A Deeper Look into Bullying Culture, and its Effects on Incoming College Students

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Chapter I: Introduction, Literature Review and Methods

I. Introduction

As an 18-year-old student, moving into college changes everything. For many, it is their first time living away from home, in an entirely new environment, surrounded by complete strangers. In addition to classes, studying and extracurricular activities, students have to learn how to do laundry on their own, find the dining hall and share a bedroom with someone they just met. As a result, starting college is a major adjustment for many students, and it has been tied to increased emotional distress, substance use and academic struggles (Pritchard et al., 2007, as cited in Holt et al., 2014; Zivin et al., 2009, as cited in Holt et al., 2014). In addition, about one-fourth of all first-year students do not return the following year, with half leaving in the first six weeks, and a significant number of them citing emotional reasons for dropping out (Upcraft & Gardner, 2009, as cited in Pritchard et al., 2007; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995, as cited in Pritchard et al., 2007). In dealing with new stress at the start of college, many students turn to negative coping tactics. Pritchard et al. (2007) notes that college “may actually cause physical and psychological distress” for a lot of undergraduate students, and observed an increase in the quantity of alcohol consumed on weekends, the frequency of drinking and the frequency of intoxication during the first year (p. 18).

The overall adjustment to college can be particularly difficult for those who have been bullied in the past, since college puts a lot of pressure on making new social connections. This is of concern for a significant number of students, with the 2017 School Crime Supplement finding that about 20% of students ages 12-18 nationwide had experienced bullying (StopBullying.gov, n.d.). Given their previous challenges in social settings, this new pressure can be difficult to
manage for past victims (Wei et al., 2005, as cited in Holt et. al, 2014). Among first-year students navigating the transition to college life, past bullying victims were found to have more current symptoms of anxiety and depression, as well as worse physical and mental health. Past bullying victims also reported a higher rate of dating violence or sexual victimization exposure (Holt et al., 2014). Consequently, Holt et al. (2014) concluded that “bullying might have a unique association with mental and physical health outcomes among first-year college students,” separate from other childhood trauma and victimization experiences (p. 557).

Given the multitude of stressors presented at the start of college for any student, the overlapping and often long-term consequences of past bullying victimization need to be taken into account when addressing the health and wellbeing of the student population. This study focuses on that association by closely examining the intersection of past bullying victimization with the transition to college. In analyzing the issue at hand, the following literature review helps lay out what is known and not known within the literature. The first important finding is that inconsistent definitions of bullying can result in inaccurate data, and can lead to gaps in appropriate coverage and prevention. Therefore, when speaking with undergraduate students who had previously been bullied before entering college, a definition of bullying was not explicitly provided. Instead, interviewees were asked for their personal definitions of bullying, based on their self-identified experiences, to help contribute to a more fluid and practically useful definition.

In addition, the literature reflects that past bullying victimization has a plethora of long-term consequences, especially considering its correlation with future victimization. Robert Agnew’s General Strain Theory may be an effective academic tool for understanding these concerns.
Lastly, the relevant literature shows that students might be able to get the help they need, and ultimately thrive in college, given the proper support. Following the literature review, this chapter will outline the methods used for conducting this study and analyzing its data. This study aims to test and enhance the current literature on how past bullying victimization affects the college experience, with a particular focus on the transition to college. Directly using the experiences and input of past bullying victims, the ultimate goal is to provide recommendations of how to implement systemic improvements for students struggling with similar situations.

II. Literature Review

A. Defining bullying, and the consequences of inconsistency

When it comes to defining bullying, Olweus and Limber (2018) use a three-part definition, where “(1) [bullying] concerns purposeful unwanted negative (aggressive) behavior that (2) typically implies a pattern of behavior that is repeated, and (3) occurs in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power or strength, favoring the perpetrator(s)” (p. 139). According to Olweus and Limber (2018), these criteria have been well accepted in the research community, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control has crafted an extremely similar definition. This CDC definition includes unwanted aggressive behavior, observed or perceived power imbalance and repetition of behaviors or high likelihood of repetition. Much of the relevant literature uses definitions of bullying that are very similar to this, with slightly different interpretations of the power imbalance and need for repetition (Chapell et al., 2006; Quinn & Stewart, 2017; Keith, 2018; Holt et al., 2014).
StopBullying.gov (n.d.), which is a site managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, also uses this definition, adding on that traditional bullying can be direct or indirect, and fit into the categories of physical, verbal, relational and damage to property. StopBullying.gov was launched in 2011, following the White House Conference on Bullying Prevention (“President and First Lady Call for a United Effort”, 2011). President Obama said, “If there’s one goal of this conference, it’s to dispel the myth that bullying is just a harmless rite of passage or an inevitable part of growing up…We can take steps that will help prevent bullying and create a climate in our schools in which all of our children can feel safe” (“President and First Lady Call for a United Effort”, 2011). StopBullying.gov was the product of the Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention Steering Committee, which consisted of the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Justice, Defense, Agriculture, and Interior, as well as the National Council on Disability and the Federal Trade Commission. The purpose of the site was to “provide information from various government agencies on how children, teens, young adults, parents, educators and others in the community can prevent or stop bullying” (“President and First Lady Call for a United Effort”, 2011).

However, issues arise when studies fail to include a definition of bullying entirely, or inconsistently deviate from the established definitions when measuring occurrences of bullying (Lai & Kao, 2018). Not having an operational definition of bullying, both from research and victim internalization standpoints, could skew data and prevent people from getting the help they need. For example, in a study conducted by Young-Jones et al. (2015) with college students, an operational definition of bullying was not provided. Consequently, only 12% of participants claimed to be “bullying” victims, but 49% claimed to be victims of individual acts that typically constitute bullying (such as verbal harassment, physical violence, peer exclusion, property
damage and cyberbullying). Other explanations provided for this include students perceiving bullying too harshly, given its currently portrayal in the media, resulting in students not viewing their experiences on the same level. In addition, for underclassmen specifically, bullying might be accepted more than it should; with widespread stories of hazing, students might feel like their negative interactions are just part of their transitional experience (Young-Jones et al., 2015).

There is also a distinct lack of consistency in framing the issue of bullying across the StopBullying.gov site. This is especially concerning since it is the centralized location for information on bullying managed by the federal government. The site claims that behaviors that would be considered “bullying” before college are often recategorized under criminal law for young adults and college students, and that this age group is uncomfortable with the term “bullying,” and associates it with younger children. However, it is unclear if bullying for young adults and college students is treated differently as a result of this view. If high school students are experiencing the exact same forms of bullying as they transition to college, but the behaviors are no longer viewed as bullying, then there might be gaps in coverage, prevention and support for these students. This is of particular concern because past bullying victimization has been shown to predict future victimization, including into college (Young-Jones et al., 2015).

In an increasingly technologically dependent society, cyberbullying has also been frequently discussed when looking at bullying victimization. Some of the literature describes cyberbullying as even more dangerous than traditional bullying due to how easily it can happen (including anonymously), that it can happen any time and that it is difficult to stop legally. Victimization can also be even more cruel because of the removal of emotional reactions from the interaction (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008, as cited in Keith, 2018; Kowalski & Limber, 2007, as cited in Keith,
In analyzing the 2009 School Crime Supplement of the National Crime Victimization Survey, a study by Keith (2018) found that cyberbullying leads to victims avoiding places and activities out of fear of attack or harm electronically. In addition, it was found that cyberbullying and traditional bullying had similar negative consequences for victims. As a result, Keith concluded that cyberbullying should receive additional attention. Since bullying victimization has been tied to school shootings, Keith believes, “policymakers should focus on strengthening the relationships between students and teachers rather than focusing on increasing physical security measures because cameras are unlikely to catch cyberbullying” (Schneider et al., 2012, as cited in Keith, 2018; Keith, 2018, p. 81).

In contrast to Keith (2018), Olweus (2013) reports that the prevalence of cyberbullying is overexaggerated. According to Olweus, the media distorts the problem of cyberbullying. This leads to preventable anxiety and tension, and makes the situation appear unnecessarily out of control. Olweus says that traditional bullying is “clearly the most prevalent and most serious problem,” and giving cyberbullying disproportionate attention could take resources away from the antibullying work in schools on traditional bullying (p. 768). Olweus and Limber (2018) actually find that verbal bullying is more than three times as prevalent as cyberbullying, and that “there is no doubt that there are many more children and youth involved in traditional (verbal) bullying than in cyberbullying” (p. 141). In addition, many cyberbullying victims are simultaneously the victims of some form(s) of traditional bullying (Olweus & Limber, 2018). The many conflicting findings in current cyberbullying research might be caused by the use of different definitions and ways of measuring cyberbullying (Olweus & Limber, 2018). This leads to a lack of replicability, which can interfere with proper understanding, intervention and prevention (Olweus & Limber, 2018).
In addition, failing to consider the lenses of race, gender and ethnicity has further led to conflicting reports when analyzing bullying research. Racial and ethnic minorities, as well as males, experience bullying victimization at a higher rate but are far less likely to perceive or report these experiences as bullying; these results are apparent when defining bullying through specific behaviors, as opposed to generally (Lai & Kao, 2018). The discrepancies created by defining bullying generally versus specifically have been observed elsewhere in the literature as well (Young-Jones et al., 2015).

The reason for this is that these groups of students face greater stigma for reporting bullying. Male and minority students often have to appear “tough,” and do not want to risk social ostracism by identifying as a victim (Lai & Kao, 2018). This results in drastically different interpretations of bullying among students, plagued by stigma and stereotypes that lead to underreporting by the effected groups. When not taken into account, these differences in reporting can cause inconsistencies in the literature on findings of bullying prevalence (Lai & Kao, 2018). On the other side of this issue, additional problems can arise when adults approach bullying with stereotypical biases. Instances of bullying are much less likely to be noticed or taken seriously when the student does not fit the mold of a “stereotypical” victim. If the individual is not visibly struggling, shy or passive, parents and teachers might be less inclined to take action (Mishna et al., 2006, as cited in Lai & Kao, 2018).

B. The long-term and far-reaching effects of past bullying victimization

Bullying victimization is both prevalent and problematic at the high school level. As a result, it functions as a predictor for high school dropout rates and long-term mental health consequences as these students enter adulthood (Lai & Kao, 2018). Bullying victimization still
occurs at the college level for students at a rate of 21-25%, compared to about 35% of students before college (Modecki et al., 2014, as cited in McGinley et al., 2015; Chapell et al., 2004, as cited in McGinley et al., 2015; Chapell et al., 2006, as cited in McGinley et al., 2015). Building on this, more often than not, the students who are being bullied in college are the same ones who were previously bullied. Although there is a noticeable decrease in self-reported victimization with the transition from high school to college, those who are being victimized are simply continuing in the “bullying victim” role from their previous years of school (Adams & Lawrence 2011, as cited in Young-Jones et al., 2015; Chapell et al. 2006, as cited in Young-Jones et al., 2015).

Young-Jones et al. believe that bullying is a significant issue in college, even though students might not think so, and that the impact on academics should be a legitimate concern for administrators. Past bullying victims have been recorded to have lower self-esteem and psychological wellbeing compared to non-victims, along with much higher levels of stress (Newman et al., 2005, as cited in Young-Jones et al., 2015; Scafer et al., 2004, as cited in Young-Jones et al., 2015; Sesar et al., 2012, as cited in Young-Jones et al., 2015). These individuals suffer from trauma, depression and anxiety, as the effects of their experiences with bullying can last far longer than the victimization itself (Sesar et al., 2012, as cited in Young-Jones et al., 2015). Many of these students consequently struggle to let their academic performance remain unaffected, leading to academic motivation becoming a predictor of past bullying victimization. Low motivation can make it difficult for victims to thrive in a college environment both academically and socially, which could lead to low grades and increased drop-out rates. As a result, past bullying victims might need additional support and encouragement in order to properly succeed in the classroom. An effective approach for helping these students will
need to take past experiences into account in addition to the challenges they are currently facing (Young-Jones et al., 2015).

Furthermore, past bullying victimization becomes a public health issue when it comes to long-term substance use and abuse. A study by Quinn & Stewart (2017) analyzed the first 10 waves of the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ National Longitudinal Study of Youth from 1997-2007, which looks at emerging adults (born between 1980 and 1984) transitioning from school to the workforce, and specifically asks about bullying and substance use. The results showed that past victims of childhood bullying (before the age of 19) were 1.23 times as likely to have smoked cigarettes in the last 30 days, and 1.38 times as likely to have used non-marijuana drugs in the past year (Quinn & Stewart, 2017).

In addition, since past bullying victimization is a risk factor for future bullying victimization, it is worth considering if it predicts related, yet separately categorized, forms of victimization. Among these other categories of victimization are generalized and chronic generalized harassment, and electronic victimization in friendships and romantic relationships. At the college level, generalized harassment is defined as “any negative interpersonal interaction that creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment, and/or one that may affect the conditions placed on a student as they relate to his or her academic standing, but which is not based on legally protected categories, such as gender or race” (Rospenda & Richman 2004, as cited in McGinley et al., 2015, p. 1899). There are inevitable similarities between behaviors that could be defined as either chronic generalized harassment or bullying. As a result, if past bullying victimization is an indicator of future victimization, then it might also predict something as analogous as chronic generalized harassment. However, by getting caught up in definitions,
experiences that do not quite fit the specific mold of bullying could go unnoticed. Adding in the inconsistency in defining bullying to this issue, and there is a concerning potential that struggling students could be left without the support or treatment they need to succeed.

In a college setting, there are not any school-wide rules or parental restrictions on electronic use (Bennett et al., 2011). Consequently, there is a greater likelihood for electronic aggression, which brings together aspects of relational and psychological aggression. Relational aggression involves “hurting or harming someone through character assassination, ostracism, or relationship manipulation” (Crick, 1995, as cited in Bennett et al., 2011, p. 411). Psychological aggression consists of “acts that inflict emotional harm and that can create fear because of their implication of greater harm” (Gondolf, 1988, as cited in Bennett et al., 2011; Stets, 1991, as cited in Bennett et al., 2011; Straus, 1979, as cited in Bennett et al., 2011, p. 411). With electronic victimization, there are also “unique opportunities for highly public forms of humiliation” (Bennett et al., 2011, p. 411), and it has been found that the majority of college students experience electronic victimization in their various kinds of relationships. Given the significant prevalence of electronic victimization for college students, it is worth considering if the issue is exacerbated for past bullying victims.

These separately categorized forms of victimization are also associated with increased substance use and abuse at the start of college. Students who experienced chronic generalized harassment were found to have more overall problems from drinking, and higher rates of binge drinking, drinking to intoxication and cigarette use (McGinley et al., 2015). In addition, this rise in substance use in college is particularly concerning, since tendencies can become established for students as they enter adulthood (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 1998,
as cited in McGinley et al., 2015). Problematic substance use is a troubling method of coping for these students, and it presents a serious public health issue that needs to be addressed in the college setting. One of the perplexing results from the McGinley et al. study, though, was that chronically harassed students were less likely to binge drink, but did so in greater quantities. McGinley et al. proposes that chronically harassed students might be kept away from social events that involve binge drinking, but upon access, drink at a much higher volume (McGinley et al., 2015). It is unclear if this is actually what occurs, but it is yet another cause for concern; this sort of behavior, particularly if it flies under the radar of identification and categorization, could have rather extreme consequences for students.

In addition, Bennett et al. (2011) found that electronic victimization for females, both in friendships and romantic relationships, is associated with alcohol and substance use, as well as aggression. For electronic victimization in romantic relationships there was also an association with risky sex for females (Bennett et al., 2011). There appear to be many factors that lead to unhealthy coping tactics for college students, even before taking bullying victimization history into account. Without considering how past victimization contributes to these experiences, administrators might not be able to implement appropriate plans for intervention.

C. Using General Strain Theory to understand the impact of bullying victimization

Robert Agnew’s General Strain Theory could be a particularly useful framework for analyzing the consequences of past bullying victimization. GST argues that negative stimuli (like bullying victimization) can cause negative emotions, which lead to harmful outcomes for individuals who do not have access to proper support or resources (Agnew 1985, as cited in Quinn & Stewart, 2017; Agnew 1992, as cited in Quinn & Stewart, 2017; Agnew, 2006a, as
cited in Keith, 2018; Agnew, 2006b, as cited in Keith, 2018). GST is especially applicable for higher magnitude stressors, such as ones that occur more frequently, recently or chronically. Given its pervasive nature, bullying victimization easily falls into this category of stressors (Agnew, 2006b, as cited in Keith, 2018). In addition, students who experience bullying victimization at a young age might turn to substance use in the absence of healthy coping techniques. Since this victimization occurs at a time of mental and physical development, unhealthy coping tactics can persist; childhood substance use in response to bullying victimization can continue well into adulthood in response to other stressors, long after victimization has ceased (Quinn & Stewart, 2017; Agnew, 2001, as cited in Quinn & Stewart, 2017). This concerning trend has been observed elsewhere in the literature as well (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 1998, as cited in McGinley et al., 2015).

Bullying victimization also leads to lower school attachment for students, preventing the administration from appropriately managing its social climate, and further contributing to troublesome outcomes (Schneider et al., 2012, as cited in Keith, 2018). Keith (2018) believes teachers should be conscious of how their interactions with students make them feel, and should strive to build healthy and beneficial relationships with them. If they do, students will be less likely to become disconnected from the school, allowing administrators to provide more effective support (Keith, 2018). In addition, it still needs to be examined if the presence or absence of a healthy support system contributes to how students choose to cope with victimization (James et al., 2015, as cited in Keith, 2018).

D. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program
At the pre-college level, one well established bullying prevention program is the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, also known as the OBPP. The OBPP strives to “reduce existing bullying problems among students at school, prevent the development of new bullying problems, and achieve better peer relations at school (Olweus, 1993, as cited in Olweus & Limber, 2010; Olweus et al., 1999, as cited in Olweus & Limber, 2010; Olweus et al., 2007, as cited in Olweus & Limber, 2010, p. 126). The OBPP started out in Norway, before being spread across the United States with the help of Clemson University (Olweus & Limber, 2010). Clemson and the team in Norway created a dissemination plan, and catered it to the needs of American schools – as a result, it has been implemented in thousands of schools across the country (Olweus & Limber, 2010; “Olweus Bullying Prevention Program”, 2020).

According to Clemson, the program works at the school-wide level, in classrooms, on an individual basis and within the community simultaneously; through multiple levels of intervention, the OBPP is “focused on systemic change to create a safe and positive school climate” (“Olweus Bullying Prevention Program”, 2020). At the school-level, the program calls for the development of a trained Bullying Prevention Coordinating Committee. The Committee consists of a school administrator, a teacher from each grade, a counselor, parents, non-teaching staff and someone from the community. Within the classroom, there are regular class and parent meetings. At the individual level, there is increased supervision of student activities, and vigilant intervention and support by staff for students who are being bullied. Within the community, the OBPP strives to get active involvement on the Bullying Prevention Coordinating Committee, and spread the message of best practices and support for bullying prevention (“Olweus Bullying Prevention Program”, 2020). An empirically based program like the OBPP could have a
monumental impact for students who are struggling with bullying; however, schools would have to be willing to implement such a program.

Despite “efforts to disseminate the OBPP widely,” only about 4% of schools in the United States have adopted the program (Olweus & Limber, 2010, p. 132). One of the reasons proposed for this is that while many states require bullying prevention in schools, “few require research-based approaches to prevention and intervention,” and consequently, there is a “hodgepodge of efforts to address bullying, many of which are short term and/or ‘quick fixes’ that are unlikely to have significant effects on the culture of bullying within schools” (Olweus & Limber, 2010, p. 132). While some schools lack the resources to implement the OBPP, others simply are unwilling to address bullying culture in a comprehensive manner. Without a desire to properly create systemic improvements, schools are unable to benefit from a program such as the OBPP.

**E. What can be done to support past bullying victims transitioning to college?**

High school teachers and staff underestimate the severity of the problem, and this could be the same at the college level as well (Young-Jones et al., 2015; Bradshaw et al., 2007, as cited in Young-Jones et al., 2015). As a result, if faculty and staff are not looking for or noticing an issue, this could be contributing to the continued victimization observed at colleges across the country. With effective support, though, past bullying victims transitioning to college might be able to start over. College can be a new beginning for students hoping to break away from their past experiences, and it could allow them to thrive in a new, healthy environment (Holt et al., 2014). Among first-year students at a large northeastern university, previous bullying victimization was not shown to have a significant effect on academic success. In addition, there were no differences in global ratings of college experience between students with and without
bullying histories (Holt et al., 2014). With the ability to exert more control over their social interactions and overall experience, the results show that past bullying victims might be hopeful about their transition to college (Holt et al., 2014).

Although not explored in this study, one possible way of helping students move past their experiences with bullying is through the coping method of imagery rescripting. A study by Watson et al. (2016) examined the effectiveness of imagining avoidance, revenge and forgiveness as possible avenues for coping with past bullying experiences for young adults. Imagery rescripting has been successful in other trauma scenarios like with PTSD, and therefore could be applied to coping with bullying victimization (Watson et al., 2016; Arntz et al., 2013, as cited in Watson et al., 2016). For this study, which consisted of recently bullied undergraduate students, it was originally hypothesized that imagining forgiveness would lead to the most positive responses. This is because avoidance is correlated with depression, anxiety, and eating and substance abuse disorders, while revenge is related to depression (Aldao et al., 2010, as cited in Watson et al., 2016; Newman, 2011, as cited in Watson et al., 2016; Rijavec et al., 2010, as cited in Watson et al., 2016). However, while the results showed that forgiveness was more beneficial than revenge, avoidance was also beneficial for the participants (Watson et al., 2016). Forgiveness appears to be more immediately stressful than avoidance, resulting in participants favoring avoidance in the short term despite its long-term consequences. Therefore, combining short-term avoidance with long-term forgiveness could be the most effective course of treatment for bullying victims looking to cope via imagery rescripting (Watson et al., 2016).

While there are several examples in the literature in which support for transitioning college students is recommended, it is unclear if these recommendations have actually been put into
practice. In regard to student welfare in general (unrelated to past bullying victimization), Pritchard et al. (2007) says that colleges (including their counseling centers) should take action during first-year orientation. Doing so could help alleviate stress, offer positive coping strategies and help with the overall transition to college to allow students to have as positive and healthy of a first year as possible (Pritchard et al., 2007). Other recommendations include having college counselling centers take bullying into account as a risk factor, offering group counseling experiences for past bullying victims and enhancing peer support (Chapell et al., 2006; Holt et al., 2014). However, it is not clear whether these strategies are being widely implemented or not, or what is actually being done for past bullying victims entering college.

III. Methods

To answer the question of how past bullying experiences impacted their transition to college, thirteen current undergraduate students were interviewed for this study. They were recruited over social media through postings that asked for “rising sophomores, as well as upperclassmen, who attend 4-year residential colleges or universities and who had been previously bullied before coming to college.” Given the issues surrounding the definition of bullying, as identified in the literature, interviewees were intentionally not provided with an explicit definition of bullying, and they were not asked to describe their experiences before being selected. Interviews were conducted in-person in the greater Boston area, as well as over video call using Zoom. The 13 students come from four different small to medium-sized institutions, all in the northeast. All of them were assigned pseudonyms, except for Alex, who requested to not have the information he provided be anonymized. Alex, along with Meghan and Dave, are juniors. Brenda, Ashley, Katherine and Leah are sophomores. Jessica, Charlie, Phoebe, Debbie, Rebecca and Greg are all
seniors. It is of note that two of the interviewees are sisters, and attended the same schools for grades K-12. One of the other interviewees coincidentally attended their same high school, although they are not related. Lastly, Alex attended the same middle and high schools where I personally experienced bullying. All of the relevant demographic information is listed below in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>High school graduation year</th>
<th>Class year in college</th>
<th>College enrollment date</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Sexual orientation</th>
<th>Religion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Fall 2018</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Jewish (Conservative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Fall 2018</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Jewish (Reform)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Fall 2018</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leah</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Fall 2018</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meghan</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Spring 2018</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Pan, but mostly straight</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Fall 2017</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Fall 2017</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Agnostic/other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Fall 2016</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Gender fluid</td>
<td>Asexual</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Fall 2016</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Jewish (Between Conservative and Orthodox)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoebe</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Spring 2017</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Cis woman</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Jewish (Reconstructionist)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Fall 2016</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Jewish (Reform)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Fall 2016</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Care not to answer</td>
<td>Jewish (Reform)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Fall 2016</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using the literature as a foundation, I asked the students about their past bullying experiences, the schools they have attended, and any anti-bullying programs that they might have had (including any college orientation programs). They were also asked about their personal understandings of what constitutes bullying and their takes on the media’s perception of
bullying. In analyzing the consequences of past bullying victimization, they were asked about their college experiences, especially in regard to social and academic experiences, substance use and mental health. In addition, they were asked about their personal coping techniques, and if anything positive has come out of their past experiences with bullying. One of the last questions asked was if there was anything that they felt they should have been asked, or if there was anything else that should have been discussed. Using interviewee responses, the following questions were incorporated into subsequent interviews: 1. Why were resources that you have identified as helpful so helpful to you? 2. How did your experiences with bullying affect your ability to form and develop relationships with others? 3. How did your experiences with bullying affect your life at home? The interview guide that was used with participants has been attached as Appendix A.

I then analyzed all of the participants’ responses inductively using ATLAS.ti. All of the interviews were professionally transcribed, and the transcripts were then fed into the program. I originally coded responses by their corresponding interview guide question number. From there, I started to look for recurring patterns among the participants, and the responses were then grouped thematically and separated by respondent. Some of the thematic codes included: cyberbullying, forming relationships, issues with orientation, lasting (impact), mental health, mistrust, point of recovery, putting on a mask, support system, substance use and when support should start.

The next chapter of this study addresses the inconsistencies found within the literature, including how bullying is defined, and the prevalence of cyberbullying. After listening to participant responses, it became abundantly clear that the definition of bullying needs to be
expanded, and made more fluid, in order to encompass all of its experiences/interpretations. Cyberbullying has also not replaced traditional forms of bullying, and cannot receive disproportionate attention at the cost of other forms of victimization. The third chapter describes when and where bullying occurs, along with the experiences that make up “bullying” according to the participants. Just as many of the participants experienced some form of bullying victimization on school property as they did off school property. Common experiences of “bullying” included social exclusion and forced isolation, as well as verbal and physical encounters. Early adolescent victimization was also far more prevalent than expected. In addition, this chapter details the immediate and long-term effects of bullying victimization through various lenses, such as mental and physical health, academics and substance use/abuse. Several of the participants have suffered from depression and anxiety. Binge eating and self-harm were also commonly reported outlets for coping. However, many of the participants were able to thrive upon starting in their new college settings. Lastly, the fourth chapter proposes possible solutions for how to best support bullying victims both before and throughout college. This chapter recommends better advertising of resources by schools before college, and also outlines healthy coping tactics currently being used by the participants. The chapter concludes by suggesting the development of two forms of support for colleges – a formal group therapy program, and a less formal individualized care program.
Chapter II: Addressing Inconsistencies in the Literature

Does the literature define bullying the same way as those who are actually being victimized? Does all of their victimization take place on the internet? Instead of framing the issue for them, this study uses the insight and experiences of self-identified bullying victims themselves. As a result, this section aims to address the inconsistencies in the literature. Considering all of these conversations, there appears to be a noticeable difference between how researchers and bullying victims are defining the same term; the participants’ wide variety of definitions shows the need for a more open and comprehensive approach. In addition, cyberbullying has to be appropriately considered in context; it has not overtaken traditional bullying victimization, and needs to be considered alongside it instead.

I. How would you define bullying?

Olweus and Limber (2018) define bullying as “(1) [concerning] purposeful unwanted negative (aggressive) behavior that (2) typically implies a pattern of behavior that is repeated, and (3) occurs in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power or strength, favoring the perpetrator(s)” (p. 139). The CDC, StopBullying.gov and much of the relevant literature all use similar definitions, with slight variations in regard to repetition and the imbalance of power (Chapell et al., 2006; Quinn & Stewart, 2017; Keith, 2018; Holt et al., 2014). However, when asked, “how would you define bullying?”, Alex was the only one who even included all three parts of this established definition. Thirteen interviews resulted in 13 different definitions, none of which identically reflect the literature (and some more drastically than others). While the literature might have come to a relative consensus, there is a significant discrepancy between how bullying is being defined and how it is actually being experienced by self-identified victims.
Alex – a 20-year-old junior in college – most closely mirrored the established definition of bullying when asked to define it himself.

It’s one or more people in a position of power taking advantage of that power for whatever reason, I’d say, obviously, usually, their own personal self-consciousness…but taking advantage of that to put someone else down whether it be on purpose once, on purpose a bunch of times or even, I’d say, not on purpose on multiple occasions. If it’s repeated, even if it's by accident, I’d say it’s still conscious.

Alex’s definition encompasses unwanted negative behavior, an imbalance of power and the matter of repetitiveness. However, he identifies singular actions as bullying, noting that the behavior does not need to occur on more than one occasion.

Several other interviewees shared this sentiment as well, in which repetition was not an essential part of their definitions. Katherine, a 19-year-old sophomore, said that bullying is when “someone who’s in a position of power uses that power to leverage it over another either emotionally, physically or mentally to make them feel worse about themselves in some way.” Jessica, a 21-year-old senior, shared a very similar definition – “A hateful or purposefully harmful interaction with another person. Especially if the person doing it has power over the other person, if it’s like a group or in some way they have more privilege.” Both Katherine and Jessica emphasize the intentionality of bullying behavior, while also drawing attention to the bully’s use of power over their victim. What their definitions noticeably lack, though, is the often-assumed pattern of behavior experienced by victims; both of them identify isolated, negative occurrences as bullying.

However, some of the participants, while not necessarily including repetition in their definitions, do recognize the potentially compounding effects of repeated bullying behaviors. As Brenda, a 19-year-old sophomore, said, “I think when you are a victim of bullying, you’re constantly thinking that it’s going to happen… And that’s really scary, so I think that’s kind of
what really encompasses bullying, even if there isn’t repetition, this thought of, ‘oh, it can happen again.’” Unlike other definitions, which view repetition as essential to defining bullying, Brenda explains that it can just make the victimization even worse. Furthermore, she brings up an interesting point in saying that the fear of repetition can be just as harmful as repeated behavior itself. An isolated incident can have the same impact as repeated incidents, given the paranoia surrounding future victimization. As a result, bullies (and those who categorize bullying victimization experiences) might not fully comprehend the lasting impact of certain behaviors.

Greg, a 21-year-old senior, shares a similar view on the impact of repetition when it comes to bullying victimization.

From the victim’s perspective I would say the repetitive, continuous bullying, I think it’d probably be more detrimental and harmful because we as humans kind of learn by repetition so for someone to continually speak negatively to you or to demean you or put you down will probably have some serious and significant implications on how you think about yourself and feel. Whereas a one-time thing might feel bad, but you might go home and talk about it with your parents and then it might not happen again. It doesn’t really scar you in the same way.

Similar to Brenda, Greg sees the potentially severe impact of repeated bullying behaviors when compared with isolated incidents. The more frequently negative interactions occur, the greater the chance that these experiences affect how these individuals perceive themselves. When the sheer volume of bullying becomes too much to handle, these victims’ self-esteem and self-efficacy plummet. However, while acknowledging the serious concern of chronicity, Greg still recognizes singular experiences as bullying victimization. “If there’s nothing that you’ve done wrong and you’re being treated negatively and you feel badly about it, even one-time things can really make a difference…It might not have the same impact, but I would call it bullying.”

Despite the significant impact repeated, negative interactions can have on someone, Greg does
not view it as a necessary component of bullying. Although repeated bullying can be extremely harmful, it does not simply erase the issue of singular occurrences of bullying; one bad thing does not just replace the other, as both have deleterious effects.

In addition, while the established definition states that the negative behavior is “purposeful,” overt intentionality was also not a necessary component of all participant definitions. For Alex, a pattern of unintentional yet harmful behavior still falls under the category of victimization. While a typical view of bullying is intentional belittlement that occurs repeatedly, he describes the opposite to be true as well. Phoebe, a 21-year-old senior who started college in the spring of 2017, noted the repetitive nature of bullying, without mentioning a power dynamic, and also explained that the behavior does not necessarily have to be intentional. “I don’t necessarily know that bullying is always someone’s intention” she said. “I think a lot of the time it’s a miscommunication. But depending what age you are, that’s a distinction that you just cannot understand.” For many individuals, especially those of a younger age, a negative interaction is simply a negative interaction. Depending on how the behavior is received and understood, and regardless of the intentions of the perpetrator, the consequences can be quite severe for the victim. As a result, Phoebe values the purposeful nature of bullying behavior much less than the action itself and its impact.

Further deviating from the literature, some of the participants defined bullying through its specific behaviors, as opposed to conceptually. Meghan, a 21-year-old junior who started college in the spring of 2018, focused on the behaviors themselves. She acknowledged the physical and verbal aspects of bullying while also saying that it could simply be the “act of just ostracizing someone.” Despite not including anything about intentionality, repetitiveness or an imbalance of power, she did manage to cover three of the four forms of traditional bullying listed
on StopBullying.gov – physical, verbal and relational – while only leaving out damage to property. Brenda shared a similar perspective, in which the problem with bullying for her is the multitude of ways, some more intricate than others, that people can be harmed.

I think bullying can take many forms. I’ve had kind of all the above. Cyberbullying is really a thing right now, with our age of technology, and it wasn’t really when we were really little. So, there’s definitely cyberbullying, there’s definitely verbal abuse. For me that was a lot of talking about someone behind their back, and then someone says, “You know Brenda, actually so and so was talking about you.” …I think anything that involves public embarrassment can be bullying. Physical abuse obviously, is bullying. That one is the more textbook, what people think of when they think of bullying. But I think bullying can go far past physical abuse and can really manifest in other psychological ways.

These perspectives differ from the other interviewees in that they solely focus on the actual manifestations of bullying. This is particularly important for individuals who are the victims of detrimental behavior, but never actually considered defining their experiences; if a student does not know they are being “bullied” then they might not seek the help they need, and their experiences could also remain uncategorized by diagnostic measurements.

Another important finding is that many of the interviewees’ definitions of bullying are extremely similar to that of generalized harassment, or chronic generalized harassment, depending on whether or not they view it as repeated behavior. For college students, generalized harassment is defined as “any negative interpersonal interaction that creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment, and/or one that may affect the conditions placed on a student as they relate to his or her academic standing, but which is not based on legally protected categories, such as gender or race” (Rospenda & Richman 2004, as cited in McGinley et al., 2015, p. 1899). Whether it is chronic generalized harassment or not simply depends on whether or not there is a repeated pattern of this harassment.
While none of the participants went as far as to say that their bullying was “not based on legally protected categories,” several otherwise defined bullying in nearly the same way as generalized harassment. Charlie, a 21-year-old senior, described bullying as “teasing of any kind for any reason, regardless of what it is.” He added that “it’s not for retaliation. It’s completely unjustified. It just is.” Rebecca, a 21-year-old senior, said that bullying is “targeting someone in particular with violence or emotional abuse or verbal abuse,” and Greg, a 21-year-old senior, defined it as “intentionally treating someone negatively without them necessarily doing anything to provoke it.” These three define bullying victimization as some form of negative interaction, regardless of its reasoning, frequency of occurrence or the existence of a potential power dynamic. This is strikingly similar to “any negative interpersonal interaction that creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment,” as it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate bullying from categorically different forms of victimization.

Moreover, several participants defined bullying along the same lines of chronic generalized harassment. Dave, a 19-year-old junior, had a definition of bullying that was somewhat of a hybrid between generalized and chronic generalized harassment in that it did not necessarily have to be repeated. He defined it as “an isolated or repeated act with the intention of bringing someone down.” Although differing in the need for intentionality, Ashley, a 19-year-old sophomore, Debbie, a 21-year-old senior and Leah, a 19-year-old sophomore, explicitly defined bullying as repeated (chronic) behavior. Ashley said that bullying was “a repeated action with the intention to make others feel something in a negative way.” Debbie shared a similar perspective, and emphasized the intentionality of the perpetrator. “I think bullying has similar characteristics to harassment in that it’s persistent. It’s targeted at a particular individual for whatever reason. It’s usually having to do with certain characteristics of that person. It usually
has to do with somebody trying to feel better about themselves. It’s definitely malicious by nature regardless of how severe the person that it effects has reacted to it.” Leah defined bullying as “repeated actions which have the intended or unintended consequence of harming the person which they’re targeted towards.” Although Leah specifically asserted that unintentional behavior also falls under the category of bullying, the three definitions nonetheless resemble chronic generalized harassment.

How can the issue of bullying be properly addressed by researchers, policymakers and schools without knowing what it actually entails? If someone were to look at the literature, they would see two entirely separate phenomena – bullying and generalized harassment. Both have their own established definitions, and both have observable and identified long-term consequences. Among its noted consequences, bullying leads to lower self-esteem and academic motivation, trauma, depression, anxiety and long-term substance use and abuse. Generalized harassment has also been correlated with a rise in problematic substance use in college, in terms of alcohol consumption and cigarette use. Despite being categorized separately, these forms of victimization are very similar to one another, with several bullying victims even defining their experiences almost identically to generalized harassment. However, what happens if researchers, policymakers and schools were to look at only one of these forms of victimization, and not the other?

Given the presented issues with consistently defining bullying, this study suggests a more fluid approach to viewing experiences of victimization moving forward. Since past bullying victimization has been shown to be an indicator of future bullying victimization, failing to identify those who are in the most need of support is unacceptable; both victimization and its consequences are long-term problems, and they cannot remain undetected as a result of
uncoordinated categorization. Instead, related forms of victimization – such as bullying and generalized harassment – need to be condensed, and the term “bullying” needs to encompass all of its different experiences. As opposed to focusing on defining bullying as a concept, researchers, policymakers and schools need to take into account the numerous experiences victims self-identify as bullying. A struggling individual should not avoid seeking out help, or not be able to receive the help they need, because their experiences do not exactly align with a certain definition. By getting caught up in definitions, instead of focusing on the experiences themselves, researchers, policymakers and schools risk leaving out a significant amount of people in need of treatment and support.

II. How accurate is the media’s portrayal of cyberbullying?

There are drastically different views on the prevalence of cyberbullying as presented in the literature. As described earlier in the literature review, Keith (2018) on the one hand believes, “policymakers should focus on strengthening the relationships between students and teachers rather than focusing on increasing physical security measures because cameras are unlikely to catch cyberbullying” (p. 81). On the other hand, Olweus (2013) believes the issue of cyberbullying is overexaggerated by the media, and that traditional bullying is “clearly the most prevalent and most serious problem” (p. 768). He also worries about unnecessarily diverting resources to preventing cyberbullying instead of addressing traditional bullying. Given the uncertainty surrounding the issue, interviewees were asked for their takes on the prevalence and scope of cyberbullying based on their personal experiences. With cyberbullying being less common among the participants, it became clear that it has taken its place alongside traditional bullying, as opposed to replacing it entirely. In addition, while addressing the issue of cyberbullying is necessary, the solution is more deeply rooted in society than typically assumed.
One of the most consistent responses was that while cyberbullying has not overtaken traditional forms of bullying, it has become an easily accessible and dangerous tool for bullies to use in today’s society. According to Brenda,

> What’s really scary about cyberbullying is that the bully doesn’t have to go face to face, and so there’s the sense of anonymity that comes about because of that. That I could say even more horrendous things, because I don’t actually have to face this person. And so, I think that’s what makes it seem more prevalent, and seem like bullies are using it more…It’s just a tool that’s way too good, it’s perfect for bullying.

The prevalence of cyberbullying appears to be inflated by thinking that this obvious form of victimization is the only form of victimization occurring. However, as described earlier in the literature review, one of the biggest problems with this is that often times cyberbullying victims are being simultaneously victimized in traditional ways (Olweus & Limber, 2018). Leah explained this by saying that with cyberbullying, “bullies have new tools in their toolbox, so they can add to what they would have done originally to make it a lot more harmful using the tools that they have.” Instead of replacing traditional forms of bullying, cyberbullying has simply been added to bullies’ repertoires to cause further harm.

Another issue with cyberbullying is that, in practicality, there is a mismatch in terms of what is reported by the media and what is actually being experienced. Since internet trends are constantly evolving, Ashley says that “being able to identify [cyberbullying] can be really difficult, which then if you’re the victim, then sometimes it can be harder for you to gain help if you don’t know what’s going on with you.” She believes that it is challenging to define something that is continuously changing in subtle ways. In addition, Meghan does not think that older generations understand how difficult it is to avoid cyberbullying by avoiding certain apps or the internet entirely.

> One thing I guess older people don’t really get about cyberbullying is like, “oh it’s so easy just don’t use those apps,” or don’t go on Ask.fm, but when all of your peers are
doing it, and especially because social media is such a way for this generation to stay in touch, and [it is] how we communicate. It’s like you can’t just not have an Instagram, because people are going to be like, “what’s wrong with you, you don’t have an Instagram?”

In an increasingly technological society, the solution to cyberbullying is not to simply unplug effected individuals from their plugged-in generation. Rather, Meghan notes that attempting to avoid exposure to cyberbullying by unplugging can actually cause even more victimization. In order to propose appropriate solutions, researchers, policymakers and schools need to make sure they accurately understand the implications of their actions.

In addition, there were several different perspectives on how to properly allocate resources between cyberbullying and traditional bullying prevention programs. First, while Rebecca acknowledges that cyberbullying prevention takes limited resources away from traditional bullying prevention, she believes it could be worthwhile. She thinks “it does divert resources away, for sure, from addressing other bullying, especially in public schools where there’s only so many resources to go around, but I don’t know that that’s a bad thing.” For her, because of the potentially devastating effects of cyberbullying compared to other forms, such as physical bullying, it is deserving of additional prevention resources.

For Dave, he believes that addressing traditional bullying will simultaneously allow for a reduction in the spread of cyberbullying.

I think diverting resources more so toward face-to-face bullying is (1) more efficient, because trying to divert resources toward decreasing hate and bullying online is so difficult, and you have to cover so many bases to the point where it’s quite literally impossible. But then if you focus more on real-life bullying, it can be a bit more of [a] two birds, one stone approach. Because if you decrease say, toxic culture in a high school, you have less people who are generally worked up and upset and they will be less likely to take it out on someone that they can’t see later on.

In diverting resources to improving interpersonal relationships, this “two birds, one stone” approach simultaneously addresses traditional bullying and cyberbullying. This goes hand in
hand with the views held by Brenda and Leah, in which cyberbullying has become an additional tool for bullies alongside traditional forms of victimization, as opposed to replacing these traditional forms. While it is difficult to monitor online victimization, cyberbullying does not appear to be an entirely separate issue from traditional bullying. Therefore, by addressing the more accessible roots of traditional victimization, bullies will in turn be less likely to cause harm both in person and online.

Debbie holds a similar point of view, in that the causes of cyberbullying are based on more widespread societal issues at large.

Cyberbullying obviously happens, but I think something that’s even more, it’s not bullying, but it is the same root of it is that we’re all kind of judging each other and part of the reason why it’s so rampant now is because of the internet, because of social media…Don’t get me wrong, cyberbullying happens and it’s terrible, but that’s not the only thing we should be focusing on. I think that it’s a bigger conversation about how we interact with each other.

For Debbie, resources do not need to be diverted toward cyberbullying directly, since there are bigger underlying causes affecting society as a whole. The issue here is being too narrowminded; in this respect, nothing can be done to reduce cyberbullying without addressing larger concerns about the nature of interpersonal interactions in today’s day and age first.

Taking all of this into account, it becomes apparent that cyberbullying is dependently interconnected with both traditional bullying and toxic societal norms. Despite a concerning prevalence, cyberbullying and traditional bullying seem to have the same root causes, since the former has become just another tool for bullies to use. In other words, cyberbullying should not be viewed as a separate, ubiquitous problem from bullying when it comes to support and prevention. Instead, it just needs to be an included factor when addressing bullying and the societal problems causing it as a whole. While cyberbullying cannot be ignored, a “two birds, one stone” approach, like Dave suggested, appears to be the most effective route moving
forward. Moving past the literature and into personal experiences, the next chapter details when, where and how the participants experienced bullying, along with the immediate and lasting impacts of their past victimization.
Chapter III: The Experiences and Impact of Bullying

I want to preface this chapter by extending my gratitude to all of the participants for their openness, honesty and vulnerability in sharing their stories with me. In the following analysis, it would be impossible to include all of the moving narrative details I had the privilege of hearing. However, this is most definitely not out of disrespect for any of the interviewees. The goal is to outline commonalities, and to apply these findings in order to make systemic improvements on a macroscopic scale. I hope each and every participant knows the immense value of their contributions, and that I am able to ultimately make them proud with how I apply their insight and experiences.

This chapter discusses when, where and how bullying experiences occurred before college for all of the participants on and off school property. In addition, participants’ responses reveal a wide variety of experiences, both evident and subtle, that they identify as bullying. This includes a significant amount of victimization occurring at an early adolescent age. Lastly, this chapter details both the immediate and long-term effects of bullying victimization leading up to and throughout college.

I. When and where bullying occurs

The following three tables summarize when and where past bullying victimization occurred for all thirteen participants before entering college. Table 2 shows when past bullying victimization occurred, and illustrates that the issue is not just limited to high school experiences. Tables 3 and 4 show where past bullying victimization occurred, with table 3 representing locations on school property and table 4 representing locations off school property. From table 3, it is clear that a significant amount of bullying is happening outside the classroom while still
on school property. Table 4 shows that the same number of participants were bullied off school property as were on school property, and that the school bus may be of particular concern.

**Table 2 – When past bullying victimization occurred (before college)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Periods of time when past bullying victimization occurred</th>
<th>Percentage of interviewees with bullying experiences during this time period</th>
<th>Interviewee names (and grades if explicitly specified)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary school</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>Jessica (grades 4-5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Brenda (grades 1-2, 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Katherine (grade 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leah (grades K-4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Phoebe (starting in grade 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Debbie (grades 1-3, 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rebecca (grades K-2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Meghan (grade 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dave (all grades)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle school</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>Jessica (grade 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Brenda (grade 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Katherine (grade 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leah (grade 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Charlie (grade 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Phoebe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Debbie (grade 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Meghan (grades 7-8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dave (all grades)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Alex (grades 6-7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>Jessica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Brenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ashley (grade 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Katherine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leah (beginning of grade 9, summer after graduating)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Charlie (grades 9-10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Phoebe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Debbie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Greg (grade 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Meghan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Alex</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 – Where past bullying victimization occurred (before college) on school property

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locations where past bullying victimization occurred</th>
<th>Percentage of interviewees with bullying experiences at this location</th>
<th>Interviewee names</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On school property (total – all locations on school property)</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>Jessica Brenda Ashley Katherine Leah Charlie Phoebe Debbie Rebecca Greg Meghan Dave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom (subcategory – on school property)</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>Jessica Brenda Katherine Charlie Greg Dave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cafeteria (subcategory – on school property)</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>Jessica Leah Meghan Dave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside on school premises (subcategory – on school property)</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>Jessica (during lunch) Debbie (during recess) Rebecca (playground) Dave (playground)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular activities/school events (subcategory – on school property)</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>Ashley Katherine Phoebe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallways (subcategory – on school property)</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>Katherine Phoebe (in between classes) Dave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports practice field (subcategory – on school property)</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>Katherine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking lot (subcategory – on school property)</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>Katherine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 – Where past bullying victimization occurred (before college) off school property

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locations where past bullying victimization occurred</th>
<th>Percentage of interviewees with bullying experiences at this location</th>
<th>Interviewee names</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Off school property (total – all locations off school property; includes social exclusion and cyberbullying)</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>Brenda, Ashley, Katherine, Leah, Charlie, Phoebe, Debbie, Rebecca, Greg, Meghan, Dave, Alex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus (subcategory – off school property)</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>Leah, Rebecca, Alex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With other people, such as friends or teammates (subcategory – off school property)</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Katherine, Greg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer job (subcategory – off school property)</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>Leah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer camp, as a camper (subcategory – off school property)</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over the phone, verbally (subcategory – off school property)</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>Charlie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports practice field (subcategory – off school property)</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>Alex</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first thing to note is the significant percentage of participants (77%) who were bullied in middle school, with elementary school close behind at 69%. Due to recency, the original expectation was that those who volunteered to speak would have primarily been bullied in high school. Instead, while numerous participants certainly detailed horrific experiences from high school, the majority of them also brought the immense impact of early adolescent victimization to light. As a result, in order to best support past bullying victims transitioning into college, the long-term consequences of experiences occurring before high school need to be considered as well.
In addition, all but one of the participants’ descriptions included bullying experiences that occurred on school property (92% of participants). However, less than half of the interviewees said that they had been bullied in the classroom (46%); a significant portion of school bullying experiences occurred without readily accessible adult support/supervision. Other locations where bullying occurred on school property included the cafeteria (31%), outside on school premises such as during lunch or recess (31%), extracurricular activities/events (23%), hallways (23%), sports practice fields (8%) and even the parking lot (8%).

In terms of where bullying victimization occurred off school property (which was the case for 92% of participants, once again, and included social exclusion and cyberbullying), a common response (that directly relates to school) was the bus (23%). In fact, almost all of Alex’s bullying victimization occurred on the bus in middle school. “They, on the bus to school and back, would let me know that I was overweight every day.” While Alex was not bullied on school property directly, he was victimized every day going to and from school, away from proper supervision and accessible resources. Moving further off school property, Alex’s bullies later tormented him on local sports fields; having been unchecked in middle school, the same individuals targeted Alex years later under a similar absence of administrative support. Other instances of bullying happening off school property included in-person encounters at social gatherings and with teammates (15%), over the summer as a camper (8%) and at a job (8%) and over the phone verbally (8%).

II. The multitude of experiences that “bullying” encompasses

The following section describes what the participants identified as “bullying,” as experienced before entering college. Among the participants, two of the most common examples of bullying that came up – which can also be extremely difficult to detect – were social exclusion and forced
isolation. As Jessica said, “[In elementary and middle school] I was socially excluded to the point of, I would say something to people, and they would look at me and walk away and not acknowledge the fact that I was talking to them. That was a regular occurrence. It was mostly social in that sense, because people did not interact with me.” In Jessica’s case, she was excluded by being ignored – she was made to feel unheard and invisible. For Debbie, although the exclusion was even more subtle, she was similarly isolated from the student population in high school. “I was the type of person who just never wanted to branch out because I didn’t think I could… I’ve noticed that it tends to be a problem with a lot of teenage girls where it’s this subtle, really like sadistic, ‘we’re not going to say anything to you, but we’re going to make it very clear that you are not one of us.’” In following the trend of subtle exclusion, Ashley was also made to feel like she did not belong, especially within her student council group.

They wouldn’t listen or they’d make jokes that I clearly didn’t understand… We’d sit in a circle, and just the way it worked out, I was coming from a class far away, so I was usually the last one to get there, and the circle was usually closed by that time, and then I had to squeeze myself in somewhere. It wasn’t what people were saying, it’s what they weren’t saying, what they weren’t doing.

For Jessica, Debbie and Ashley, even when nothing was verbalized, there was a clear labeling of “otherness,” and consciously hurtful exclusion occurring.

A lot of social exclusion and isolation also manifested in more evidently deliberate ways, both on and off school property. Off school property, most social exclusion involved regularly not being invited to any social gatherings. This became particularly difficult when certain events, such as sleepovers, would be posted about on social media for everyone who was not invited to see. On school property, there were multiple instances of isolation occurring after direct, verbal confrontations. When Leah entered high school, she was not allowed to sit at the same cafeteria table as all of her friends from middle school. One of her friends at the table had
started to push her away from the group at the end of middle school, and told her that she was “not allowed” to sit with them in high school, claiming that the open seat was taken. “It was really weird,” Leah said, “and I totally lost all of the friendships from middle school because I no longer sat with them. I no longer talked to them.” As opposed to being subtly excluded, Leah was very directly pushed away from her social group and left to adapt on her own in isolation.

Phoebe had a similar experience, in which verbal victimization from someone who had previously been a friend led to social isolation.

I didn’t understand that [she] didn’t like me. I kind of felt like [she] was one of my best friends. And in ninth grade some time, we stage managed a show together and just before the end of the show she was like, “I hate you.” And I was like, “Ha ha ha.” [And] she was like, “No, I hate you. I don’t want to be your friend... I’ve just been friends to humor you. I don’t want to be friends with you.” …And my other friends tried to stay friends with both of us and did succeed to an extent, except that I didn’t want to be in the same space as [her], and [she] didn’t want to be in the same space as me. That obviously created issues.

Similar to Leah, Phoebe was directly confronted and pushed away from an established social group. While she was able to keep her friends, a divide was directly created in order to push her toward isolation.

In addition, participants described numerous experiences with verbal and physical bullying where the direct intention was not social exclusion or isolation. Verbal bullying included “typical put downs,” as Brenda described, such as “your hair is frizzy, you’re ugly,” and other direct, hurtful insults typically regarding physical attributes, possessions or personal hardships (i.e. academic struggles). Experiences of physical bullying included being pushed and punched in the classroom setting as well as the hallways, having rocks thrown at them, finding tacks in their boots and on their chairs, and also being regularly beaten up. The last point was especially relevant for Rebecca in grades K-2 on the bus.
We were bullied because we’re Jewish. We’d get on the bus in the morning and our neighbors and some other people who lived in the neighborhood close enough that we’d be on the same bus route would beat up my brother and [me]. After a while, because we went home, we told our parents, our parents went to the school. The school didn’t have any kind of means of intervention because it was the bus. The bus driver can’t stop the bus and stop the fight, and by then, we’ve already been hit... You try to intervene in a normal way, and then my brother and I just reached a point where we were like, “You know what? No. We have to fight back.” So, then we started getting in physical fights.

In these instances, social exclusion was less of a primary motive; instead, harm was directly caused through bullies exerting power over their victims via verbal and physical assaults. It is also worth noting that this was the only experience of bullying, as described by the participants, that was directed at someone because of a protected status (religion).

While less common among participant responses, there were still experiences of cyberbullying occurring off school property in a variety of ways. Since instances of cyberbullying occurred without face-to-face interaction, victims were left especially vulnerable to attack. For example, while on student council, Ashley and her fellow members often had to make up dances for pep rallies. However, in one particular instance, when Ashley was performing in a show outside of school, she received a text from the council members saying, “‘We made a dance. Here’s the video. If you don’t send us a video of yourself in an hour, then you’re not allowed to be in it.’” So, there’s a video of me still in my costume from my show learning the dance and doing it, and I got ready to send it to them, and they were like, ‘Ha, ha. It’s just a joke. Just kidding.’” Ashley was easily targeted because none of this had occurred in person; Ashley had no reason to think that they had not made a dance without her, and had no way to know what was true and what was not going into this situation blind.

Building on this, various online platforms – such as social media sites and forums like Ask.fm (where questions and responses could be anonymously sent and publicly posted) – used anonymity and an absence of direct confrontation to easily cause harm and dispense hate.
In addition, while primarily less explicit in nature, some participants described bullying experiences surrounding their sexual orientation. For Ashley, she is gay, but attended a Catholic high school that was not accepting of homosexuality. As a result, she said, “I basically really suppressed everything, and I tried not to deal with it as long as possible because I knew that I wasn’t in a safe environment at my school.” Despite not being directly victimized as a result of her sexual orientation, she was left to feel unsafe and unaccepted based on the culture that was fostered within the school. Jessica similarly dealt with indirect victimization as a result of her sexual orientation. She believed that “part of the reason people thought I was weird and would bully me is probably because I did not express an interest in guys.” While she was not explicitly mistreated as a result of her sexual orientation, she was nevertheless victimized for her identity and behaviors.

One other pre-college experience of bullying that was discussed, while only applying to Leah, was workplace bullying. Leah worked as an intern at a political organization the summer after graduating high school, and interestingly, she noted that it was “the most pronounced bullying I’ve ever experienced, and it’s also the one that I think the least people would count as bullying.” Unlike all of the other bullying experiences that have been described, Leah’s bully was her boss, who was a middle-aged adult and not a student. She picked her out specifically, and would yell at her and make her feel “totally incompetent;” Leah could do no right by her. After being terrified of her boss and how she would treat her the entire time she was there, Leah ended up leaving the job a week earlier than she had anticipated. With a clear power imbalance in place, Leah was relentlessly victimized until she could not handle being there anymore.

The main takeaway here is that bullying is defined, and can occur, in so many different ways. With some victimization experiences being far more subtle than others, it becomes all the more
essential to not simply address what can be clearly seen. Being silently excluded from a social group is far more difficult to detect than a physical fight that breaks out in the classroom. However, that does not mean that more subtle forms of victimization are not happening, or having a devastating impact, for the effected students.

III. The immediate and long-term impact of bullying victimization before entering college

The following section describes the immediate and lasting impacts of bullying victimization among the interviewees. Specifically, participants described the effects that their experiences with bullying had on their mental and physical health, academics, social relationships and substance use/abuse before entering college. While the effects are described individually, many of them were experienced simultaneously, and as a whole they represent the overall impact on the participants.

A. Mental and physical health before college

In terms of mental health, multiple participants self-harmed as a result of their bullying experiences before entering college. Meghan described it as an “outlet,” and that it was “a way to physically feel the pain and externalize it.” She used it as a form of coping from grades 6-8, about once a month, and “as things started to build up, then that would be a way of expelling all of it.” She got the idea from a friend, who was also self-harming as a result of her parents going through a divorce. For Jessica, she said, “I was self-harming in ways that I’ve never seen portrayed in the media. I didn’t realize that it was self-harming because I was like, ‘well, I’m not cutting myself, so obviously I’m fine.’” Since her methods of self-harming were less “typical,” she was more accepting of them as a form of coping.

Building on this, depression was a consequent result of many of the bullying experiences endured by participants. Jessica identified as having been depressed and suicidal, while Phoebe
was depressed throughout the majority of her middle and high school years leading up to college.

For Dave, he was depressed in sixth and seventh grade, but said that it was not clinically diagnosed as a result of not seeking support.

I never went to seek help and frankly, I was really good at hiding it. I was scary good at hiding it…100% felt like I had to hide it from school, from my family 100%…I had clear evidence that my family, although they did care, were not good at handling other people’s emotions, not even good at handling their own emotions…I knew if I told them, they would try, but that would have been after they really understood it, which would have taken a lot of work on my end…[and] emotional patience that I did not have as a sixth grader. It would have taken so much for me to explain how I felt to them and then to make them understand that and then to try and have them help guide me into seeking help. And in my mind, it just wasn’t worth it.

Without having an adequate support system in place, Dave was unable to appropriately treat his depression. Lastly, Alex was diagnosed with “relatively severe” clinical depression in high school, and believed that it at least in part was impacted by his experiences with bullying in middle school. However, he did acknowledge a potential genetic component to his diagnosis.

Even more so than depression, participants’ experiences with bullying caused a significant amount of anxiety. For Leah, the most difficult part of her bullying-induced anxiety was the struggle to compartmentalize. “I think that that’s a really big impact in that it’s not just making me feel bad, it’s making me feel like that’s all I can think about. It felt like I can’t think about just friends, I can’t think about whatever. It was into every part of my life for a period of time. I couldn’t get rid of it.” Even when Leah was not actively being victimized, she was actively thinking about her negative experiences as a result of her anxiety. Dave also believed that the anxiety he had was entirely a “cause and effect relationship” with his bullying experiences. As he said, “it became a thing of I was more anxious, so I acted more strangely and feared what other people thought and were going to say more, which caused me to be more anxious…It was a vicious, destructive cycle.” In Dave’s case, his anxiety and his bullying experiences were
actively contributing to one another. Alex also said, "there was a really strong, direct correlation between the anxiety and the bullying" he experienced before college. His anxiety manifested itself in social contexts, and would keep him from being able to attend social gatherings. He said that he was invited to a lot of parties, but "I would walk in, have a panic attack, throw up and have to leave. My mom would wait in the parking lot when she would drop me off because she knew I would just come back out." Even when he was being included from a social standpoint, he was unable to acclimate to these settings.

In terms of physical health, coping by eating was a common response. For Katherine, her struggles with binge eating led to further victimization. "Physically, I coped by eating. So that made me gain weight and that's not great because then people had a reason to make fun of me.” She was eventually diagnosed with an eating disorder as a result. Debbie also struggled with eating as a method of coping, and said, "I definitely ate instead of facing my feelings.” Dave had a similar approach to coping, with binge eating habits manifesting around the same time as his depression in middle school.

Lastly, many participants needed to mentally escape in order to cope with their bullying experiences before college. Katherine needed to feel like she “wasn’t there,” and spent a lot of time daydreaming as a result. Charlie liked to read in order to escape, and both he and Dave used video games for the same purpose as well. Leah, on the other hand, used people as her form of escaping from her reality.

If I couldn’t help other people, then I was failing, and there was something really, really wrong. I think personally because of the bullying, that’s all I wanted to do. I didn’t want to focus on me. I didn’t want to think about me…I never drank or used other substances, but to some extent, I sometimes felt like I was using people to sort of satisfy that need for an escape.
In order to cope, Leah would take on other people’s problems, while avoiding her own. “I think it really wasn’t healthy, and also [I] wasn’t sure how else to cope. I knew it was healthier than other options I had, so I just went with it.” However, she often took on more than she was qualified to handle as a result, and it became an immensely stressful method of coping.

**B. Academics before college**

Bullying victimization affected the participants’ academics in a variety of ways. For Leah and Phoebe, their struggles with bullying pushed them to focus on their schoolwork. Leah described academic work as a “refuge,” while Phoebe described having the most academic success during her worst periods of social anxiety and isolation. “Looking at my grades from high school, I think I got progressively happier every year in high school and my grades got progressively worse,” she said. “I think a lot of my social anxiety ended up manifesting itself in being really into my academics.” For Leah and Phoebe, schoolwork was a way of focusing on something other than what they were going through.

However, the consequences of bullying victimization prevented other participants from being able to thrive in an academic setting. As Dave said, “the way my anxiety manifested itself was if I was at all stressed out like an academic assignment, I couldn’t think. I couldn’t do it. And that led to, especially in early high school and all of middle school actually, that led to a lot of problems with being able to get large-scale homework assignments done or projects…It made it hard. Once I got stressed, my brain went into overdrive.” For Katherine, while her bullying experiences had less of an effect on her grades, she struggled to feel comfortable in the classroom. With her bullies whispering and laughing behind her in class, she struggled to focus while contending with a significant amount of stress.

**C. Social relationships before college**
Socially, several participants’ bullying experiences impacted the ways they formed relationships with other people. As Jessica said, “I think that I ended up being pretty socially stunted, because I did not talk to people my own age for two years.” Building on this, while Charlie had friends throughout all of high school, he struggled to make connections with people his own age as a result of his bullying experiences. “It affected more the demographics of people that I spent my time with…I generally avoided my grade until we were seniors. So, things got easier for sure as time went on, but I still didn’t really feel part of my peer group until I was older.” While Charlie was able to make friends, he felt the need to make connections outside his immediate group of peers. Debbie had similar struggles when she was younger; while she was able to connect with adults, she was unable to develop the skills to connect with people her age.

In addition, bullying victimization and its resulting consequences socially isolated many of the participants. For example, while Leah was directly cut off from her friends, Katherine “never went to any parties because I was afraid of what would happen.” In addition, Dave was left with “no confidence to seek out friends. I had three, four friends total until fifth grade, sixth grade, and I knew that I couldn’t find more. That was it.” He did not feel capable of making deeper social connections as a result of his previous victimization. For Debbie, her past experiences often left her alone in high school.

There’d be many days where I wasn’t sure if I was going to sit with someone at lunch or I wasn’t sure if anybody was going to check in with me to see how I was doing or anybody was going to talk to me…I wasn’t necessarily sure that there’d be every day where I’d be okay…I had friends in high school. Two of them I’m still close with. I just didn’t know. I would go through my days thinking, “am I going to talk to somebody today?”

Debbie did not feel connected to her school community, and it left her feeling unseen and unsupported.

D. Substance use/abuse before college
Several participants coped with their bullying experiences through substance use. Katherine described her drinking as a “social pressure release” from everything she was going through.

“For example,” she said, “people hated me because I didn’t go to parties, they said that was weird. So that caused me to have a lot of stress and have to deal with it by drinking.” For Jessica, she started drinking as early as middle school.

I started drinking in seventh grade regularly. By most definitions of alcoholism, it doesn’t fit. But I started drinking in seventh grade regularly and most people don’t do that. I probably would have done it more had I had more ready access to alcohol than I did. So, I still drink but I don’t drink very regularly now. I think…in retrospect, I probably was on the verge of having substance abuse problems in middle school when I started drinking, when I was recovering from depression.

While Katherine was directly coping with her bullying-induced stress through drinking, Jessica was using alcohol to subconsciously cope with her resulting struggles with mental health.

In addition, for bullying victims who were struggling socially, substance use became an accessible method for fitting in. Both Meghan and Greg smoked marijuana in part as a way to fit in with their friends. As Greg said in reference to switching high schools,

I think actually what's interesting is a lot of kids…were starting to smoke…sophomore year and so it was kind of my way of feeling like I could re-integrate back in with them. It wasn’t the only way, I would do other things, but it was like “oh, they’re all starting to smoke, I’ll do it with them.”…[It could] smooth the transition…[and] get me back in the circle with my friends.

Since Greg was concerned about fitting in socially, he was drawn to smoking as a way to assimilate with his peers.

IV. The long-term effects of past bullying victimization on the transition to college and overall college experience

While the previous section focused on the pre-college experience, this next section examines the long-term effects of past bullying victimization on the transition to college and the college experience overall. After discussing the participants’ readiness for college and what their
transitions were like, mental and physical health are looked at once again, along with academics, social relationships and substance use/abuse throughout college. Lastly, this section notes any positive impact from past bullying experiences as described by the participants.

A. Transition to college

The first thing to note is that many of the participants were looking forward to college as a fresh start, instead of fearing that their negative school experiences would continue. Brenda was hopeful about her transition to college, whereas Debbie, Dave and Alex viewed college as the way to escape from their pasts. As Debbie said, “I really wanted to break away from my high school as much as I could, so I really tried to not think about this as a continuation of high school, even though it was literally three months after,” and she was “so ready” to start over. Dave shared a similar perspective, believing that “college was absolutely, ‘get me away.’” I didn’t hate my school, I just hated about 30% of the people who currently were there.” In addition, Alex “wanted to be able to just sort of decide who I wanted people to see me as. It was nice because I didn’t have that opportunity in high school because everyone already knew me.” As a result, Alex approached college with the mindset of being able to reinvent himself.

Building on this, many of the participants were able to thrive at the beginning of college. For example, Brenda reflected on her first year by saying, “I got through school so that I could have just this gorgeous college experience and appreciate it for everything that it is.” Moreover, Ashley described her transition to college as a “clean break” from her high school experiences, and Charlie had a “very smooth transition,” in which he formed many new friendships. For Leah, she was able to start fresh by surrounding herself with healthy relationships.

I think the people that I surround myself with are quality people. I’m learning that sometimes surrounding myself with people who are really unhealthy, and trying to help them, is not always healthy for me. I had a really, really good friend freshman year of college who sort of fit the mold of someone that I needed to help. I did one thing wrong,
and they decided that they couldn’t be friends with me anymore. I’m trying to figure out, obviously not just stay away from people who have issues, but not to seek them out in the same way that I think I probably did in high school.

In college, Leah has been able to move away from her detrimental methods of coping, and form mutually beneficial friendships. Phoebe also emphasized the importance of the support system she developed for the success of her transition to college.

However, for others, it was extremely difficult to adjust to life in college at the start. As Katherine said, “my transition to college was really hard…[it] was hard because it creates a sense of isolation and it’s hard to get out of that…it’s hard to trust people too because of that.” Katherine struggled to not carry the impact of her past experiences with her into college, and it left her feeling alone upon arrival. Debbie also had a difficult first semester, as she struggled to form friendships and make connections with new people. “I sort of feel like the people who I chose to hang out with freshman year, most of them are no longer people who I hang out with,” she said. “I never wanted to leave. I just had a harder time connecting…making real friends was harder for me my first year than it is now.” With recent experiences of social exclusion, it was difficult to adjust in a new social setting, surrounded by strangers.

B. Mental and physical health in college

In terms of mental health, several participants described learning more about themselves in college. As Debbie said, “I’ve learned to take care of myself more. I’m learning a lot and I just think I’m a whole better person than I was before I came here. I just know what I need now, and I know how to ask for my needs unlike before.” For Greg, he said, “I’m able to learn about how I now relate to my past because I think everyone whether they’re aware of it or not is still feeling strongly about their past experiences. To be able to have that understanding and understand myself enough that I can live a healthy lifestyle and be happy moving forward is all I can really
ask for.” Debbie and Greg both have a greater understanding of who they are now in college, and are able to take care of themselves in much healthier ways.

However, in terms of the impact on mental health, there can definitely still be carry over into college from past experiences with bullying. Alex is still suffering from depression, and his past experiences still affect his self-esteem and self-efficacy on a daily basis. In terms of how that manifests, Alex said that he is constantly putting himself on display.

I put myself now in positions of times where I will get objective judgment because I just have this urge to know what other people think of me in an objective way. I do mock trial now, and I’m literally judged for two days in a row. I get this just very weird satisfaction from reading these numbers that people give me in terms of my performances and my perceived personality. I just need to see it.

As a result of how he was treated in the past, and made to feel inferior, Alex participates in activities where he can receive objective feedback; he has sought out ways in which he feels he is being viewed and evaluated in a fair manner.

In addition, Alex’s past experiences with bullying still have a direct impact on his self-worth. “Every morning I wake up, and I go look at myself in the mirror, and I’m unhappy,” he said. “Every morning. That’s junior year of college, and I’m the captain of the rugby team here, and I’m 6’1”, 190 pounds. I’m fit, objectively. My BMI is fine, and I’m healthy, but I will never be pleased with how I look because I was told that I shouldn’t be for so long, so that’s tough.” Alex had his self-worth determined for him by middle school bullies, and the impact has lasted well into his college experience.

C. Academics in college

Overall, the participants have thrived academically in college despite their past bullying victimization. Brenda made the Dean’s list in each of her first two semesters, while both Charlie and Debbie described having “great” academic experiences throughout all of college. In
addition, Ashley said, “I really love being in an environment that encourages you to learn because I really like learning, but so much of high school is like, everybody has to take the required English, science, and math. While we do have distribution requirements, it’s just not the same as high school, so I love that academic aspect of it.” Despite the lasting impacts of their past experiences with bullying, these students have found academic success at the college level.

D. Social relationships in college

One of the lasting impacts of past bullying victimization was that it forced some participants to change the way they interact with others. Their experiences gave them a deeper understanding of empathy and compassion; they did not want others to feel the way they did before college. Leah viewed this as a positive change, saying it makes her “think about people’s motivations…[and] emotions.” For Charlie, he has actively adopted this approach in his everyday life, and tries to make himself “a resource and…a friend.” Both Leah and Charlie learned how they did not want to be treated from their past experiences, and want to help prevent similar struggles for other people.

Another long-term effect for past bullying victims is a general mistrust of others. For Katherine, her mistrust of other comes from feeling alone and isolated for so many years. “It’s like a self-fulfilling prophecy,” she said. “You’re lonely so you don’t go out, and so you stay lonely.” She also added that “It’s hard when you get hurt again and again to try to form meaningful relationships…It’s hard to find someone that I feel like…is safe…That’s always going to affect me and it does make it harder to make friends.” Similarly, Alex said that he is “very skeptical and cynical of people,” and that he does not “really trust a lot of people.”
Building on this, other participants still constantly worry about what people think of them. “Sometimes it’s hard to read a room of people and how they’re perceiving me,” Debbie said. “That’s something that’s always on my mind. It really shouldn’t be, but how people perceive me is on my mind all the time...That’s a direct result of everything I’ve gone through...[and] it comes in when I’m trying to make a relationship or when I’m trying to interact with somebody.” For Meghan, she too shares a general mistrust of other people. “If someone gives me a compliment,” she said, “I’ll be like... ‘they’re just saying that to laugh about me later.’...If I hear a group of girls laughing somewhere, I’m like, ‘oh...they’re laughing about something I’m doing.’” Even long after their bullying victimization has come to an end, years of constant belittlement has caused participants to struggle with trusting others at face value.

Lastly, past bullying experiences have also manifested themselves in victims feeling the need to put on “masks,” in which they feel unable to truly express themselves in various social settings. For Alex, this is a problem he struggles with on a daily basis.

[My past experiences have] given me an ability to sort of socially chameleon myself. I’m rarely speaking candidly. I rarely let my guard down. It’s harder for me to talk honestly than it is for me to talk in character...I don’t really act as myself a lot of the time...[And] I know which people now are going to like which characters. I can figure it out, it’s not that hard. People are pretty predictable in general, but it’s a lot of work. One of my friends yesterday asked me, “how do you keep this up?” This was a literal conversation I had yesterday. I was coming back from mock trial tournament. We woke up at 6:15 a.m. both days, went to bed at 1:00 a.m. both days because we just had work to do. I was talking and answering questions all day long and after our last tournament I was still smiling and making jokes, and doing heel kicks in the air, and stuff like that. One of my friends just asked the question, “how do you keep this up?” The answer I didn’t give but was thinking was, “I don’t keep it up. I change it.” Every person I talk to is a different interaction. I don’t have to be really bubbly all the time. It just depends on who I’m talking to. It’s easy to stay in character. It’s really easy to stay in character, it is method acting. It’s not real life. It’s a lot easier for me to do that now. I think that’s...because of middle school, because of this constant knocking me down for who I was even though it wasn’t necessarily for who I was, so I no longer am that. A lot of the time I just don’t act how I am...It’s interesting because I have a lot of people that I’m friends with, but I’m also very frequently lonely because there are very few people who are friends with Alex and not one of Alex’s characters. It gets really hard.
How can someone feel comfortable with who they are, if they have always been told they were not good enough? To this day, Alex still manufactures himself on a daily basis; he chooses to be who he feels others want him to be at any given time, as opposed to responding to his own thoughts and emotions in social settings.

E. Substance use/abuse in college

While less common, some participants have used substances in college in order to cope with the lasting impacts of their past bullying experiences. For Alex, drinking was a consequence of constantly wearing a mask in social situations.

[When drinking] I’m worried about things, but with no consequences because people expect me to not be smooth. People expect me to be silly and trip over my own words and stuff like that, so there’s an out. There’s always an excuse, and it’s okay, so stuff like that. Now I don’t really do that because…I’m under control. I never have had any abuse problems. I just definitely have noticed that I would start to think about it sometimes as a way to get out of it, as a way to get out of some of my feelings.

By drinking, Alex had an excuse if his feelings or behavior were met with resentment; if he was not being “perfect” for people, then it was a reflection on the alcohol as opposed to his identity.

Using substances also allowed for apparent social inclusion, and fitting in within certain groups of people. After stopping for a couple of years in high school, Greg resumed smoking marijuana before entering college in order to socially prepare for the transition. “I’m nervous about this transition…I know [smoking is] going to come up when I start school, people are going to want to, so I might as well start again because it’s like a way to get to know people again.” It has been an active process for Greg now in college to move away from that mindset, and to not feel like he needs to smoke in order to make friends. “In order to fit in socially,” he said, “I think one of the things I’ve realized [is that] …you don’t have to compromise your own interests [and] do things you don’t want to do.”

F. Positive impact – reflecting on past experiences
Despite numerous deleterious effects, interviewees were able to identify some positive impacts that past bullying experiences have had on their lives. For many of the participants, past bullying victimization made them stronger, and they are content with who they are now; their past experiences in part shaped their identities, and they would not want to change what defines them today. As Katherine said, “I’m happy with where I’m at. I’m happy with who I am and if they couldn’t destroy me and all that, I’m not going to.” In addition, for Brenda, her past experiences with bullying have inspired her career path.

One of my goals is to get my master’s [degree] or my PsyD in theatrical therapy. So, you use theater as a mode to heal basically…I don’t think I would quite understand, particularly children and then children who grow up and become adults that have underlying problems because of bullying, I don’t think that I would be able to understand them on the level that I do unless I experience some of it myself firsthand…I think kind of the biggest gift that I’ve gotten from bullying is that, I can empower myself and through that…in the future specifically, I can empower others.

Not only have Brenda’s past experiences with bullying defined her perspective in life, but they have inspired her to help those with similar challenges for a living.

Most of the participants’ past experiences with bullying have clearly had lasting impacts on their lives in a variety of ways. In order to mitigate the negative effects, and to enhance the potentially positive outcomes, the final chapter of this study details what can be done to best support bullying victims both before and throughout college.
Chapter IV: How to Support Past Bullying Victims

This final chapter outlines what schools – both before and throughout college – can do to better support bullying victims. Before college, schools should strive to better advertise and normalize the resources they already provide. At the college level, it is important for schools to expand their range of resources for struggling students. As a result, this study proposes both a formal group therapy program that starts a few weeks into the semester for transitioning first-year students, as well as a more informal, student-run program of individualized care. The individualized care program would be available from the very beginning of orientation, and run continuously throughout the year. Additionally, this chapter includes healthy coping techniques that the participants are currently employing in their every-day lives, and emphasizes the importance of a healthy and present support system.

I. Providing support before college for bullying victims

As discussed earlier in the literature review, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is a well-established bullying prevention program that currently exists for grades K-12. However, a potentially effective program such as the OBPP will have a limited impact without proper distribution. The OBPP is actually widely available, but it is still not being universally implemented, with only about 4% of schools in the United States having adopted the program (Olweus & Limber, 2010). Even with a seemingly excellent program such as the OBPP, it will not be effective if schools are unwilling to look for/choose comprehensive solutions to the issue of bullying.

Furthermore, none of the participants’ schools used the OBPP, and most of the participants did not have any formal anti-bullying programs in their high schools. As Alex said, “we definitely had a couple of videos that we had to go into an auditorium and watch where it’s like,
‘hey, don’t be mean.’ The people who that video is targeted for are going to skip that assembly.”

In addition, some schools were far more implicit with their views on bullying than others. For Debbie, her high school essentially wanted students to uphold the values of the school and “live by the honor code” without specifically addressing bullying in any way. Yet for other students, like Greg, any attempts by their high school were entirely forgettable. “I don’t really remember if there was any anti-bulling stuff,” he said. “And that means and kind of shows that if there was, it might not have been so impactful or memorable, which is probably an issue.”

One of the ways that Alex’s high school countered this lack of formal support was through various programs across the school. “I think that there isn’t really any sort of club, or organization, or required activity to prevent bullying or to deal with bullying,” he said, “but I think that there are a lot of organizations that students have created themselves, even if not directly, to deal with it because it is sort of inevitable right now.” In places where bullying is occurring, but not being addressed head on, alternative forms of support become increasingly necessary; students might not be aware that they are being bullied without proper awareness or intervention, but they are still struggling, nevertheless. Alex was the head of the mental health awareness club at his school, and while bullying was never explicitly talked about, he said, “the description of activities that people didn’t classify as bullying, that I would have, [came up] every day.” In this way, even at a school where bullying was not being directly addressed, there were opportunities for students to discuss their experiences, feel heard, and still receive support similar to that of a more formal anti-bullying program.

Participants were also asked, outside of anti-bullying programs, if their high schools advertised any forms of support for bullying victims, such as counselling. The overwhelming
response was that there was not nearly enough advertising of resources. As Alex said in regard to his school,

> It was sort of implied that the clinical counselors and the guidance counselors were all trained in dealing with bullying and stuff. I think that it was just sort of assumed that people got bullied. I think that people assumed that we’re in high school, we can help ourselves out by seeking out help even though it’s...hard to seek out help when you don’t want or don’t know that you want it... Any verbatim expression of, “hey, this will help you with bullying,” I don’t think that existed.

In addition to guidance counselors, Alex’s high school had a formal counseling center with at least four clinical counselors. The clinical resources for supporting current bullying victims, as well as past victims dealing with the lasting consequences of bullying, silently existed; those who could help did not make it clear to students that they were available.

Therefore, without adding on any additional programs or resources for bullying victims, schools should simply do a better job of marketing the support that they already provide. If students actually knew the specific services that their schools could provide in terms of bullying support, then they would be able to start getting the help they need at a much earlier age.

However, as Meghan and Alex both pointed out, there is still an unfortunate stigma surrounding therapy and help-seeking for things such as mental illness. As Meghan said, “no one really talked about it,” as it was not something that was viewed as common or normal. Furthermore, Alex noted that this stigma not only prevents open conversations, but can also keep people from getting the help they need entirely. “With people who need to go to counseling, for people who actually think that it would help them… they’re going to be the ones who are most worried about being seen [going into or] leaving the office.”

Consequently, schools would additionally need to maintain a simultaneous focus on normalization and de-stigmatization surrounding the use of these resources. “I think normalization has to start at the roots” Dave said. “So, the place to start with that is definitely in
the education system to show that therapy and getting mental and emotional help is normal and it is okay and that all of that is valid. That’s just where you have to start with.” As a result, a counseling center would need to be situated in a logical location within the school, that allowed for privacy and comfort when entering and exiting. In addition, as part of advertising their services, schools would need to make it clear that students’ experiences do not have to meet a certain threshold or criteria to “qualify” for counseling; students should not feel like their situations are not severe enough to warrant support, or feel like they are escalating their situation further by visiting the counseling center. Moreover, particularly for students struggling with the mental and physical consequences of victimization, they should not feel like they are diagnosing themselves simply by taking part in counseling. While schools need to clearly and coherently advertise the resources that they have available to support bullying victims, they also must address student concerns about using these resources, and actively encourage students to seek the help they need.

II. **Healthy coping techniques from past bullying victims in college**

One of the most wonderful parts of listening to participants’ experiences was hearing about the healthy coping techniques they are currently employing. By sharing some of these accounts, this study hopes to provide additional strategies/resources for other past bullying victims.

**Rebecca**

I write a lot. I listen to music. I have breathing exercises that I do. I have mindfulness exercises that I do. I go to therapy. I try to be open with my friends.

**Brenda**

I don’t have my parents [at school], so I have to replace that with something… I have gotten really good at asking my needs, because I know that I’m a good friend back and that I would be there in an instant for the people that I love. So, I don’t feel shy anymore to just say, “Hey I’m not feeling so good, can you come sit with me?” Or, “Let’s go on a walk.” Or let’s do this, that or the other thing.
Ashley

I don’t love to work out, but I find that it’s very helpful because that focus, you can’t be stressed about anything else. That’s something that I found works for me, and even if I’m not working towards some big goal like completing some Ironman or anything like that, just having some goal in that moment to focus on has been really helpful.

Since my senior year, I took AP Psych, and we learned about the effects of gratitude, so I’ve been keeping a gratitude journal for like a year-and-a-half now that I write in every night and I just break down good things that happened in my day, and then just summarize the day and then go to bed right from there. So, that’s kind of helped me focus on the positive things. My philosophy is that it’s not that negative things aren’t happening; it’s what you choose to focus on and let affect you.

Katherine

If I don’t feel okay, just taking the day to myself and knowing that I have certain limits.

Phoebe

I think I’ve realized…how much having unstructured social time with just a few people where I’m not anxious about it, and being able to create those spaces, I think has been new, and I think I’m not always good at it, but I’ve gotten a lot better at it.

Debbie

I think I just have matured enough to realize that I am just one person at this school and that I can just be that person. Knowing that it’s okay to step outside or step out of whatever it is to just take a few minutes. That’s super empowering that I have that now. That I have that skill in my toolbelt.

Dave

If I need to cope, still the best thing for me is I’ll just sit down with someone and just hang out or I’ll go to a group of people and just hang out.

Alex

I play the drums a lot. I’ve been playing the drums since I was in middle school. I do think I’m really good at playing the drums, so it’s really nice to go down and do that, and have something that I’m confident about, and have something that is physically tiring as well as emotionally entertaining, and I don’t really worry about it because I know that I’m good at it. It’s nice to know that you’re good at something. That’s something I do for sure. I don’t feel stressed. One of the happiest times ever is when I’m playing drums because I don’t really worry about anything, which is very cool.
Sports. Any sort of competition is always fun. That really takes my mind off of things. If I go to play basketball, and now I can just focus on winning. If I go play rugby, it’s nice because I can just focus on scoring, or passing, or whatever.

Another factor that came up for many of the participants was the importance of a healthy support system. For example, without her familial support system, Debbie said, “I don’t know what it would have done. I don’t know if I would have turned to drugs, but I might have turned to self-harm.” Without the support system of friends that he developed in high school, Dave said, “for all I know, my depression could have relapsed, and I could have killed myself.” Whether it came from direct family or friends, a reliable support system was crucial to the overall health and well-being of these past bullying victims.

In addition, without this support, unhealthy coping tactics can form in its place. As Rebecca said,

I think I wasn’t really raised in an environment where I learned how to ask for help or talk about my feelings. I was really only shown that anger, yelling, throwing things, hitting is how you deal with things… I think I didn’t have other options because of what was going on, and I think I chose my coping mechanisms based off of what I grew up with, like seeing how [my parents] coped.

For Rebecca, it was difficult for her to develop healthy coping techniques because she simply did not have anything to base them off. Whether past bullying victims cope by writing, focusing on the positives, playing sports or anything else, the additional constant that remains is developing a system of support. Utilizing people who are already present to help, or seeking out those who will be able to listen and provide guidance, is critically important no matter what the next steps might look like for someone in need.

III. Providing support throughout college for past bullying victims

Not all past bullying victims are looking for the same kind of support. Some students are more comfortable with therapy, while others are not ready for formal intervention. In addition,
some students prefer to talk and learn from a group setting, while others need individualized care. As a result, with past bullying victims requiring a wide range of optimal support, how can an institution properly account for these variations? To effectively and comprehensively support past bullying victims with their transition to college, this study proposes two separate programs. First, facilitated by an institution’s counseling center, there should be a formal therapy support group for past bullying victims. Second, colleges should look into developing a more informal program of individualized care, maintained by students on campus.

Some of the participants who were in favor of the group therapy program currently do not have any forms of bullying specific support at their institutions. Jessica said, “literally anything would be an improvement,” and Charlie believed that “the question isn’t [what] more they could be doing, and more importantly anything that they could be doing, because they’re not doing anything.” At one of the institutions in particular, there are actually several group therapy programs already in place, but none of them are for bullying support. As Charlie said, “I think that that would be such a good and powerful thing for a lot of people transitioning into college, is just to go into a space and just be like, ‘I was horribly bullied.’” Especially for schools where other programs already exist, implementing an additional group therapy program seems plausible.

In terms of what participants said they would want to get out of the program, several of them just believed in the power of listening to and learning from other bullying victims. Students would be surrounded by peers who share similar struggles, and want to improve their lives in some capacity. In a supportive and collaborative environment, formally maintained by the counseling center, past bullying victims would be able to learn from and help one another as they transition to college. “Because if you know how to support a friend,” Brenda said, “then you
know how to support yourself. I think they go hand in hand.” Building on this, Dave thought “really learning about other people is what makes you a better person, or [what] makes you treat people better is just learning about them.” As a result, this group therapy program would allow past bullying victims to not only help themselves, but to help each other as they adjust to their new environment.

However, one of the most important things that came up with regard to bullying support during students’ first semester was timing. It was originally hypothesized that past bullying victims – undergoing an overwhelming transition to college – would require immediate support once they set foot on campus during orientation. However, multiple participants quickly pointed out that many students might not be able to dive into their traumatic past experiences while trying to adjust to life on campus. As Brenda said, with orientation, there are “a lot more factors, and you’re sort of putting your best foot forward, and you’re trying to impress people. It’s in that weird stage where you’re just…frantically trying to make friends.” For someone who is trying to start fresh and escape their past bullying victimization, or is struggling to adjust to their new surroundings, or both, orientation becomes a challenging time to rehash trauma. Regardless of what a formal bullying support program entails, it could be rendered useless if it took place at the wrong time. As a result, while the group therapy program should be advertised during orientation, it should be offset by a few weeks to make the most meaningful impact.

For students that require immediate support, though, there still have to be accessible bullying support resources – and this is where the individualized care program could be implemented. This more informal program would be student-run, likely by past bullying victims themselves, and could function like drop-in hours for any past bullying victims who are struggling with their transition to college. A program like this one would be accessible for students as soon as they
arrived on campus, and could subsequently be used on a need-to-need basis. Since it would not have a defined start date, there would be no fear of falling behind if a student did not choose to participate for a few weeks. In addition, with the individualized care program, not only could it be additionally beneficial to students, but it could also take some of the load off overtaxed counseling centers. As Greg described,

I think helping people feel empowered to talk about whatever they’ve gone through and to be honest about it and to have people who won’t make you feel bad for being honest is important… Sometimes all people need is an ear to talk things out with and listen to. So, I think just to have someone to be able to talk to… to have someone who can just listen and not treat them or intervene.

Sometimes students are not looking for formal therapy, and simply need to feel heard and to be able to verbalize what it is going on with them. This program could do just that for students, as it would provide them with a safe space to receive support and voice how they are feeling while transitioning to their college environment.

Training materials on counseling support – and specifically bullying – could be provided by an institution’s counseling center, and confidentiality training for student counselors could be provided similar to other student-run confidential resources on campus. In addition, these student counselors’ personal accounts of how to succeed on campus would become an essential part of the program. For Rebecca, she envisions a low-pressure environment enhanced by student experiences.

I think something that gives people the space to feel validated for struggling in that transition, but yet doesn’t force them to talk about it and doesn’t force them to go seek resources…[and] have seniors share their stories of like “I was bullied. This is how I dealt with it at [my college]. This is how [my college] was helpful.” …I feel like hearing other people’s stories is a really good way to validate people, but also recognize…it’s really personal. It’s really individual. Obviously one person’s bullying experience is not everyone’s experience at [their college], but their story can be uplifting.
Introducing student perspectives into the situation could allow transitioning students to feel more comfortable and prepared right from the start. In addition, they could also receive even more school-specific strategies that they otherwise would not receive from clinical counselors or other non-students.

However, some incoming first-year students would not be comfortable sharing with other undergraduate students at their school. As Meghan pointed out, “a lot of people who have been bullied…don’t trust other people…How do you know that little Susie in your talk circle isn’t going to turn around and say [something] that you said?” As a result, if possible (given the institution), there should be an option to speak with graduate students within the individualized care program. This would allow past bullying victims, who do not feel comfortable sharing with people who are in their social circle, to still receive the transitional support that they need. While some schools might not have graduate students, it is still important to have as diverse a group of student counselors (including various class years) as possible. In this way, students who do not feel comfortable speaking with their close peers could still utilize the program.

Outside of these two proposed programs, there are still other things that colleges can do to support past bullying victims. Katherine, for example, believes that there should be more forgiveness in terms of class attendance when it comes to mental and physical health.

I just wish sometimes there were a little more forgiveness in terms of bad days…I take Arabic, and [with language classes] you only can miss like two days at the most, and I suffer from so-and-so, and I don’t want to personally go for academic accommodations because I don’t want that on my record. It’s just something personal. And I just wish there was a little more forgiveness for that.

Students cannot control when they are going to need to take a day off because of their mental/physical health, and when it will be too difficult for them to go to class. While policies
like mental health days could possibly be abused by those who do not actually need them,

increasing flexibility for bullying victims would be ideal in a college setting.

In addition, professors could also reach out to students more, especially throughout first-year classes. As Rebecca said,

I wish more professors had established themselves as resources my freshman year...My sophomore and junior year, I was declaring my major, I had professors who were like, “listen, if you are stressed about your career path or stressed about declaring, I’m here for you.” I would’ve loved to feel that “I’m here for you” in my first semester...A lot of professors were like, “I know that some of you are new, so we’re going to review.” I don’t need review. I’m a smart person. I know the subject matter...Like, can I come talk to you about the fact that I’m losing my mind?...Not all professors are equipped to deal with that and not all professors are good at that...[but] some are and could really help people...Even as a senior I go to my advisor’s office and I’m like, “Help.” He’s always there. He’s always there to support me. But if I had known that freshman year, it would’ve been a really different year.

While it would not be reasonable to expect professors to take on the additional role of clinical counselor, it is important for them to be aware of the immense impact they can have on their students. Even if it is just having a personal conversation outside of class, or proposing some stress management techniques during their office hours, professors could play an extremely positive and beneficial role in students’ first-year, transitional experiences.
Conclusion:

I. Defining “bullying,” and framing the issue of cyberbullying

This study first outlined the need for a less rigid definition of bullying by researchers, policymakers and schools, as identified by participant responses. Olweus and Limber (2018) define bullying as “(1) [concerning] purposeful unwanted negative (aggressive) behavior that (2) typically implies a pattern of behavior that is repeated, and (3) occurs in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power or strength, favoring the perpetrator(s)” (p. 139). Much of the relevant literature shares an identical or very similar definition. However, while this definition has been widely adopted in the literature, it lacks a similar consensus among bullying victims; among those who self-identify as having been bullied, there is significant variation in how they define the term. Some of the participants identified isolated incidents as bullying, without the need for repetition entirely. Others felt that while repetition was not necessary for a behavior to be considered bullying, it could make the experience far more severe. Overt intentionality was also left out of some definitions, while others defined bullying only through its specific behaviors. In addition, more than half of the definitions closely paralleled that of generalized/chronic generalized harassment, which is a categorically different form of victimization from bullying in the literature.

As a result, this study proposes a more fluid approach to defining and addressing bullying victimization. The term “bullying” should encompass all of its different experiences; bullying behavior should not go undetected because it does not line up with an established definition. While this was a relatively small sample size (N=13), bullying prevention and intervention strategies will be ineffective if researchers, policymakers and schools are all framing the issue
differently than the victims themselves. By opening up the definition of bullying to include all of its different forms, more struggling individuals will be able to receive the support they need.

In addition, cyberbullying has not replaced traditional forms of bullying victimization – it has simply been added alongside these other forms. Although it has not become the predominant form of bullying, cyberbullying still needs to be addressed as a readily accessible form of victimization that can be especially dangerous. As a result, this study proposes a “two birds, one stone approach” for preventing cyberbullying. Instead of viewing cyberbullying as a separate and more pressing issue, it just needs to be included as another factor when addressing the toxic culture that causes all forms of bullying. Furthermore, since identifying traditional bullying could be more manageable than preventing widespread hate online, and since the two appear to have the same root causes, addressing the former could simultaneously prevent the latter.

II. When, where and how bullying occurs and is experienced

While it was expected that the majority of the participants would have experienced some form of bullying in high school, more than two-thirds were bullied in elementary school, and over three-fourths were bullied in middle school as well. As a result, the impact of early adolescent victimization cannot be overlooked when addressing bullying. In addition, in regard to bullying victimization on school property, less than half of participants were bullied in the classroom. Instead, other common places where bullying occurred included the cafeteria, hallways and at extracurricular activities/school events. Off school property, aside from cyberbullying and social exclusion, bullying victimization primarily took place on the bus and at various social gatherings. Although some forms were far more subtle than others, a wide range of experiences were identified as bullying.
This study also examined the immediate and long-term effects of bullying victimization. Leading up to college, mental and physical health, academics, social relationships and substance/use abuse were looked at among participants. Several participants described self-harming and binge eating as ways of coping with their bullying. Participants’ experiences with bullying also commonly led to depression and anxiety. Academically, while some participants buckled down on their schoolwork to avoid thinking about what they were going through, others were unable to focus as a result of the constant stress they were under. Socially, bullying victimization experiences often led to isolation. In addition, some participants used alcohol to cope with their bullying experiences, while others smoked marijuana in order to feel like they could fit in socially with their peers.

Participants then described their transition to college, before again discussing mental and physical health, academics, social relationships and substance use/abuse in college. Lastly, participants touched on the positive impact that their experiences with bullying have had on their lives. While some participants struggled to adjust to college, especially socially, others were able to thrive upon being placed in a new environment. Academically, participants were also able to find much success in the classroom, despite the lasting impacts of their past bullying experiences. From a social standpoint, though, many participants described still feeling a general mistrust toward others as a result of their past experiences. In addition, while less common, some participants have still used alcohol to cope with the lasting impacts of past bullying experiences, and others have still used marijuana to fit in socially. In terms of positive impact, many participants identified as being stronger now because of their past experiences, and were happy with who they have become.

III. How to support bullying victims
In order to best support bullying victims, this study proposes several steps that can be taken both before and throughout college. Something that participants noted was that their high schools did not advertise any forms of support for bullying victims. Despite many schools having resources available to help students with bullying, and its resulting consequences, they were not adequately marketed. As a result, along with focusing on normalizing and destigmatizing counseling/other forms of support, this study proposes that schools strive to advertise/describe the resources they already have in a more effective manner. In accordance with participant responses, it also became clear that forming a support system – whether it be social or familial – is an essential part of being able to cope with bullying victimization in a healthy manner.

In addition, this study proposes two programs for colleges to implement in order to best support past bullying victims who are transitioning from high school. The first is a formal group therapy program, run by an institution’s counseling center, while the second is an individualized care program maintained by students on campus. The individualized care program would be more informal, and function like drop-in hours, with confidentiality training for student counselors being provided similar to other student-run confidential resources on campus. Since not all past bullying victims are looking for the same thing, the goal in offering a variety of programs is to provide the most effective and comprehensive support possible for those who need it.

IV. Limitations and future research

The first limitation of this study is its sample size (N=13). With a limited number of participants, the data here is more insightful into the experience of bullying than it is representative of bullying experiences as a whole. As a result, being able to conduct a similar
study with a large, representative sample size to test these findings is advised for future research. Building on this, as described earlier in the literature, racial and ethnic minorities experience bullying victimization at a higher rate but are far less likely to perceive or report these experiences as bullying. These differences in reporting can consequently skew the data on bullying prevalence in society (Lai & Kao, 2018). However, all thirteen of the participants who volunteered for this study were white. In order to examine the significant impact of race and ethnicity on bullying victimization, it is recommended that future studies use a more racially and ethnically diverse cohort. This could likely be achieved while simultaneously trying to obtain a greater number of participants.

In addition, retrospection is another potential issue for a study based on past experiences. All of the participants were current undergraduate students, but they were tasked with describing experiences from the very beginning of college, and for all of their time in grades K-12. While some retrospection is necessary (i.e. reflecting on the impact of past experiences on present day life), future studies could be stretched longitudinally. While the time and resources would be extensive, researchers could identify a cohort to follow through their years of school up through the transition to college. In this way, there could be documentation of impact and reflection as experiences are actually happening.

In contrast, if future studies were not made longitudinal, an emphasis could be put on speaking with more sophomores, or even first-year students. This study, while receiving wonderfully reflective insight on the college experience from many upperclassmen, only had four volunteers who were sophomores. To limit the effects of retrospection, future studies could focus on speaking with more underclassmen than upperclassmen. In addition, first-year students
could also potentially be recruited to participate. These students could be interviewed right after the orientation period ends, or potentially at the end of the first semester.

Lastly, while the selection criteria for this study specifically included undergraduates who had been bullied before college, future research could also examine continuing victimization in college. As mentioned earlier, past bullying victimization has been shown to predict future victimization, including into college (Young-Jones et al., 2015). Among the participants for this study, 31% have had experiences with bullying at the college level. Therefore, the effects of current bullying victimization – both for those who had and had not been bullied before entering college – could be examined in future studies.
Appendix

A. Interview Guide

Title: A Deeper Look into Bullying Culture, and its Effects on Incoming College Freshmen

Thank you for participating in this study. I am hoping to learn a bit about your past experiences with bullying, and the impact they have had on your college experience. I am particularly interested in how your experiences affected your transition to college. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Could you describe your high school?
   a. General geographic location?
   b. Size?
   c. Relative demographic composition?

2. How would you define bullying?

3. What are your thoughts on cyberbullying? From your personal experiences, how accurate is the media’s portrayal of the issue in terms of prevalence and scope?

4. Did your high school have any anti-bullying programs? If so, could you describe them?

5. Did your high school advertise any form of support, that you knew of, for victims of bullying?
   a. i.e. Counseling

6. Could you describe your past experiences with bullying before entering college?
   a. What forms of bullying had you experienced before coming to college?
      i. Cyberbullying, verbal, physical, and/or social?
   b. In what settings had you experienced bullying before coming to college?
      i. In the classroom, outside of the classroom, off school property entirely, etc.?
   c. What did these experiences entail for you?
   d. How did these experiences affect your day-to-day high school experience?
      i. Academically?
      ii. Socially?
      iii. Mentally?
      iv. Physically?
   e. How did you cope with these experiences before entering college?
      i. Any forms of substance use?
         1. Any struggles with substance abuse?

7. Did your experiences with bullying influence where you chose to attend college? If so, in what ways?
8. Could you describe your college?
   a. General geographic location?
   b. Size?
   c. Relative demographic composition?

9. How would you describe your transition to college?
   a. Were you still experiencing any continuing forms of bullying victimization from high school?
      i. i.e. The same people from high school still bullying
         1. If yes:
            a. Could you describe those experiences?
   b. Did you have any new experiences with bullying victimization, now stemming from your college environment?
      i. i.e. New people in college bullying
         1. If yes:
            a. Could you describe those experiences?

10. Did your college employ any sort of orientation program for students who had been previously bullied before coming to college?
    a. If no:
       i. Do you think you would have benefitted from an orientation program like that? Why or why not?
    b. If yes:
       i. Did you choose to participate? Why or why not?
          1. If yes:
             a. Could you describe what the program entailed?
             b. Do you think the program was a positive experience? Why or why not?
             c. Did the program help with your transition to college? Why or why not?

11. How would you describe your college experience so far?
    a. Academically?
    b. Socially?
    c. Mentally?
    d. Physically?
    e. Have any continuing forms of bullying victimization from high school carried over into college?
       i. i.e. The same people from high school still bullying
          1. If yes:
             a. Could you describe those experiences?
             b. How have you coped with them?
                i. Any forms of substance use?
                   1. Any struggles with substance abuse?
    f. Have you had any new experiences with bullying victimization, now stemming from your college environment?
i. i.e. New people in college bullying
   1. If yes:
      a. Could you describe those experiences?
      b. How have you coped with them?
      i. Any forms of substance use?
      1. Any struggles with substance abuse?
   g. How do you normally cope with stressful or upsetting situations?
      i. Any forms of substance use?
      1. Any struggles with substance abuse?

12. Do you wish there was more that your college would do to help past bullying victims transitioning from high school? If yes, in what way(s)?

13. Has anything positive come out of your past experiences with bullying? If yes, how so?

14. What questions am I not asking, that I should be, to better understand how past bullying victimization affects the college experience?
   a. What more could I be asking to make the most effective difference?

Demographics:
- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Religion
- High school graduation date
- College enrollment date
- Race
- Ethnicity
- Age
- College major(s) and minor(s)

Using the interviewee responses to Q. 14, the following questions were incorporated into subsequent interviews:

1. Why were resources that you have identified as helpful so helpful to you?

2. How did your experiences with bullying affect your ability to form and develop relationships with others?

3. How did your experiences with bullying affect your life at home?
References

* denotes a secondary source


