seeking social support
in the aftermath of being stigmatized (Lewis et al., 2013; Puhl & Brownell, 2006) this is
not surprising. As discussed in the prior chapter, participants felt isolated and alone as
students of size at Sporty University. Several participants were curious about how many
other participants I had, and wanted to know more about the others, as they were excited
to know they were not the only student of size at Sporty University. Dee told me, in
reference to participating in the research, “at least this opens our eyes to feeling like
we’re not alone … and that we aren’t the only ones feeling like this.” I was unable to
share detailed information about the other participants due to the need to protect the
privacy of each individual participant. This interest in connecting with others however
was not isolated to wanting knowledge of their fellow participants. As I spoke with each participant about the possible applications for this research, each woman expressed an interest in connecting with other students of size at the university. The model of a student organization or a club for students with a shared identity was a common suggestion to adopt for students of size. Rachel explained what she thought would be helpful.

I think some visibility would be nice … Like a fat club, like I don’t know how to create a community about it, but I think that would be nice if they could figure out the terminology to use to make people feel comfortable. And it doesn’t necessarily have to be like an AA thing, where you talk about your struggles or whatever, just like come do your homework, and hang out…that would be really neat. Just like activities and go places together.

Similarly, Olivia told me that she thinks that having a “student alliance” and a place to find “common connections” would be helpful to her and other students of size as a way to help normalize her body size on campus and find friends with whom she would be comfortable. Jamie sought a similar group or experience, noting, “I think that people will feel more accepted if they feel like they’re not alone … there’s a great benefit [of having a group] to people who are feeling isolated.” Other participants shared similar sentiments regarding a desire for a semi-formalized mechanism for connecting with other students of size.

While student organizations are typically necessarily student initiated and led (and therefore administrators wishing to support students of size may not be able to establish a student organization), I believe there are some sensible steps administrators may be able to take that would help cultivate a student-led organization or similar connection hub for students of size. For example, hosting an event or series on body positivity (such as Jess Baker, or similar) could have the effect of serving as a natural gathering point for students of size and organic connections between students could develop from there.
Absent a keynote speaker, perhaps staff could facilitate an informal meet and greet style event for students of size to meet one another and natural student connections could be formed in such a setting. Or, maybe an online forum for connecting students of size at the university could be developed, as doing so would allow students to initially engage from the relative privacy of their own spaces. Existing social media platforms would likely be useful to cultivate such connections or software for student organizations may have similar functionality that could be leveraged for this purpose. A variety of other approaches could also be employed. Regardless of the approach, is my recommendation that staff and faculty at Sporty University put forth concerted effort to help cultivate a supportive peer community for students of size.

In working to support and facilitate positive visibility and connections for students of size, administrators and others doing this work should exercise caution regarding the message and the means of doing so. Students of size are vulnerable and may initially be cautious — or even skeptical — about such efforts. Jamie, for example, offered the following perspective,

If the university were to start talking about it [size] and then people would feel more comfortable talking about it as a result, or individual start talking about it, which would therefore make the university feel more comfortable … knowing that it is something that’s okay to talk about … I work though that if it’s something that is talked about, then the main theme will be how to get healthy, how to lose weight. Where I feel like we should start with acceptance, not start with wanting to change…

Later, Jamie told me “people don’t know how to even start that conversation.”

Administrators, such as university diversity and inclusion leaders, should thoughtfully help members of the university community begin and hold the conversations. As is the case when engaging in conversations about and with others who hold any minoritized
identity, caution and sensitivity should be exercised about how, with whom, and by whom, the conversations are held. Both the approach to the conversations and the identities of those leading the conversations should be considered, in light of the judgment-laden experiences students of size have on campus. As we wrapped up our time together, Serena reminded me that she had been anxious about coming to participate in her initial interview with me, as, not knowing me or my identities, she had been fearful that I might be judging her. She told me she had been thinking, “What if she’s this model looking, perfect size two, always been like this her whole life? Just taking notes … judging me like, ‘okay, so how many calories…’ type of questions.” Despite this fear, Serena chose to come in to be an active participant in this research, given the importance of the topic to her. However, Serena’s speculation about me, as the researcher, may serve as an example of fear, and related hesitation, that students may hold about coming to other conversations about size on campus.

In summary, I offer the following recommendations for practitioners interested in cultivating a more visible, positive, and inclusive climate for students of size at Sporty University:

1. Adopt a size justice frame that acknowledges historic and existing inequities and orients the university as a socially just and equity minded institution for students and people of size.

2. As an initial step in actualizing the size justice frame, recognize and embrace body size as a social identity.

3. Integrate size justice work into other university social justice work. Challenge faculty and staff working on equity initiatives to expand their
efforts to include body size and to explore the intersection of body size with other facets of identity. Explicitly include body size in the inclusive excellence edict, along with other social identities that are already cited.

4. Disaggregate relevant data to reveal possible disparities in students’ use and benefit of student services. Use this data to inform adjustments to program and service operations and to work towards equitable participation and outcomes across all student services. Additionally, use this data to shape relevant trainings (see below).

5. Train faculty, staff, and students to think and act in ways that promote size justice. Include recognizing and interrupting manifestations of size-related stigma and bias, such as microaggressions, in the training.

6. Conduct a facilities audit across the campus to determine how and where students and other people of size may experience environmental indignities that manifest as size-related injustices.

7. Cultivate connections between students of size in a thoughtful and sensitive manner. Encourage and support student-led organizations or activities that will help promote community and peer support for students of size.

8. Visibly promote body positivity on campus. Host events, co-curricular activities, and/or implement other initiatives which normalize body size diversity and present an alternative to fat as a shameful or problematic body size.
9. Be cautious to ensure that generalized health and wellness initiatives are not veiled fat shaming. Operationalize wellness and health on campus in a way that includes a broad array of health and wellness topics and be sensitive to how students of size may experience this work.

**Additional Recommendations for Student Affairs**

In addition to the recommendations outlined above for institutions and the administrators, faculty, and staff leading them, I offer several recommendations for the field of student affairs here. A professional field is comprised of people working within particular discipline or setting. For the field of student affairs, professional organizations provide a structure to organize professionals and in which to situate best practices, inform the field’s future, and house relevant research and applied professional development. As such, my recommendations for the field of student affairs are directed to relevant professional organizations and the leaders within them. Specifically, I offer these recommendations to the major student affairs professional associations: the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). Additionally, given the relevance of the topic to the specific functional areas of recreation and dining programs, I also direct these suggestions to NIRSA (formerly the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association) and the National Association of College and University Food Services (NACUFS), as well as the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I) and the Association of College Unions International (ACUI), given that dining services is often housed and/or managed within student housing and/or student union departments or facilities.
Just as I suggested that institutions and the staff within them adopt a size justice frame and incorporate body size into their diversity and inclusion efforts, the same should occur within student affairs professional organizations. In these professional associations, body size should also be recognized as a social identity that impacts students’ experiences in college. Professional association leaders should attend to the climate for people of size within their associations, both because their membership is comprised of people of size, and because the association climate is apt to impact how members contribute to their respective institutional climates.

Once a professional association has adopted a size justice frame, leaders within the association should examine their activities, programs, publications, and related with a size justice lens. This may be particularly relevant for association initiatives related to wellness and/or the promotion of student wellness. For example, given NIRSA’s natural emphasis on fitness, there may be elements of the organization’s work in this area which denigrate people of size or which hide body size diversity in fitness. Similarly, dining initiatives led by the association and related to nutrition and health may be prone to fat shaming. Association members and leaders should therefore, thoughtfully, consider how key topics can be addressed without stigmatizing or shaming people of size. Likewise, broad-based wellness or health initiatives, such as the ACPA Healthy Campus Initiative outlined in chapter I, should be scrutinized to determine if they are truly reflective of an overall health and/or wellness agenda, or if they are a guise for institutionalized shaming of people of size.

Because size justice work is not yet widely occurring within student affairs professional associations, leaders of the associations should be intentional and active in
engaging members in this work. This will require association leaders and members alike to be educated on equity and inclusion related to body size in professional and educational settings. Association leaders might consider soliciting focused educational sessions at conferences on this topic. Similarly, a special edition or focused volume of an association publication could be dedicated to exploring body size diversity from a size justice lens, with relevant content for the association’s specific functional area(s). Associations might similarly offer webinars, newsletters, or other communications for their membership to educate and offer additional resources.

Professional associations typically also play a role in connecting scholars and practitioners with shared interests and passions. For this reason, I suggest association leaders consider mechanisms to bring together members interested in working on size justice. For example, NASPA’s knowledge communities, with a purpose of, “connecting members and facilitating the sharing of knowledge” (“NASPA Knowledge Communities,” n.d.) might be a model to consider. Although there are currently 36 active knowledge communities, with titles ranging from technology and sustainability to Latinx and disability, there is not [yet] a community within NASPA for size justice oriented professionals to gather. The creation of a size diversity or size justice knowledge community within the association would be a powerful signal of the association’s commitment to supporting its members of size and students of size. Once formed, such a community could then be a place from which size justice initiatives could be developed, supported, and communicated across the association.

Lastly, just as the participants at Sporty University community shared a desire for a community and connections with other students of size, members within various
professional associations are also people of size who may similarly want a venue for developing a community of peers and colleagues of size. With this in mind, as professional associations in student affairs adopt size justice frames they should consider both the ways in which they can educate and support their members in support of students of size, as well as the firsthand experience of members themselves. That is, in addition to attending to the possible campus-based initiatives and related benefits, association leaders should take care to ensure their association events and publications offer inclusive and equitable experiences for professionals of size and there is space (whether physical or virtual) for members of size to build community. Just as the climate on campus matters for students of size, presumably so does the climate within the association for members of size.

I close this section on recommendations for practice with an acknowledgment that much of what I have offered here will not be easy to implement. On the contrary, there will likely be both overt and covert resistance to what I am suggesting. While on the surface, several of the recommendations may appear relatively easy to execute, I suspect the deep held beliefs and assumptions that dominate the rhetoric related to fatness and shape the collective sense that is held in the U.S. about people of size will manifest as significant barriers. As explained in chapter II, the historic roots of shame and stigma related to size in the U.S. run deep. Between the dominant and alarmist public health crisis frame, which pathologizes fatness, and the immorality frame that positions people of size as lazy and deserving of shame, a shift to a size justice frame is not apt to be easy.

Well-intentioned naysayers of my stance may continue to operate in a way that equates fat-shaming to health advice. Professional association leaders may be weary of
embracing body size as a facet of social identity. University budget and finance officers may cite the fiscal trade-offs associated with bucking existing systems in favor of more inclusive approaches. Diversity officers may be unwilling to expand their portfolio to include body size as a social identity, given the already massive array of issues they must address. The majority of students may balk at the idea of body positivity, when their whole life has been spent teetering on a social ladder with a thin ideal. However, as additional research related to students of size in the academy is conducted (see recommendations for future research, below), it is my hope that a compelling case for change will be reinforced. The current study was exploratory in nature. Subsequent work on this topic might dig deeper into the impact of the climate on students’ persistence to degree completion, as one possibility. As articulated in chapter II, findings that directly speak to the impact of a disparate climate on student retention and/or graduation might further garner the interest of higher education administrators who are positioned to enact change.

**Limitations and Considerations for Future Research**

As explained in chapter III, I intentionally selected case study methodology to address the stated research questions. Inherent with this selection was the limitation that I would not be able to generalize findings beyond the bounds of the specific case. While that limitation is maintained, I am hopeful the concepts discussed in this chapter offer student affairs practitioners and researchers alike valuable food for thought that will motivate and inspire further work in diverse campus settings. Still, several additional limitations are worth noting here. These limitations may also serve to inspire future scholarly research, as the field for potential exploration on this topic remains vast.
Limited Lens: Participant Demographics

While I unabashedly approached this work from a feminist perspective, I did not intentionally recruit only female-identified participants. As explained in chapter III, my recruitment tactics were broad and designed to cast a wide net to any student who self-identified as a student of size. Despite this, all participants identified as women. Given the gendered nature of size and the discomfort that men, in particular, may have about talking about body size (Bottamini & Ste-Marie, 2006), this was not a surprise to me. Still, it presents a limitation as I was not informed by the perspective of any men, non-binary, or gender-queer students who attended Sporty University. As I talked about the research with my female participants, they too wondered about how male students of size experienced their campus. I believe I likely would have had different findings, had the study included individuals who did not identify as women.

Other demographic factors of the ten participants also contribute to limitations of this work. As discussed earlier, I was both surprised by and interested in the racial diversity of the participants. Size and race intersect in countless ways (Ailshire & House, 2011; Kwan, 2010; van Amsterdam, 2012). On the one hand, given the overall demographics at Sporty University (overwhelmingly White), I was fascinated that my group of ten participants included five women of color, and within the group of five none shared a racial identity. Yet, because I was not intentional in recruiting racially diverse participants, nor did I plan to delve deeply into race and size, this important intersection was not fully examined. While there are countless other demographic considerations that I also did not explore in depth, I offer that race is of particular importance and, therefore a notable limitation, to this topic. I have contemplated this limitation and considered
what, if anything, I might have done differently to more completely address race within the research, given the importance that participants placed on it. Ultimately, I decided that a study that honed in on the intersections between race and size and the campus climate is indeed a different study, and one that I offer as an area of consideration for future research.

Similarly, socio-economic class was a factor that clearly intersected with body size for many participants, as explained in the prior chapter. Yet, this was not an intentional focus of the research and so I did not fully explore this intersection with each participant. Given the dominance and status of wealth at Sporty University, as described by the participants, I suspect that there was likely more there to uncover about the ways in which size and class interact for students at the institution. Furthermore, as college costs have risen in recent years, and economic forces have made college attendance even more of a challenge for many students and their families since the recession of 2008, class is a timely and salient issue for research in higher education across many sectors and topics (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). I appreciated the candor with which participants offered insights to me about their own socio-economic background and their experiences and am simultaneously aware that my inattention to this in the research design is therefore a limitation of the work. Just as an entire research study could be undertaken to intentionally explore race and body size within a university climate, the same could be the case for class and size, or perhaps even size, race, and class.

Additionally, sexual orientation was not a factor I intentionally addressed within the research. Only one participant, Rachel, brought her sexuality into our conversation in an explicit way, but it was late in her second interview when she did so and therefore this
did not prompt me to inquire about or discuss this with others. In retrospect, given that college is a time that many students are exploring and affirming their sexuality, and the social dynamics surrounding dating were indeed mentioned by several participants related to body size, I regret not addressing sexual orientation. I imagine had I done so, or had I opted to recruit participants who held a specific sexual orientation, I may have had some additional and/or different findings. As is the case with race, I am left wondering about what this may have led me to learn but offer this instead as a possible area for further research.

I would also be remiss if I did not address a final participant variable that influenced the research in ways that I cannot quantify: size itself. I collected information about participants’ self-reported height and weight for the purposes of disqualifying any potential participants who were underweight. I used this information for that purpose only, as I stated I would. As I have spoken with others about this work and as I have spent the last several years immersed in the topic and reflecting on the rich data I collected, I am left to consider the diversity of size within the descriptor *student of size*. While all participants met the CDC’s definition to be classified as minimally overweight, I am well aware that there are likely larger students who attend Sporty University. As is the case with any other social identity, there is incredible diversity within a particular category or grouping of individuals who share an identity. Furthermore, the experience of individuals related to discrimination within a particular social identity is apt to vary, based on the extent to which they are perceived to fit with that identity (Hunter, 2007). Specific to people of size, Puhl and Brownell (2006) found the degree to which individuals experienced stigma was positively correlated with their body weight such that
larger individuals experienced more stigma. There is certainly not a monolithic experience within the campus climate for students of size at Sporty University. I acknowledge that just as all facets of identity were not explored in this research, the experiences of larger and differently shaped students’ experiences remain hidden.

Lastly, as discussed in prior chapters, this research was conducted in a geographic region of the country with relatively low rates of obesity. The surrounding environmental context matters when studying a particular climate. As such, it would be interesting to explore the differences in campus climates for students of size in different regions of the country (and/or the world). I am reminded of Crosnoe’s (2007) study which found differences in college matriculation rates for high school women when they were one of a few students of size, compared to when they were grouped with other like-bodied students. With this in mind, I speculate the climate might be different on a campus in a geographic region with a higher proportion of people of size.

**Methodological Considerations for the Future**

I intended this research to be exploratory and preliminary. It was designed to spark conversation and prompt further work in the area of students of size. As others are inclined to further pursue research in this area, I offer several possible avenues for consideration. These considerations are offered in addition to work that could further explore the intersections of identities discussed above (race, gender, class, and variance of size).

Although I was thoughtful about not approaching this research using the standard way of measuring climate (namely a climate survey), I believe there would be value in conducting a climate survey with attention to body size as additional exploratory
research. A climate survey, which could be modeled after many of the fine examples of climate surveys focused on other social identities (for example, Rankin & Reason, 2005; Tetreault et al., 2013; Wells & Horn, 2015), would likely allow for an assessment of the climate to be shaped by the perspectives of many more people of size. A climate survey would potentially also offer anonymity to participants, thereby allowing for participation by individuals who, for example, may not have opted to participate in my study. Given the nature of the topic, offering individuals a way to share their experiences through research, while staying visibly hidden, would be of value. A climate survey could also be administered across different institutions and therefore unique differences between institutions by type, region, or otherwise could be elucidated.

Additionally, I maintain that a true ethnography on this topic would likely uncover nuance of the cultural fabric of the institution the current study did not and could not address. My inquiry was on climate — with cultural perspectives informing my work. A true cultural examination would have required a different approach to the research. Based on my observations while on campus for the current study, I believe an immersive cultural study related to the experiences for students of size would be a worthy, interesting, and useful study to pursue.

Although I used some ethnographic approaches in my work, I did not fully immerse myself in the culture with deep observation from within it. I estimate that I spent approximately 60 hours on the Sporty University campus for the purpose of meeting with gatekeepers, recruiting participants, interviewing participants, note taking before and after interviews, and related activities. Most of this time was spent in the student union, library, and outside on the grounds of the campus. During this time, I found myself drawn
to informally examine what I observed around me. I read the promotional materials for activities and services when I hung my recruitment flyers adjacent to these artifacts of the Sporty University culture. I watched how students navigated the campus grounds and paid attention to the configurations of the sidewalks. I noticed the student organizations hawking promotional materials in the student union. As I browsed the Sporty University website, I paid attention to the images of the campus and the student body that were highlighted online. When I bought coffee at the shop on campus I noted the food served there and the nutritional labeling adjacent to the pastry case. When I visited the campus and browsed the t-shirt selection I observed the prevalence of extra extra small sizes and the dearth of larger sizes on the women’s racks. All of these observations — and more — certainly shaped my understanding of Sporty University; however, I was not intentional about collecting data through observation or my own experience on campus (beyond some contextual cues that I captured in my post-interview notes and reflections). I implore others interested in the experience of students of size to consider ethnography as a methodology for future research on this topic.

As an exploratory study, I learned about elements of the climate, and students’ experiences within the climate, I did not anticipate when I initially designed the research. I pivoted in response to much of what I was learning through the research process, but I was also limited in doing so as it was not reasonable or appropriate to shift to include all possible relevant theories. One group of theories I did not encompass in this work, but that I believe would add value for future research, are environmental theories, such as Banning’s (2017) campus ecology theory. Predicated on the notion that the environment in which students live and learn matters to their success (Strange, 1996), this group of
theories might lend different value to an understanding of the experiences of students of size on campus. Participants in the current study offered me clues about the ways in which the campus environment, or features within the environment, impacted their experience. For example, Rachel and Dee expressed concerns about the classroom chairs and Serena, Rachel, and Olivia offered perspective about stairs and elevators on the campus. While I integrated these insights into the findings of the current study, I did not deeply examine them from an environmental or ecological lens. I suspect had I used ecological or environmental theories, I might have uncovered a slew of additional environmental factors that matter to students’ experiences. As such, I offer a recommendation for future research on the experiences of students of size that such theories be used, both to inform the research design and to interpret and analyze findings.

Considering the methods I employed for this research, I also recommend future research explore other modes of data collection. In particular, I am interested in how group dialogue about the experiences of students of size might bring about new insights. I initially proposed that I use focus groups for the current study and ended up shifting to a second individual interview approach instead. Reflecting on both my findings and the action-oriented agenda for the research, I believe bringing participants together could have offered benefits to both the research and to the participants. While focus groups resemble interviews, but with groups of participants, they are different in that the data is generated through the group interaction, rather than individual perspectives of the participants (Smithson, 2000). Although there are absolutely some cautions to heed when conducting focus groups on sensitive topics, they can work best for “topics people could talk about to each other in their everyday lives — but don’t” (Macnaghten & Myers,
2004, p. 65). Considering comments from participants, for example from Jamie who told me about how much she appreciated talking about her experience as a student of size, but that my interview with her was the first time that she had an opportunity to do so, this struck me. Focus groups on the topic of the campus climate for students of size could be a way of offering participants a space to talk further about their experiences with peers who may be apt to connect with their lived experience within the climate, while at the same time allowing a researcher to collect valuable data.

In their study on campus racial climate and microaggressions towards students of color, Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000), relied on focus groups with students to collect data. They reported the group dynamics at play within the focus groups enhanced the richness of the data that they were able to obtain. In several instances they noted how student participants were in agreement with one another, and often added additional details or illustrative examples to information that a peer had previously shared. I believe this type of group interplay could have led to unique data surfacing related to the climate for students of size.

Additionally, as shared in the prior chapter, several participants relayed an eagerness to connect with other students of size to me during our individual interviews. When I shared preliminary themes with participants during the second interviews, I was often met with a sense of affirmation or relief from the participant with whom I was speaking, that they were not alone in their experience within the climate at Sporty University. Furthermore, in my discussions about potential applied use of the research with the participants, several offered that a group, club, or similar organization for students of size would be helpful to them as they navigated the climate at the university.
Because I had not obtained permission to share their personal contact information with other participants, as this was not part of my research design, I was limited in my ability to connect the participants to one another. However, a study using focus groups with participants would naturally account for this. Indeed the focus group itself could serve not only as a gathering for the sake of data collection, but also for the sake of cultivating connections and building community for students of size. Focus groups with this topic could be the beginning of a meaningful and applied outcome of the research. As such, I recommend that future research related to the experiences of students of size consider focus group as a data collection method.

Although research allowed me to draw some natural conclusions about the implications of the climate, multiple studies could be designed that explore implications in much greater depth. For example, a researcher interested in academic outcomes could engage in further work to examine the relationship of size with factors such as grade point average, field of study, persistence and/or credit hour accumulation, or other similar factors. Additionally, given the known weight-related stigma and bias in the workplace (Giel et al., 2012; Giel et al., 2010), it may be prudent to examine career-related outcomes of college students of size and factors such as job placement rates, first destination salaries, or similar measures. Mental health, and the relationship of a variety of mental health variables and/or diagnoses to size, is another area of exploration that might be timely to pursue as a research agenda within the higher education context. Institutions are grappling with limited and/or decreasing resources to support student success and yet, are being held accountable to a myriad of student success indicators. With this in mind, it
seems there would be interesting insights to glean related to almost any student success program in which the university invests, with size as a student variable.

**Researcher Identity**

Although not a limitation of the work, my own identity is worth addressing again in considering both the implications of this research and future approaches to scholarly inquiry on the topic. As discussed previously, my identity shaped my approach to the work, and it also shaped how I engaged with participants as I collected data. Consistent with my approach as a constructivist researcher, it also impacted how I interpreted the data and what I have chosen to bring forward in this chapter for consideration. I could not — and should not have — untangled myself from the work, and so I offer an additional reflection here on how my identity impacted what I learned and how I interpreted it.

Calling attention to the obvious, I am a doctoral student researcher who engaged in this research as a learning experience. Although I had some prior experience with several aspects of the qualitative research process, I was — and still am — a novice. I believe my limited experience may have shown in how I conducted interviews, for example. As I revisited my interview transcriptions and audio recordings many times, I could not help but feel frustrated with myself for the way that I posed particular questions, or my lack of probing follow-up in some instances. Had I been a more experienced or skilled interviewer, I may have obtained even richer data than I did in this study. Likewise, despite my best efforts to adhere to a rigorous process for data analysis, I often felt lost as I coded and analyzed. Had I been a more experienced researcher, I imagine I may have gleaned additional or different meaning from the data.
My identity as a student researcher offered value to the process as well. I found myself ruminating on concepts at length — likely sometimes too long — because I was new to independent research and had many moments of doubt throughout the process. My mind was filled with questions that caused me to pause and reflect in a way that I imagine is somewhat unique to someone who an inexperienced researcher. Despite the unease that this caused me at times, I do believe the hesitancy caused me to be more thoughtful about my choices than a more seasoned researcher might be. Additionally, as a student myself, I had at least one connection point with each participant, because they too were students. I attempted to leverage this as a strength in my interactions with participants. I believe that my student-identity likely served to help temper the power differential (Potts & Brown, 2005; Riley, Schouten, & Cahill, 2003) that oftentimes exists between researcher and participant (though I recognize that this was not mitigated entirely).

I conducted this research as a White cis-gendered woman in my late 30s who likely presented as middle class and able-bodied. In my self-disclosures at the onset of the first interview with each participant, I also shared a bit about myself and revealed to the participants that I was a mom and employed in higher education. In several of the interviews it came up that I was married (to a man). These aspects of my identity were apt to have shaped the ways in which participants engaged with me, and the ways in which I engaged with them. In particular, my identity as a White woman mattered. While I believe that I built solid rapport and an appropriate connection with each participant, I also acknowledge that race matters and the participants who were women of color may have limited some of what they shared with me. Johnson-Bailey (1999) discussed the role
of race, class, gender, and color in qualitative research interviews. While she was clear to note that researchers who hold different identities than their participants are certainly capable of effective empathic interviewing, she also offered, “When there are fewer margins to mitigate, the research setting can take on an electrifying and intimate aspect” (p. 669). As I have reflected on my time with the 10 participants for the current study, I can understand the participants of color and I were indeed working to mitigate our racial differences in the interview. In some instances, I believe this took the form of the participants having to explain things to me, as a White woman, that otherwise they may not have needed to do (and in turn, this was time and energy exerted that perhaps could have been spent on something deeper or more insightful). In other instances, I believe this likely took the form of them simply not sharing certain aspects of their experiences with me. Likewise, I believe my unpreparedness to address race in the interviews and my own discomfort with my Whiteness while interviewing women of color prevented me from probing and encouraging them in some instances.

I also believe my age or status as a higher education professional may have contributed to a dynamic in which some were less comfortable sharing candidly with me about certain aspects of their experience. For example, Rachel, Olivia, and Serena all addressed how size is sexualized or a factor to consider related to sex. While discussions related to sex are apt to be somewhat uncomfortable with anyone who you have just met, I sensed that my [older] age, or possibly the knowledge that I was a university administrator, may have added to the discomfort. As an example of this, Olivia began to share an example with me about men who fetishize large women. In starting to explain this to me she used a term with which I was unfamiliar. When she paused briefly and I
asked her to clarify the word, she did so but then fairly abruptly changed the subject. In this example, and several others like it with other participants, I could not help but wonder if participants’ perceptions of me, based on my age and professional identity, were holding them back from sharing some of the more intimate details of their experiences with me.

My identity as someone who is not a person of size, and as a White woman is perhaps the most salient identity-linked limitation to consider when reviewing this work. As explained earlier in this chapter, several participants identified the anxiety they had upon meeting me and not identifying me as a person of size. Although I believe that I did a reasonable job building rapport with most participants and at least partially overcoming this barrier to their candor in the interviews with me, I do not think that I completely mitigated this. I believe a researcher who had more social identities in common with the participants would have had a different experience with the participants, and likely would have garnered different data. Researcher’s identities matter in qualitative work.

Similarly, I believe my analysis would have been a different process had I been engaging in the work as a current person of size. Whether the researcher is an *insider* or *outsider* to the population one is studying matters (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). That is, does the researcher share identity or experience with the population with whom they are studying (*insider*), or are they outside of the community or frame of reference that participants experience (*outsider*)? For feminist research, this dynamic is particularly important to consider and address (Hesse-Biber, 2014a). For me, though in many ways I identified as an insider (because I was a student of size when I was a student at the time that I was working on one of my previous degrees and because I am a woman who still
exerts significant mental energy on my body size), when I conducted the researcher I was not a person of size and did not visually present as one either. Although sharing images of my larger, younger self, and being explicit with each participant about my own body size while an undergraduate college student was important to the work, the fact remains that at the time I was conducting the interviews I was not a person of size. Similarly, I was not a person of color, and for the participants who were women of color, I was an outsider related to my race too.

Dwyer and Buckle (2009) use the term *insider-outside* to denote a relationship to participants that is different from the binary options. Researchers can be both insiders and outsiders simultaneously. Researchers draw on their shared experiences and commonalities that are informed by their social identities but not exclusive to them when interacting with participants. The hyphen in *insider-outside* represents the space between being inside the group and outside of it. This term, and this hyphen, honors that researchers can operate from this in-between space, and highlights that there is benefit in doing so. This space, and the descriptor *insider-outside* resonates with me for my own experience with this research study. Still, just as this research would have been different had I had no experience as a student of size, it would have been different had I presented to the participants as a person of size. Although I will stop short of speculating that it would have been better, stronger, or any other superlative, I maintain that my own identity while conducting this work is a relevant factor for readers to understand.

**Concluding Commentary and Commitments**

I embarked on this research unsure what I would find. Based on my review of the related literature, and my own lived experience, I was expecting that the climate was not
going to be particularly positive for students of size. Indeed, my suspicions were confirmed. I was fortunate to have such candor and commitment from the participants. Each contributed so much more than simply their time and words. As I conversed with each woman, I was increasingly affirmed that exposing the climate was not only a worthy cause, but a necessary one in order for student affairs professionals to actualize values related to equitable student outcomes and inclusive campus environments.

Over the almost 5 years that I have spent with this topic, I have continued my work as a student affairs practitioner. At the time that I began this research I oversaw the health, counseling, and recreation departments at a university. My professional role informed this work, and vice versa. More recently, I have added leadership for the university’s student-serving equity and inclusion work to my portfolio, in addition to retaining the supervision of health/wellness and student engagement functional units. While from its inception this research was designed to be an act of social justice, this has become even more compelling as I have stretched my professional scope to include equity work. In doing so, I have seen the value of intentional and strategic equity and justice work. I have observed firsthand how students’ lives and educational outcomes can be transformed when capable student affairs professionals set out to shift the climate in meaningful ways. I have seen what happens when faculty, staff, and students participate in well-developed and executed trainings and are then supported and empowered to act upon newfound knowledge or insights. However, I have also been privy to the harmful and hurtful disparities that exist across campus and that call for this work to be done.

While I believe the profession has a collective awareness and interest in addressing inequities related to other facets of identity, I have not [yet] experienced or
observed this work centered on body size. The potential impact on students when student affairs practitioners put their minds and energy towards a more just campus environment is remarkable. The time has now come to include body size in our diversity and inclusion work.

As I sit here [nearly] done with this research, I am reminded that the work is so far from done. Although the research process has served as an incredible learning experience for me, and I know had meaningful and cathartic purpose for the participants too, I am conscious of my commitment to the critical action agenda that I set at the onset of this project. While I am making the final edits, tweaking my formatting, and otherwise anticipating the feeling of riddling myself of the figurative weight of the dissertation, it is tempting to envision a future for myself that is free and void of this topic. Yet, I offer these final pages as my personal and professional commitment to take my work thus far and apply it to help improve campus climates for students of size. I have been immersed in the scholarship on and around this topic for five years; I will now turn my attention to the practical and applied outcomes that can be realized from this work and do my part to help better the campus climate for students of size.

Specifically, I offer the following commitments. These commitments are made to the 10 participants who gave so much of themselves to this work and to whom I feel wholly indebted. These commitments are also made to the many other students of size, whose stories and experiences remain hidden, but who too deserve an equitable, comfortable, and just climate in which to learn. Lastly, these commitments are made to my college-aged self who never answered the door that night her friends came to get her to go out on campus. The button on my pants never popped, but my college experience
was burdened by an oppressive and shameful climate on campus nonetheless. I now commit to using my privilege, my professional expertise, and my newfound scholar identity to work towards improving campus climates for us all.

1. I will take strides to share this research within the field of student affairs. Specifically, I will aim to present conference presentations and/or otherwise communicate what I have learned through the relevant professional associations for student affairs administrators.

2. I will develop training curriculum to share with higher education colleagues (either within student affairs and/or diversity and inclusion areas) on how to work towards a size just climate. The curriculum will be designed so that it may be packaged with or alongside existing trainings related to institutional diversity and inclusion efforts, or as a stand-alone offering.

3. Drawing heavily from the reference list of this research, I will develop a recommended reading list for professionals interested in further exploring the topic of campus climate for student of size and employing a size justice frame.

4. I will continue to stay abreast of the scholarship in the field of fat studies. It is my hope that I am not alone in my quest to address the topic of students of size in higher education. I will continue to read others’ work (as it exists). As applicable, I will connect with other scholars and practitioners and forge relevant relationships in support of students of size.
5. **In my professional role(s),** I will call attention to body size as an identity to which we should pay attention when considering the experiences of diverse students on campus. I will advocate for body size inclusion in various institutional initiatives including policy work, student community building activities, facilities and planning decisions, and related responsibilities.

6. **I will challenge myself to actively interrupt body size microaggressions I observe or of which I become aware.** I will not sit silently and allow an oppressive climate for students of size to remain hidden. I will constructively call attention to concerns and work to dismantle the oppressive environment I suspect exists well beyond the gates of Sporty University.

7. **I will continue to be attentive to the risk of thinsplaining as I engage in this follow up work.** I will challenge myself to continue to explore and reflect on my own body size and how it impacts my role as a practitioner doing this work.

8. **Likewise, I commit to actively working to keep my own privilege related to this topic in check — not only as a standard size woman, but as a White, cis-gendered, able-bodied, and middle-class person too.** The benefits that are afforded to me on the basis of my identities are significant. I must acknowledge this privilege, check it, and work intentionally to avoid further marginalizing others as I continue to engage in this work.
9. I will do what I do best: talk. Throughout my work on this project, as a rookie researcher contending with my own self-doubt about my work, I was uncharacteristically quiet about my topic of inquiry. I commit to getting over that. Now is the time to be my usual loquacious self. Now is the time to chat up the colleague who recognizes that I have resurfaced from the abyss of dissertation writing and tell her exactly what I have been up to. Now is the time to harness the interest that I suspect others may indeed have about this topic. I just may find allies and size justice advocates to join me.

10. Lastly, I commit to never buying chairs with arms on a college campus again.
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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER
DATE: January 5, 2017
TO: Braelin Pantel
FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB
PROJECT TITLE: [962071-3] Students of Size: A Case Study on a Big Issue
SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: January 4, 2017
EXPIRATION DATE: January 4, 2018
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB has APPROVED your submission. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of January 4, 2018.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or Sherry.May@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB’s records.
APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT-GENERATED PHOTOGRAPH INSTRUCTIONS
Thank you again for your participation in my research about the campus climate for students of size. As we discussed, I’m interested in gaining your insights about the campus climate through your eyes.

A definition of campus climate is “those attitudes, behaviors, and standards/practices that concern the access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential” (Rankin & Reason, 2008, p. 264).

Over the next week, please consider the clues or signals about climate in your day-to-day experiences as a student at the University and capture 5 representative images that you can text or email me. There is no right or wrong way to approach this (really)! You might consider:

- Pictures of spaces, items, activities, or otherwise that are particularly welcoming to you as a student or size, or particularly unwelcoming
- Pictures that represent people, programs, or experiences that you think contribute to the climate on campus for students of size
- Pictures of your habits or behaviors on campus that factor into your experience as a student of size at the University

You are welcome to take the 5 pictures at one time and send them to me in a batch or over the course of the next week as you think through what symbolizes the climate on campus for you. When you send me the picture, please include a very brief (2-3 sentence) description of each image.

The only rule has to do with pictures of other people and off-limits spaces.

Please do not take pictures in places where photography is prohibited, will be disruptive, or otherwise may make people uncomfortable (i.e. do not take photographs in public restrooms or locker-rooms or at events where photography is prohibited). In general, public spaces (indoor and out) and your own private spaces are just fine. If you’d take a picture in that space for your own (unrelated) purposes it is apt to be just fine!
APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT POSTER
What is your experience like as a person of size at the University? Does your body weight impact your college experience? Are you treated differently because of your body size?

Regardless of your answers to these questions, if you identify as a person of size and are a current student, is interested in learning about your experiences for a research study on the topic of campus climate for students of size.

Participating in the research involves two individual interviews and a photo-project in between—all scheduled to be convenient for you.

Please visit www.studentofsize.com to learn more and to sign up to participate. Or, contact Braelin Pantel at bpantel@du.edu.

Participants will receive a $20 Amazon gift card as a small thank you for their time and perspective.

Note: This is not a study about weight loss. Rather, this is to gain an understanding of your experience to incite further exploration, discussion, and action to help create campus environments that are inclusive of students of size.

Thank you in advance for considering participation in this study. I look forward to hearing from you!
Sample Email Text (recruitment)

Hello,

I am a graduate student conducting research to understand the climate on campus for students who identify as students of size (Note: the term ‘students of size’ is a term designed to include people who self-identify as overweight, heavy, obese, or any term of their choosing that indicates that they fall on the higher end of a spectrum of body weights.) The purpose of this research is to explore this topic so that university leaders can be informed about the climate for students of size when shaping the university experience for all students.

If you self-identify as a student of size please go to this website (LINK) to learn more about the study and to sign up to participate. Participation will involve completing a brief questionnaire, participating in (2) interviews (at a date/time scheduled at your convenience), and a brief photograph assignment in which I’ll ask you to take pictures using your smartphone of images that are representative of the climate on campus for students of size.

Thank you in advance for considering participation in this new research.

As an additional expression of my appreciation, participants will receive a $20 gift card to Amazon.com when we meet for the first interview.

If you have questions about the research please contact me at pant0261@bears.unco.edu.

Thank you in advance for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from students of size about your experiences and perceptions of the climate on campus.

Best,

Braelin
APPENDIX E

PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE
As part of a research project being conducted by a doctoral student in a Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership Program, this questionnaire is designed to collect information from individuals interested in participating in the research study entitled "Students of Size: A Case Study on a Big Issue." After you complete this questionnaire, and assuming that you meet the participation criteria (identify as a student of size and not reporting a BMI that classifies you as underweight), you will be invited to participate in the research project which involves two interviews to be conducted by the researcher and a photography project where you will take images that represent your experience within your campus climate and share them with the researcher.

The questionnaire is confidential and participation is totally voluntary. Only the researcher and her faculty at the University of Northern Colorado will have access to the responses you provide. By choosing to complete the survey you are giving your consent to participate in this stage of the research project. It is estimated that completing the questionnaire will take approximately 5 minutes. Because this questionnaire is being used to solicit participation in follow up interviews you will be asked for your name and contact information at the end of the questionnaire. Questions? Please contact Braelin Pantel at _____.

Note: Items with a * are required questions.

1) Do you currently identify as a student of size (any of the following words- or others-might be used to describe your body type: overweight, heavy, fat, obese, husky, curvy, chubby, rotund)? *

*Note: the term ‘students of size’ is a term designed to include people who self-identify as overweight, heavy, obese, or any term of their choosing that indicates that they fall on the
higher end of a spectrum of body weights. There is no BMI threshold or medical diagnosis necessary for participation.

2) Participation in this study is closed to any individual who has a self-reported Body Mass Index (BMI) which classifies them as underweight. Please input your current age, height, and weight.

Note: This information will not be used for any purpose besides determining if you meet the criteria for participation.

How old are you? *

Approximately how tall are you (inches)? *

Approximately how much do you currently weigh (lbs.)? *

3) What is your student status? *

4) Do you have a personal device such as a camera phone or digital camera that you’d be able to use for the purposes of this study (would be approximately 5 images of your choosing that represent your experiences and understanding of the campus climate)? *

4) What is your gender identity?

5) What is your racial identity?

The next 3 questions will ask about your experiences as a person of size at the University. It is possible that reflecting on your experiences and/or observations may elicit difficult feelings or emotional responses. Note that there is no right or wrong answer to these questions and we’ll likely have an opportunity to discuss your responses during an interview, if you so choose.

If you’d like to talk about your feelings you are encouraged to the Health and Counseling Center at [phone #] where confidential support is available to Sporty University students.
Please briefly respond to the following- there are no right or wrong answers, and you will have an opportunity to elaborate and provide more information related to these questions in a follow up interview.

6) Briefly, how would you describe your experience as a student of size on campus?
   *(adapted from Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004)*

7) How, if at all, does your body weight impact your ability to ‘fit in’ on campus?
   *(adapted from Gloria & Kurpius, 1996)*

8) During your time as a student at the University, have you ever been treated poorly or unfairly due to your body weight or seen other students of size treated this way?
   *(adapted from Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004)*

Assuming you meet the participation criteria (not underweight, are a current student, and self-identify as a person of size), I’d like to follow up with you to schedule an initial interview (around your schedule/at your convenience). Please let me know how I can get in touch to schedule with you.

9) What is your name? *

10) What is a good email address for you? *

11) What is a good phone # for you? *

12) Anything else you’d like to share with me, the researcher, about your interest in the study, availability, or otherwise?
APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW #1 PROTOCOL
• Permission to audio record
• Thank you for participation
• Intro of self (general) and why I’m interested in the topic of campus climate for students of size- including an explanation of campus climate (using definition)
• Overview of study and their participation (this interview, photo follow up work, second interview)
• Reminder that participation is optional and they may choose to discontinue at any time without penalty
• Review of informed consent (and have it signed) and that they can discontinue participation at any time.
• Gift card to Amazon.com
• Discussion about the difficult nature of the topic, and information on counseling resources are available (have brochures on hand)
• Discussion/reminder of confidentiality
• Permission to audio record and explanation of data storage
• Selection of pseudonym

Conversation prompts:

1) Sharing of my story (and photo from college)

2) Please tell me about yourself- who you are and what you do.

3) Note about terminology—I’ve used the term ‘person or student of size’ to broadly capture a variety of people with different body types (explain why not focused on BMI, etc.)—but want to be sure that I’m using terms that are meaningful to you, and that are accurate. So, please tell how you describe your body and how you’d like me to refer to it.

4) Tell me a bit about your path to this University- what drew you here, what were you expecting, and why?

5) What do you like most about the University? Least?

6) Describe the “ideal ___ University student.” What does he/she do or look like? Why?

7) How is your body weight relevant- or not- as you consider your overall experience at the University?

8) Do you “fit in” here? Why/why not?

9) On the questionnaire that you completed earlier I asked you a few questions about your identity—related to gender, race, your age, and similar categories. Do these facets of your identity or other aspects of your identity intersect with your identity as a college student of size on your campus? How so?

10) How do you think that your experience at the University differs from that of a thin student?

11) Can you tell me about a time that you believe you were targeted or treated unfairly on campus by anyone else (whether another student, staff member, faculty member,
visitor, etc.) because of your weight? Please share if so. What was the impact of that experience?

12) Have you ever heard or seen offensive or derogatory things on campus targeting people of size (even if you weren’t the target)? What were those things? How did seeing/hearing these things impact you?

13) Has there ever been a time that you’ve opted to not participate or attend something on campus due to your body weight? If so, please explain and describe how you felt about it.

14) If you were describing the University to a potential student (i.e. a high school senior considering colleges) and this person was someone you perceived to be a student of size what might you tell him or her about the University? What advice or guidance would you offer?

****************************************************************************************************************************************

Photo elicitation/wrap up instructions

1. Explain: Before we wrap up today I want to schedule our second interview but I’d also like to have you take some pictures for the research before we meet again.

2. Give them written instructions and go over the instructions verbally, confirming understanding as we go through them.

3. May I text you now so that you have my info. handy in your phone to text me back the pictures? (Assuming consent is given, text them with a “This is Braelin, thanks again for your participation” message).

4. Schedule 2nd interview (ideally between 7 and 21 days from today).

5. Reminder of mental health resources (offer brochure)

6. Thank them again for participation, give them gift card and conclude.
• Permission to audio record
• Thank you again for participation
• Reminder that participation is optional and they may choose to discontinue at any time without penalty
• Review of informed consent and that they can discontinue participation at any time.
• Discussion about the difficult nature of the topic, and information on counseling resources are available (have brochures on hand)
• Discussion/reminder of confidentiality
• Permission to audio record

Conversation prompts:
• What was the experience like of selecting images for the project?
• Can you describe how it felt to be participating in research through this photo activity?
• For each image (have them printed and prioritized in order to manage time—may not get to them all):
  o Tell me about this picture and why you took it.
  o What else was happening near/before/after you took this image?
  o Thinking about the topic of body weight, what does the picture mean to you?
  o How might this image represent experiences that students of size have on campus?
  o Is this picture typical/representative of experiences or feelings that you have regularly, or is it a rarity?
  o How does reflecting on the picture now, since you took it, feel to you?
• One of the purposes of this final interview is to share some of the themes that I have identified from the work thus far, see what resonates for you and what may not, and talk about the possible implications of this work.
• Space to allow for disagreement—that is part of the process! If I share something that doesn’t sit right with you, that isn’t reflective of your experience, or otherwise strikes you as problematic please let me know— that’s what we are here for.

• Likewise, space to allow for you to help me identify where I may be on the right track— so please share freely when something that I share is particularly salient for you and your experience at the University or otherwise that you find of particular value.

• Share major themes identified (with brief explanation), allowing for reflection and comments after each:
  o How does this reflect your experiences with the climate on campus for students of size?
  o Anything else to offer with respect to what I just shared?

• After all themes have been shared:
  o What am I missing?
  o Feedback on the language that I am using to describe the major themes related to the climate?

• Given what you know about the study and generally what we are finding about the climate on campus for students of size, who do you think should know about these findings?

• If you could sit down with that person or group of people, what would you want them to know about this topic?
• What ideas do you have for how to use this information to improve the climate on campus for students of size?

• How else might we use what we now know to help ensure that the University has a climate where all students—including students of size—safe, secure, and able to fully participate in the University experience?

• What new or lingering questions do you now have about the topic of the climate on campus for students of size?

As we are wrapping up our work together, what final thoughts, hopes, or cautions might you have for me as I move forward with this work?

Conclusion:

• Final expression of my gratitude for participation

• Follow up with information if they are interested in reading my final study

• Referrals/connections if they are interested in advocacy or action on their campus

• Reminder about resources if they want to talk further about their experiences or process any feelings that emerged through participation in the study