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# Journal of Access, Retention & Inclusion in Higher Education

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**Journal of Access,  
Retention and Inclusion  
in Higher Education**

**Edited by John B. Craig, Ed.D.**

*Foreword by*

**Denise Lujan**

**NOSS, President**

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

John B. Craig, Ed.D.

*John B. Craig, Ed.D., is Associate Professor and Chair, Educational Development Services and Director of the Academic Success Program at West Chester University of Pennsylvania.*

We are pleased to present this year's edition of the Journal of Access, Retention and Inclusion in Higher Education (JARIHE). This year, we decided to focus on student success broadly defined. That is, we desired to focus the many factors which can impact student success. Traditionally, the literature, rightfully so, focuses on cognitive indicators like grade point averages, graduation and persistence rates and standardized exam scores. While these traditional measures are important, there are other non-cognitive aspects of student success which are important. Kuh et. al. (2011) posit, "Novel definitions are born out of ingenuity and necessity and may require multidimensional measures, given the increased complexity of the postmodern world and the need for institutions to be more inclusive of a much more diverse student population." As scholars and practitioners, we must be sensitive to this new reality and allow our practice to be duly informed accordingly.

To this end, readers of this special edition will notice a wide array of topics are covered, all with an eye towards improving, access, retention and inclusion for students. Moreover, in this edition, we feature work which looks at cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of student success. Authors discuss topics such as food insecurity, parental involvement, promising practices to improve academic success for Black male students, grit and resilience and college choice for female Somali students studying in the United States of America. The work presented herein is valuable to all practitioners, researchers, policymakers and students and can be applied in a wide variety of higher education institutions, in general, and to myriad academic programs, in particular. The breadth and scope of the work presented in this edition point to the fact that student success is influenced by a plethora of factors. Equipped with this knowledge, practitioners, administrators, researchers and policymakers are better positioned to meet the needs of students. This edition of JARIHE contributes to the growing student success research in ways which advances our understanding and motivates ever the more to provide the types of support to students that helps them meet their goals of earning college degrees.

Finally, the work we present in this edition is not exhaustive and as scholars, we recognize the need for ongoing research, practice and dialogue. We encourage readers of this edition to read critically and apply, where appropriate what is most useful. Additionally, we hope this work inspires further exploration into these and other areas of access, retention and inclusion in the higher education arena. As the times continue to change, colleges and universities must be willing to change in ways which responds to and even anticipates students' ever-changing needs. Colleges and universities must be prepared to holistically educate students who are coming from all walks of life and have many backgrounds. To meet this challenge consistently, it is imperative that all of us work to tear down barriers and build new bridges, such that all students succeed.

Kuh, George D., Kinzie, Jillian., Buckley, Jennifer A., Bridges, Brian K & Hayek, John C. (2011). *Piecing Together the Student Success Puzzle: Research, Propositions, and Recommendations: ASHE Higher Education Report*. John Wiley & Sons, 2011.

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## FOREWORD

As the President of the National Organization for Student Success, it is my honor to write the forward for the fall 2020 Journal of Access, Retention, and Inclusion in Higher Education's new publication focusing on student success. NOSS's vision is to assist education professionals in making a positive difference in the lives of students. There is no better way for NOSS to accomplish this than by partnering with our esteemed colleagues at JARIHE. JARIHE provides an opportunity to learn about all the positive work being done to help students be successful.

Those of us in higher education use "student success" frequently, particularly when discussing retention and degree completion. However, I suspect that we have many different definitions of student success and what it looks like for institutions, faculty and staff, and students. The beauty of these differing definitions is that we can focus on our piece and define what student success means and looks like to us in a way that supports the overall mission and vision of our institution. Focusing on what we can impact allows for the innovation and creation of programs and policies that improve student academic and professional success

This publication of JARIHE is focused solely on sharing those innovations and initiatives that are helping students succeed. Written by practitioners, these articles provide us with promising practices that have worked. Each of us can use these practices to spur creativity and innovation to build programs that facilitate the development of students' academic skills and unique strengths and empower them to succeed in their educational and professional pursuits. As educators, our ability to think outside the box is unparalleled and our willingness to share what works is unmatched. For us, it is as Helen Keller stated, "Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much."

It is with great pleasure, I present you with this edition of the Journal of Access, Retention, and Inclusion in Higher Education.

Warmest Regards,  
Denise Lujan, NOSS President



## How Grit and Resilience Predict Successful Academic Performance

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### ABSTRACT

Predicting student success and preventing dropout are crucial efforts for higher education institutions. Many indicators are used to predict retention and performance such as high school GPA, SAT scores, and individual personal factors. Grit and resilience are two such individual factors useful in helping identify characteristics of successful students, although they have sparked much debate. For this longitudinal study, college students' resilience score from the Effective Life-Long Inventory (ELLI) and the Grit test were used to predict cumulative grade point average. Resilience and Perseverance of Effort (POE), a subscale of the Grit test, were significant in predicting student performance. Efforts to improve retention and performance would benefit from interventions to build resilience and grit to help students be more aware of their strategies and overcome obstacles and thus prevent them from dropping out.

Key words: persistence, student success, grit, resilience, ELLI, academic performance

### Introduction

#### How Grit and Resilience Predict Successful Academic Performance

College success is important for individual and family sustainability. Education reduces disparities in income, resources, and health for individuals and their families (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). According to the National Student Clearinghouse, in 2014 around 29 million students dropped out of college and only 13% enrolled again over the next five years (Cooper, 2019). Predicting student success and preventing dropout are crucial efforts for higher education institutions to help those who come to college with different skill sets and resources.

Students drop out of college for many reasons including financial, social, academic preparation, and family issues (Azmitia et al., 2018). High school GPA and SAT scores often predict college success although individual personal factors are considered important predictors

as well (Akos & Kretchmar, 2017; Baier et al., 2016; Cazan & Truta, 2015; DeBerard et al., 2004; Koretz, et al., 2016; Yu, 2017).

### **Grit and Resilience**

While questions of terminology abound, Duckworth and Yeager (2015) suggested that “non-cognitive” factors influence student performance. The term “cognitive” refers to “ability and knowledge constructs that can be reliably measured by standardized intelligence and achievements tests” (West et al., 2016, p. 149). “Noncognitive”, in contrast, is a somewhat misleading term given that all such processes are cognitive in nature. However, for our purposes, noncognitive refers to processes that affect performance enabled by the cognitive processes but are not specific to so-called intelligence and achievement (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; West et al., 2016).

Both grit (Duckworth et al., 2007) and resilience (Edwards et al., 2016; Masten, 2018) have been identified as personal, “noncognitive” factors associated with academic persistence and success. Grit is defined as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087). Grit has two components: “consistency of interest [COI] and perseverance of effort [POE]” (Akos & Kretchmar, 2017, p. 165). Resilience is defined as the “capacity to adapt successfully to significant challenges” (Masten, 2018, p. 16). The concept of resilience is derived from the literature on recovery from disasters and has been associated with prior adverse experiences. Resilience is said to mediate between stressors and life satisfaction (Cazan & Truzan, 2015). These concepts are similar in that they both lead to long-term gains, one through continuing effort (grit) and the other by managing when the path forward contains obstacles (resilience).

### **Characteristics related to Grit and Resilience**

Much has been written about whether grit and resilience are useful in helping identify characteristics of students who succeed academically. Some authors have questioned whether the concepts, particularly grit, are distinct enough from more established ones, the so-called “jangle fallacy” (Credé et al., 2017) and whether their measures have construct validity and predictive value (Credé et al., 2017; Fong & Kim, 2019; Muenks et al., 2017).

Grit has been related to the concepts of conscientiousness and self-control but is defined as more sustained over time compared with the other two (Akos & Kretchmar, 2017). Muenks et al. (2017) found that there was overlap among grit and personality and behavioral characteristics such as “effort regulation, cognitive self-regulation, and engagement” (p. 616), making it difficult to determine whether grit is a separate concept or merely another term for similar constructs.

With respect to academic performance, Weisskirch (2018) found that students’ grit scores did not relate to either predicted or actual grades in a class. Self-esteem, instead, was a significant factor in students’ ability to predict a grade and, combined with students’ reported use of general learning strategies, predicted their score on the POE subscale of grit.

Deakin Crick et al. (2015) considered resilience to be part of a larger learning system which includes internal factors, such as creativity and critical curiosity, and external factors, such as social organizations and politically determined curriculum. Resilience, as measured by the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI), is considered the opposite of fragility and

dependence, and has to do with the ability to overcome setbacks (Deakin Crick & Xu, 2008). “Dependent and fragile learners more easily go to pieces when they get stuck or make mistakes. They are risk-averse. Their ability to persevere is less, and they are likely to seek and prefer less-challenging situations” (Deakin Crick & Xu, p. 2008, p. 391).

Fong and Kim (2019) argued for the need to consider “academic buoyancy” which they identified as the ability to manage “chronic and acute academic adversities” (para. 9). They suggested that students’ academic buoyancy may apply more appropriately to typical academic challenges. Moreover, Martin and Marsh (2009) argued that academic buoyancy is more episodic or limited in scope, both in terms of intensity of the challenges as well as timeframe. Additionally, they stated that resilience is reactive whereas buoyancy is proactive, with the focus on keeping on top of work rather than having to react to difficult circumstances. However, Fong and Kim (2019) found that grit, based on the Grit-S measure (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), an 8-question short version of the Grit test, predicted academic achievement beyond what academic buoyancy and a measure of future time perspective together could account for.

Given these findings, it appears that both grit and resilience have some support to be considered distinct concepts, adding to the understanding of individuals’ persistence and success in their endeavors. Kannangara et al. (2018) indicated that it is imperative that research pinpoint the relationship between grit and resilience and how they contribute to academic success. They cited one source that found a negative correlation between grit and resilience although this is an unpublished master’s thesis and so further research is warranted. In contrast, Karaman et al. (2019) found that the Grit-S translated into Spanish had a similar positive relationship to a resilience measure as did the English version.

### **Grit, Resilience, and Academic Success**

Academic success has two main outcomes: retention and performance. Whether students finish a challenging course or complete their degree are measures regarding retention. A grade in a particular course, semester grade point average (GPA), or cumulative GPA average are measures of performance.

The Grit test has mixed results in terms of its predictive ability for student success (Akos & Kretchmar, 2017; Weisskirch, 2018). The POE factor predicted GPA better while COI predicted career choice and major change of adults better (Akos & Kretchmar, 2017). The Grit-S total score predicted reaching the final round of a spelling bee and retention of West Point cadets better than either subscale alone (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009).

Hodge et al. (2018) examined how grit related to student reports of their academic performance and their grade in a course. They found that grit was related to increased engagement, which was defined as a combination of “vigour, dedication, and absorption” (p. 452). Engagement was found to mediate the link between grit and academic productivity, suggesting that those students who rated themselves as higher in grit were more likely to push forward and engage in their studies and thus perform better.

West et al. (2016) showed that students’ self-reports of grit are likely affected by “reference bias” meaning that the students’ ratings of themselves are influenced by their perceived comparison group. They found that students in a high-achieving school may see themselves less positively compared to those in a lower-achieving school. Thus, students assess their own abilities in relation to those around them, and their assessment may affect how they

engage academically depending on whether they see themselves as more capable than others. If students perceive that others are more able than themselves, they may expect less of themselves and be less likely to persist than if they feel they are more capable than those around them.

Research on resilience shows similar results in that students' self-perceptions influence their sense of how they can persist and overcome challenges. Cazan and Truta (2015) described resilient students as ones who perceive stressors as less problematic and are better able to manage challenges. Frazier et al. (2018) found that students who perceived that their stressors were greater and reported having fewer resources to manage those stressors were more likely to have lower GPAs. They also reported they were less able to cope with the stressors and were less resilient in the face of adversity.

Johnson et al. (2015) discovered an indirect effect of perceived resilience on student academic performance. Those who perceived themselves as more resilient were more likely to use "regulatory strategies" which included time management, self-regulation, and effort-regulation behaviors.

Thus, students who score higher on grit or resilience measures tend to believe that, with more effort or continued persistence, they can succeed and thus, are more likely to activate behaviors that lead to future success. They may attribute their success more to internal characteristics and be less daunted by failures. They may have more of a growth mindset whereby they believe they can make changes in themselves, rather than a fixed mindset that leads them to a static approach to learning (Dweck, 2007). Thus, it may be that the characteristics of grit and resilience influence the outcomes for students less directly and more as a result of other factors such as self-esteem, and behaviors such as self-regulated behaviors and course-related activities.

### **Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of the current study is to examine the role of grit and resilience for students' academic success. This study is part of a larger effort looking at student persistence and dropout over time. We looked at students close to the beginning of their academic careers and plan to follow them until they graduate or drop out. We want to see if measures of grit and persistence can predict who will make it in their academic program and who will switch or drop out. We expect that grit and resilience scores may change and that some students will learn that they can succeed, creating a growth mindset and others may have factors such as financial or family that make completing their degree difficult at this time. The current study is a preliminary analysis of the measures of grit and resilience that were employed at the beginning of the study and how well they predict students' academic performance.

Research questions:

Can academic success, indicated by cumulative GPA, be predicted using grit and resilience measures? Do these measures suggest that the concepts of grit and resilience are distinct from each other?

## Hypotheses

For this study, the following are the hypotheses:

1. Grit and Resilience factors will be distinct from each other (H1).
2. Those with higher Persistence of Effort (POE) and Consistency of Interest (COI) will have higher cumulative GPAs (H2).
3. Those with higher levels of resilience will have higher cumulative GPAs (H3).
4. Resilience, POE and, COI will contribute separately to explaining the variance in cumulative GPAs (H4).

## Methods

IRB approval was obtained for the longitudinal study across three campuses of a large, multi-campus university in the northeastern United States.

### Study Design

The larger study began in Fall 2018 and will continue until students complete their degree or leave the university. The current study is a quantitative analysis of data comparing Grit and Resilience scores from the beginning of Fall 2018 (Time 1; T1) with students' cumulative GPA at the end of Summer 2019 (Time 2; T2).

### Participants and Procedure

Students at three campuses of a multi-campus university were recruited for this study. Those who provided informed consent had their data included in the study. Participants were asked to complete the ELLI and the Grit test at T1. Cumulative GPA were collected at T2.

### Measures

#### *Demographics.*

After receiving informed consent information, participants completed a form providing information regarding the following demographic factors: age; gender; major; number of credit hours completed and whether they had completed credits at another university or college; commuter status; personal relationship status; whether they family responsibilities; parents' education level; family income; and the number of hours of employment per week. See Table 1 for the summary of the demographic information.

#### **Effective Life-Long Inventory (ELLI)**

The ELLI (Deakin Crick et al., 2004; Shaffer et al., 2018) is a 72-question inventory that participants completed online after receiving an email invitation. It measures seven factors: creativity, changing and learning, critical curiosity, learning relationships, meaning making, resilience, and strategic awareness. For the purposes of this study, only the resilience measure, formerly known as the inverse of fragility and dependence, was used for the comparison of the grit and resilience factors. Cronbach's alpha for the fragility and dependence measure was reported as ranging from .71-.81 (Deakin Crick & Xu, 2008). See Table 2 for sample questions.

#### **Grit.**

The Grit test (Duckworth et al., 2007) includes six questions identified as measuring POE and six as measuring COI. Participants indicated whether each statement was "very much like me", "mostly like me", "somewhat like me", "not much like me", and "not like me at all". See

Table 2 for sample questions. The Grit subscale scores were calculated as a sum of the total points for the six statements. Cronbach's alpha for these scales are POE = .71, COI = .70, compared with the Duckworth et al. (2007) alpha scores of POE = .78 and COI = .84.

## Results

### Analysis Plan

Initially the ELLI subscales and Grit total and subscales were examined to ensure that assumptions about normality were met. Bivariate relationships were examined to ensure linearity, no outliers and no multicollinearity between predictors in the later regression models, the latter determining that Hypothesis 1 was supported. Since Grit total is made up of two scales and thus it was highly correlated with both the POE (.79) and COI (.84) scores, it was not included in the regression analysis with individual subscales.

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for the Grit subscales and Resilience measure are presented in Table 3. Results of the bivariate correlation indicated statistically significant positive relationships between cumulative GPA and the Grit POE score ( $r(108) = .34, p=.000$ ) and a trend between cumulative GPA and the Grit COI score ( $r(108) = .17, p=.071$ ) supporting Hypothesis 2, and between cumulative GPA and the Resilience score ( $r(108)=.38, p<.0005$ ) supporting Hypothesis 3.

A multiple regression was calculated to predict cumulative GPA based on Resilience, POE, and COI score. Hypothesis 4 predicted that the independent factors of Resilience, POE, and COI would account for a statistically significant amount of variance in cumulative GPA. The standardized regression for this work is:

$$Y_{\text{gpa}} = \beta_1 X_{\text{Resilience}} + \beta_2 X_{\text{POE}} + \beta_3 X_{\text{COI}}$$

A significant regression was found ( $F(3, 108)=7.86, p<.0005$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .18,  $R^2_{\text{Adjusted}} = .16$ . Resilience and POE were both significant predictors of cumulative GPA. As shown in Table 4, the results of the multiple regression showed that COI did not independently predict cumulative GPA, thus Hypothesis 4 was only partially supported.

## Discussion

Success in college, both in terms of degree completion as well as achievement of higher grades, requires a long-term commitment to achieving one's goals. Grit and resilience are factors associated with success in the long term since those with higher levels of each are more likely to persist even when confronted with challenges. Research on these characteristics has questioned how they are associated with future success as well as whether they are truly distinct from other factors that had previously been explored such as conscientiousness and self-control (Credé et al., 2017; Muenks et al., 2017). The current study explored the relationship between grit and resilience, using two commonly used measures, and how they predict future academic success, measured in this case using cumulative GPA.

The results from this study suggest that the abilities of overcoming obstacles and maintaining effort are associated with academic success. Given that grit and resilience retain their distinctive, independent roles in the outcome, this supports the first hypothesis. While both Grit subscales, POE and COI, and the ELLI-Resilience measure are individually correlated with cumulative GPA, the strongest predictors are POE and Resilience. Support of the second and third hypotheses dovetails nicely with the regression. For the fourth hypothesis that all three

measures would be independent predictors of GPA, only the POE Grit subscale and the Resilience measure, but not the COI subscale are indicated as significant predictors. In other words, there is unique predictive validity of part of Grit and resilience in this outcome.

These findings support the notion that both grit and resilience are distinct factors that can aid students in succeeding in their academic endeavors. The concept of persistence of effort is thus related to how much one pushes ahead and works towards long-term goals. The concept of resilience, from the perspective of the ELLI (Deakin Crick et al., 2004; Deakin Crick & Xu, 2008) framed as the opposite of fragility and dependence, is more focused on managing one's ability to overcome obstacles. It seems that while there is overlap in these two factors, there is enough distinction to warrant relying on both for research on student success.

Previous research on resilience has shown that those students who are considered more resilient employed more measures to assist themselves in their endeavors (Johnson et al., 2015). Thus, it is not just that they have a sense of being able to succeed; they also do more to ensure that they will succeed. It would be expected, therefore, that students who had higher resilience scores also had higher GPAs since they would engage in practices aimed at ensuring their success. Thus, it is not enough to say that resilience alone will lead to academic success or will do so in a direct manner, but one must consider that resilience may be a moderator leading to this success.

The second subscale of the Grit test, COI, on the other hand, appears to focus more on whether individuals become distracted by other projects over time or finish what they have started. It may be that the COI subscale is able to predict different aspects of student behavior such as changing majors or schools. College is a time where students are encouraged to explore, and so consistency of interest may vary depending on when it is measured during their college experience and what their major is. Since some of the participants in this study are bachelor's degree students and others are associate degree students, there may be varying degrees of consistency of interest in some of these groups. This may be particularly true for those who had to commit to a major from the outset of their degree program (e.g., Physical Therapist Assistant program students) compared with those able to explore their options early in their academic careers (e.g., Human Development and Family Studies students), whose interests therefore may change over time.

## **Limitations**

Given that cumulative GPA was used as the measure of academic success, the results of this study focus more on the ability to do well in classes rather than the long-term achievement of goals, at least at this point in the research project. Later it may turn out that grit supersedes resilience in terms of finishing school whereas resilience has to do with improved performance. Thus, the results may be limited by the timing of when the snapshot is being taken within the study itself.

One problem with using cumulative GPA is that early GPA affects the cumulative one. For students in some majors, courses that are "weeders", such as Anatomy and Physiology, which function as gatekeepers are often taken early in a program and can have a significantly negative impact on GPA. Thus, cumulative GPA may be front-loaded with difficult courses and so whether the first-year grades or cumulative grades end up predicting later performance remains to be seen.

While past research (Akos & Kretchmar, 2017; Duckworth et al., 2007; Hodge et al., 2018) has also used cumulative GPA to indicate academic success, there are other factors associated with academic retention and performance. These include immigration status (O'Neal et al., 2016), social integration, race, and ethnicity (Perrakas, 2008; Pulliam & Gonzalez, 2018), and first-generation college student-status (Broda et al., 2018). Therefore, GPA tends to reflect numerous influences which complicates how it reflects the notion of academic success.

Additional limitations of this study relate to measurement issues for the instrument used to identify resilience. In this study and others using the ELLI (Deakin Crick et al., 2004; Deakin Crick & Xu, 2008), it is difficult to examine very closely the questions since it is proprietary and not available to be looked at in its entirety. It is not possible, therefore, to determine completely how the concepts of grit and resilience are different. While the Grit scales are available to analyze and have been extensively (Credé, et al., 2017; Fong & Kim, 2019; Muenks et al., 2017), resilience measures are less uniformly used and available for close examination.

### **Future Direction**

As indicated earlier, academic success is divided into two main components: retention and performance, with this study focused on performance as measured by cumulative GPA. Future studies will expand this perspective and examine how student retention, or persistence, is related to grit and resilience.

As the Consistency of Interest (COI) subscale suggests, part of grit is determined in connection with one's persistence in a certain area. While it may be important to persist when things get tough, it may also be important to re-evaluate and potentially switch fields when the student becomes aware of a poor fit with their major. Thus, persistence may be negative if it leads a student to continue in an area that will not work over the long term. Examining students' reasoning for switching to a new field may be illuminating. Determining whether students find another major that is suitable for them or whether they drop out of college altogether would further the understanding of what persistence means in these situations. It is beyond the purview of this study to follow students after they drop out of school, but it would be expected that some would find a better fit in the working world and not return to college while others may drop out temporarily and then return having more success. Thus, while it will be good to examine whether students change majors, stay in school, and eventually graduate, it is important to note that dropping out of college may not be maladaptive in the long run.

In terms of whether grit and resilience change, comparisons of students' scores of both factors at the beginning of the study and then later the same year and into future years will be examined. Some participants in the study have now completed the ELLI up to four times and so it will be determined if there is some consistency over time for them or if there is an upward trend or something else entirely.

It is also important to explore how resilience and grit may be enhanced in students who are at risk. Shaffer et al. (2018) found that students who were encouraged to reflect upon their learning strategies as indicated by their ELLI scores increased their scores. It may be that employing a specific training model may be useful in helping students develop the ability to overcome obstacles and thus prevent them from dropping out. As this conclusion is being written during the time of the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, it is particularly important to understand the factors that aid and serve as barriers for student academic success. Learning how to help

students develop additional grit and resilience and manage in difficult times is imperative to student and institutional success.

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**Table 1. Demographic information for the sample  $N=126$ ,  $n$  (%)**

Age	18-20 98 (77.7)	21-30 26 (20.6)	31+ 2 (.2)		
Gender	FEMALE 82 (65.1)	MALE 43 (34.1)	OTHER 1 (.01)		
Major	HDFS <sup>a</sup> 33 (26.2)	Forestry 28 (22.2)	PTA <sup>b</sup> 33 (26.2)	OTHER <sup>c</sup> 49 (38.3)	
Race/ethnicity	EA <sup>d</sup> 100 (79.3)	B/AA <sup>f</sup> 8 (6.3)	Multiple 9 (7.1)	OTHER 9 (7.1)	
Semester at PSU	1-2 62 (49.2)	3-4 44 (34.9)	5-6 17 (13.4)	7 3 (2.4)	
Commuter	YES 71 (42.1)	NO 55 (43.7)			
Parent1 education	Less/HS/GED 42 (33.3)	Some College 15 (11.9)	College degree 53 (42.1)	Grad degree 13 (10.2)	
Parent2 education	Less/HS/GED 53 (42.1)	Some College 20 (15.8)	College degree 39 (30.9)	Grad degree 7 (5.5)	
Employment	Under 20 hrs/week 20 (15.8)	20-41+ hrs/week 54 (42.3)	Not employed, looking 12 (9.5)	Not employed, not looking 31 (24.6)	
Family obligations	NO 92 (73.0)	Siblings 25 (19.8)	Children 4 (3.2)	Parents or grandparents 3 (2.4)	

Family income	\$49K and under 24 (19.0)	\$50K-\$99K 35 (27.8)	\$100K+ 20 (15.9)	Unknown or no answer 42 (33.3)
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Footnotes: a=Human Development and Family Studies, b =Physical Therapist Assistant, c = other includes Nursing, Health Policy & Administration, d=European American, e=Black/African American

**Table 2. Sample questions for Resilience and Grit measures**

Measure	Subscale	Sample question
ELLI	Resilience	When I have trouble learning something, I tend to get upset.
		When I have to struggle to learn something, I think it's probably because I'm not very bright.
		When I'm stuck I don't usually know what to do about it.
Grit	Consistency of Interest (COI)	New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.
		I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.
		I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.
		I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.
		My interests change from year to year.
	Perseverance of Effort (POE)	I become interested in new pursuits every few months.
		Setbacks don't discourage me.
		I am a hard worker.
		I finish whatever I begin.
		I am diligent.
		I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge.
		I have achieved a goal that took years of work.

**Table 3. Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations of the cumulative GPA after Summer 2019 with the predictors (N = 108)**

Variable 1 2 3 4

*Correlations*

1. Cumulative GPA-after SU 19
2. Resilience T1 .38\*\*
3. Persistence of Effort T1. .34\*\* .43\*\*
4. Consistency of interest T1.17.30\*\* .36\*\*

*Distribution Estimates*

*M* 3.29 56.16 24.019.4

*SD* .50 13.47 3.03.5

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

**Table 4: Hierarchical Ordinary Least Squares Regression Model Estimating Resilience, Persistence of Effort T1 (POE) and Continuity of Interest T1 (COI) independent impact upon or prediction of Cumulative Grade Point average at the end of Summer 2019 (GPA) 11 months later**

Variables	B	SE	$\beta$
Resilience Time 1	.01	.003	.26 **
Persistence of Effort Time 1	.03	.02	.21 **
Consistency of Interest Time 1	.01	.01	.04
(Constant)	1.90	.35	
<i>F</i>	7.86***		
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.16 **	

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

## Biography

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## Monmouth's Empowering Young Black Males Leadership Mentoring Program: A Catalyst for Retention, Access & Student Success

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### ABSTRACT

**This manuscript will provide an anecdotal report of the key elements of Monmouth University's Empowering Young Black Males Leadership Mentoring program and its relevance to the university's goals for diversity and inclusion. The program served dual roles, one as a catalyst for access to opportunities for personal and academic achievement for high school Black male students (mentees), and a retention initiative for current Black male college students (mentors). Throughout the program, participants were exposed to various leadership development workshops and topics related to academic, career, college access, and personal success. The program created a transformative learning opportunity for Monmouth's current Black male students to connect, inspire, and empower the next generation of young Black males toward personal and academic achievement. These mentoring opportunities provided engaging experiences that extend beyond the classroom. In addition, these experiences assisted in preparing the mentors for life after Monmouth as future community leaders and advocates.**

Keywords: Empowering, Black Males, Mentoring

### Introduction

Peer mentoring has been labeled as a well-utilized intervention in educational settings (Goodrich, 2018). Peer mentoring is a form of mentorship between two people or more and can be completed through fixed or reciprocal roles (Goodrich, 2018). According to Goodrich (2018), fixed roles peer mentorship is viewed as part of a larger hierarchical structure, where one student can share knowledge with a less knowledgeable peer. Peer mentoring can also be built within reciprocal relationships (non-hierarchical) where peers can share knowledge on an equal footing (Goodrich, 2018).

Many benefits are derived from peer mentoring such as social and personal growth, and cognitive skills (Goodrich, 2018; Castleman & Page, 2015; Sinclair & Larson, 2018). Both mentees and mentors experience these benefits. Connolly (2018) found that residential advisors involved in a peer-mentoring program saw a significant change in their personal academic

growth, specifically an increase in grade point average (GPA), growth of leadership skills, and balancing time management. Additionally, Sinclair and Larson (2018) discovered that a majority of peer mentors involved in a mentoring program in high school developed a sense of pride that prevailed throughout their adult life. Peer mentoring has been adapted to provide needed support to well-deserving groups and specific communities, like first-generation college students.

Monmouth's Empowering Young Black Males Leadership Mentoring program (EYBM) served dual roles, one as a catalyst for access to opportunities for personal and academic achievement for high school Black male students (mentees), and a retention initiative for current Black male college students (mentors). Thus, this anecdotal report will highlight key elements of the EYBM mentoring program and its relevance to the university's goals for diversity and inclusion.

### **Educational State of Black Male Youth**

While there is a large amount of research examining the benefits of peer mentoring on specific communities, there is a gap in the literature evaluating the effects of this type of mentorship on Black male youth. To understand the effect of any intervention on a specific population, a comprehensive history of the community should be reviewed. The educational state of Black male youth in the United States displays a visible opportunity gap that is motivated by racial inequities. An achievement gap between Black and White students has been noted to start as early as three years old (Burchinal et al., 2011). The lack of socio-economic resources and opportunities Black male youth receives can also be linked to low representation in higher education settings. For instance, the overall college enrollment rate for Black male youth was 36%, yet only 42% of this percentage completed a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). This racial and ethnic disparity in education parallels the imbalance of power in other institutions such as mass media and the criminal justice system, as displayed in the school-to-prison pipeline. Also, this population is vulnerable due to the heinous police targeting of Black males, which preserves social inequality and stigma against Black men in the United States (Teasley, Schiele, Adams, & Okilwa, 2018).

Yet, despite the oppression and systemic racism this group faces, few studies are evaluating possible interventions to assist this demographic. Hall (2011) asserts there is a lack of priority surrounding this demographic. A suggestion to overcome this barrier is to incorporate male elements and ensure that professionals working with Black male youth understand the limited access they have to resources and role models to inspire their success (Hall, 2011). Mentoring programs provide these opportunities for young Black males.

### **Peer Mentoring Programs & Black Male Youth**

The limited articles that explore mentoring programs with Black male youth found similar themes in both the academic and social categories. Gordon, Iwamoto, Ward, Potts, and Boyd (2009) observed significant positive changes in math and reading test scores for eighth-grade Black boys compared to those who were not in a mentoring group. Their research also found students in the mentoring program were able to develop a positive view of their racial identity and recognized the impact of internalized racism, a process connected to Cross's Racial Identity Theory (Gordon et. al., 2009).

Furthermore, Watson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Jackson (2016) investigated the importance of care the mentors and mentees shared for each other in a mentoring program in New York City

for high school students of color. Building upon the culturally relevant care (CRC) framework, the researchers concluded the essentiality of the education of Black and Latino males goes beyond the standard curriculum and requires a culture that fosters warmth, trust, and humanity (Watson et al., 2016). Using an empowerment-based positive youth developmental perspective, Sanchez, Pinkston, Cooper, Luna, & Wyatt (2018) recognized boys of color in a peer mentoring program as active agents of their growth and viewed them as potential leaders who could create change in their communities. This study further suggests the components of peer-mentoring programs, such as rapport-building activities; creations of safe spaces, and building of trust contribute to students of color creating a positive group identity (Sanchez, Pinkston, Cooper, Luna, & Wyatt, 2018). The peer mentoring programs that focus on male students of color reveal it is not only about improving academics but creating a growth mindset about one's self-concept. The support of mentors is critical to social-emotional learning, which can impact a student's future achievement (Durand, 2019).

Other mentoring studies with a focus on Black male youth are set in a higher education setting. Brooms and Davis (2017) used an anti-deficit framework to highlight that an emphasis should be placed on what we can learn from Black men who are successful, rather than focusing on their underrepresentation in education and negative societal stereotypes. They found the positive influence of peer mentoring relationships prompt Black students to observe and critique racial challenges at their college, usually a historical white institution (HWI) (Brooms & Davis, 2017). The students in these mentoring relationships recognized the importance of having a Black male mentor as a role model and aspiration for future growth and success (Brooms & Davis, 2017).

### **Monmouth University History**

Monmouth University is a private academic institution located in West Long Branch, New Jersey. It was founded in 1933 as a junior college and gained university status in 1995 after receiving its charter from the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education. Presently, Monmouth University offers 33 undergraduate and 25 graduate programs, hosts 23 Division I sports teams, and home to a renowned national polling institute (Monmouth University, 2020). One area Monmouth is lacking is racial and ethnic diversity. According to data found on the university's website based on enrollment data from the Fall of 2019, 25% of the students are members of racially or ethnically diverse groups (Monmouth University, 2020). With this information, it is assumed that the majority of the students are White. Other data revealed that the students are 70.3% White, 12.1% Hispanic or Latino, 5.62% Black or African American, 3.3% Asian, 2.19% Two or More Races, 0.0946% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.0315% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders (Monmouth University, n.d.).

While there is a lack of racial and ethnic diversity on campus, there are some strides towards improving the level of diversity and inclusion. Monmouth has recently created the Intercultural Center on campus, and the President's Advisory Council on Diversity & Inclusion. The campus is also home to only a few student organizations that embrace racial and ethnic diversity, such as the Black Student Union, Latin American Student Organization (LASO), Multicultural Club, National Council for Negro Women, and three Greek Organizations (Monmouth University, 2020). Monmouth's mission to become a more diverse and culturally competent campus can be seen through the events they host, as well as including the Interdisciplinary Conference on Race and the Central Jersey Consortium for Excellence and Equity (Monmouth University, 2020). Despite these efforts, Monmouth is currently lacking

racial and ethnic diversity leaving their students of color limited resources compared to their White students. The creation of programs that establish a focus on students of color, such as the Empowering Young Black Males Leadership Mentoring Program, would be a step closer to building a more diverse generation of students.

### **Monmouth's Empowering Young Black Males Leadership Mentoring Program (EYBM)**

Peer mentoring is known as one of the most effective and well-utilized interventions in educational settings (Goodrich, 2018). The goal of Monmouth's Empowering Young Black Males Leadership Mentoring Program (EYBM) is a tri-partner collaboration between Monmouth University Educational Counseling Program, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Monmouth & Middlesex Counties, and Neptune High School. The high school has a 77% minority enrollment with 49% of its student population economically disadvantaged (U.S. News, 2020). About 20% of their student population has taken at least one AP exam, though only 8% of students have passed at least one AP exam (U.S. News, 2020). This high school is below State standards for English/Language Arts and Math statewide assessments, respectively at 28.7% and 13.9%. Participation and attendance from students are also lacking, as 40.6 % of students are chronically absent, compared to the state average of 14.9%. The overall graduation rate is 80%, below the median rate of 90.9% for the State of New Jersey (New Jersey Department of Education, 2018). This program aligns with the Monmouth University strategic plan and the School of Education commitment to diversity and social justice for underserved populations.

The EYBM program is dedicated to educating, equipping, and empowering at-risk Black male youth from grades 9-12, with hopes of inspiring them to pursue a higher education degree. This program aligns with the Monmouth University strategic plan and the School of Education commitment to diversity and social justice for underserved populations. The program also provided male students from the local high school with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for effective and engaged citizenship in their local and global communities. In addition, the program provided mentoring opportunities to support and promote personal and academic achievement for the young men. Both the mentees and mentors were exposed to leadership competencies and prominent male leaders throughout the University and local area, who have already established their roles as leaders within their communities. Throughout the program, the participants were exposed to various leadership development skill workshops and topics related to academic, career, college access, and personal success. Students were also encouraged to assume leadership roles in and out of school to enhance their ability to lead in all aspects of their life.

The program created a transformative learning opportunity for Monmouth's current Black male students to connect, inspire, and empower the next generation of young Black males toward personal and academic achievement. These mentoring opportunities provided engaging experiences that extend beyond the classroom. In addition, these experiences assisted in preparing the mentors for life after Monmouth as future community leaders and advocates.

The first cohort of the EYBM program consisted of twenty-five (25) Black male mentees from the local high school and twenty-five (25) Black male college mentors from Monmouth University. The primary make-up of the mentors was sixteen (16) student-athletes, six (6) undergraduate EOF (Educational Opportunity Fund) students, and three (3) graduate students. Both the mentees and mentors were interviewed individually and paired based on the data collected from the interviews. Age, interests, personalities, family life, background, and the

mentors' experiences working with teenagers were considered when making the match. Mentors were also assessed on their ability to develop trusting relationships, the ability to motivate, guide, and be a good role model for the mentee. All participants were required to make a full academic year commitment to the program. The EYBM mentoring sessions were held every other Tuesday for approximately two (2) hours on the college campus. Each session was structured with a hot lunch, fellowship, and sharing between mentees and mentors; followed by a formal interactive and engaging personal development presentation, and panel or discussion led by professionals and college students. The program also held a culminating EYBM Summit on a Saturday, where parents were invited to join their sons for an all-day event that included informational and personal development sessions, panel discussions, campus tours, and games and culturally relevant activities.

### **Discussion**

Many of the mentors expressed pleasure and fulfillment of being a part of an important initiative. They identified feeling a sense of pride in paying it forward by encouraging other young men to aspire toward achieving success at the collegiate level. Sinclair and Larson (2018) identified similar findings among peer mentors in high school having a sense of pride that has prevailed throughout their adult life. Anecdotally, one student shared how he was fortunate to have family members' who helped to guide him toward his success, but reflected on how some of his peers did not have the same resources and support and ended in terrible situations.

Mentoring has shown to assist not only the mentee but also the mentor as they continue their journey toward becoming exceptional leaders among their peer groups, teams, and communities. Connolly (2018) also found peer mentors serving as residential advisors exhibited a significant change in academic performance, specifically an increase in grade point average (GPA), growth of leadership skills, and time management. This program appears to have created a community and a safe space on campus for Black male students to share concerns, and find solutions to various challenges and barriers Black males face on a predominantly white campus, as they eagerly engaged in challenging conversations. The mentors were able to gain transformational learning experiences that connected the students' classroom learning to the real world.

Through this program mentees were given the opportunity that few would have had, to visit the college campus and engage in conversation with students from similar backgrounds who made it to college. They were also exposed to the lived experiences of Black male faculty and professionals who were successful, despite real-life barriers and challenges that mirrored some of their current experiences. In addition, the students were able to tour the campus and walk the hallways of a university, with hopes of one day living that reality. Brooms and Davis (2017) used an anti-deficit framework to highlight that an emphasis should be placed on providing opportunities for young Black males to be exposed and glean knowledge from Black men who are successful, rather than focusing on their underrepresentation in education and societal negative stereotypes. It is imperative to shift the narrative and create safe spaces for young Black men to dream dreams and aspire to greatness.

A major barrier for young Black males pursuing a higher education degree is funding. The program assisted in revealing possible solutions to financial barriers by sharing with the young men and parents access opportunities on campus, such as the EOF (Educational Opportunity Fund) program, and other resources such as the First to Fly program for first

generation college students. Additionally, they were presented with the financial aid general information on the affordability of attaining a college degree.

### **Recommendations and Future Research**

The EYBM program provided a sense of connection and opportunity for continuous growth and development for both the mentees and mentors. The college mentors felt a sense of belonging and valued by the mentees and supervisors of the program. This is one initiative that could assist with boosting the university climate for young Black males who often fail to feel a sense of belonging, especially on predominantly white campuses. In addition, the college mentors were able to make connections and find mentors among other Black male faculty and Black male professionals both on the campus and in the immediate community. This platform also created a networking opportunity for the college mentors, as it relates to career and future plans.

With limited studies examining the effects of mentoring programs on college Black male mentors, a follow-up qualitative study should be employed that explores the mentor's experiences and perspective on growth and development as a result of the program. In particular, what role the program played in engaging and creating a sense of community for them. Another aspect would be to gain understanding from their perspective as to the success and areas of opportunities for growth and further development of the program.

### **Conclusion**

This program appears to have created a community, and a safe space on campus for Black male students to share their concerns and find solutions to various challenges and barriers Black males face on a predominantly white college campus. The program also created a transformative learning opportunity for Monmouth's current Black male students to connect, inspire, and empower the next generation of young Black males toward personal and academic achievement. These mentoring opportunities provided engaging experiences that extend beyond the classroom. In addition, these experiences assisted in preparing the mentors for life after Monmouth, as future community leaders and advocates. The program also provided a platform for the mentors to find meaningful ways to empower and inspire the young mentees, who one day will be sitting in the mentor's seats and paying it forward.

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Examining the role of the student-advisor relationship in a holistic, intrusive advising approach for student retention.

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## ABSTRACT

Academic advising is one of the most effective institutional tools to support student persistence and graduation. Many institutions employ transactional advising approaches because these strategies are cheap and efficient. However, the literature suggests this approach is ineffective in supporting under-prepared students. More effective are advising strategies in which the advisor proactively catalyzes advisor-student relationships to support the transformation of high school graduates into successful, persistent college students. This article examines student perceptions of the role student-advisor relationships played in their academic success when advised in a program comprising a large cohort of under-prepared, first-year college students at a large, public, four-year research institution. Results indicate that students perceive the close advisor-student relationship key in their persistence and academic success.

## Introduction

College student retention, persistence, and completion is of paramount concern to stakeholders at national, state, and institutional levels, as well as to individual students seeking a greater future for themselves. Student attrition is widespread across the United States with fewer than 60% of first-year students returning to the same institution for the second year (Hoover, 2015). Today, most high school graduates are encouraged to pursue a college degree because it is seen as the key to upward mobility and the American Dream (Barnes & Slate, 2010). Under-prepared students represent a significant proportion of the student body at many regional, public institutions; unfortunately, these institutions have made few strides in mitigating attrition and ensuring degree completion for this population (Bauer, 2015). Solving this attrition problem positively improves the lives of students and increases the stability of institutions because attrition represents not only a waste of the students' time, money, and increased lifetime earnings but also an institution's wasted distribution of limited financial and human resources (Barton, 2008; Day & Newberger, 2002; Dynarski, 2008).

Considering the high personal cost of degree incompleteness with the high institutional cost of acquiring students and failing to retain them, attrition is a significant problem requiring the identification of effective solutions (Barton, 2008; Dynarski, 2008). One such solution, highlighted in this article, is the adoption of innovative, proactive, advising relationship-building strategies designed to provide academic and personal support from orientation to graduation.

This relationship-centered advising approach, as implemented by the advising program examined in this article, was perceived by the students to be a key component of their persistence.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review provides a brief understanding of academic advising, student perceptions of advising, and insight into this study's population: academically under-prepared college students.

#### **Academic Advising**

Academic advising is described as one of the most effective tools supporting retention, success, and degree completion (Habley & Crockett, 1988; Hunter & White, 2004; Kramer & Associates, 2003; Kuh, 2008; Metzner, 1989; Tinto, 1975, 2007). The literature lists several relationship-centered qualities of a good advisor including supportiveness (Long, 1987) and accessibility (Ryan, 1992). Studies seeking to correlate effective advising and increased persistence investigated the frequency and intensity of interactions (Gerholm, 1990), the impact of early interactions (Seidman, 1991), and student perceptions of advisor concern (Metzner & Bean, 1987; Walker, Zelin, Behrman, & Strand, 2017). Increased retention measures directly correlate with effective academic advisement due, in part, to the associated outcome of increased student satisfaction (Andrews, Andrews, Long, & Henton, 1987; Frost, 1993; Gordon, 1994; Heisserer & Parette, 2002), and, as Metzner (1989) found, are associated with student perceptions of advising quality.

Effective academic advisement mitigates attrition particularly by 1) providing students with the clearest path toward graduation through course and major advisement, 2) providing an institutional connection to break through bureaucracy while also reflecting the institution's commitment to student success, 3) offering a set of high academic expectations and encouragement for academic performance, as well as, 4) providing referrals to other campus academic supports (Kimball & Campbell, 2013; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2007; Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon, & Hawthorn, 2012).

Historically, academic advising has taken many forms from the lack of curricular advisement in the 17th century, transactional elective advising in the 18th century, ad-hoc prescriptive advising in the mid-19th and 20th centuries, and then developmental and intrusive advising beginning in the late 20th century (Folsom, Yoder, & Joslin, 2015; Thelin, 2011). The varying approaches to advising are a result of greater insight into student development in addition to a greater understanding of college students' evolving needs. For example, most academically prepared students typically benefit from as-needed prescriptive advising while those less academically prepared typically benefit from frequent, mandatory developmental advising (Smith, 2002).

#### **Retention of Students Possessing Attrition Risk Factors**

The literature is replete with research evaluating academic advising outcomes with student satisfaction as the lens (Habley, 2004), though most lack a significant focus on students possessing attrition risk factors at large, four-year public institutions with specific retention rate improvements in focus. Heisserer and Parette (2002) and Laskey and Hetzel (2011) provide broad definitions for this population's risk factors: 1) ethnic minority background, 2) academic under-preparedness requiring developmental coursework in math, reading, and/or English

composition, 3) students with disabilities, 4) those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, 5) first-generation college students, and 6) probationary continuing or transfer students.

Oseguera, Locks, & Vega (2008) note that despite decades of increased focus on college student persistence, the greatest significant limitation in the literature is the continued focus of retention on traditional college students and the lack of attention to the diversity of the modern college student-body. The negative impact felt by minority students on majority campuses demonstrates how a lack of social integration is a barrier to success. For example, most students of color attending HBCUs are successful while those attending predominantly white institutions often struggle due to identity marginalization and discrimination (Torres, 2003). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2014) states that the nationwide college-bound population is projected to continue increasing its diversity well into the next decade suggesting a need for novel retention initiatives targeting a diverse student population.

### **Theory of Student Departure**

This study is guided by Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1975) which posits that a student's commitment to the institution and to degree completion is influenced by the student's academic and social integration. Tinto suggests that the greater a student's academic and social integration, the greater the student's commitment to degree completion and institutional loyalty and, therefore, the greater the likelihood the student will complete their degree and complete it at that institution (1975). Tinto's (1975) theory proposes that college communities are both academic and social in nature and that student attrition is the result of positive and negative interactions, both formal and informal, occurring within the institution. The student's experiences progress through three stages beginning with separation (when leaving their high school environment and relationships); then transition (when the student identifies the institutional cultures, including the norms and patterns of behavior, but hasn't acquired them yet); and finally, incorporation (when the student establishes both social and academic behaviors and connections). The student-advisor relationship, which at most institutions, remains a constant throughout the student's academic journey, may be the student's strongest institutional relationship and a key variable in the student's decision to persist.

### **The Holistic Intrusive Advising Approach**

The Holistic Intrusive Advising Approach (HIAA) is an advising strategy specifically designed to support the needs of students possessing attrition risk factors with the goal of increasing the students' retention to their third semester, a benchmark agreed on in the literature as an early indication of future academic success (Bowler, 2009; Tinto, 2012). The advising approach was created at the institution under study that, for the sake of anonymity, is referred to as Crooked River University (CRU). The HIAA was designed for and implemented with an advising center's entire population of 2,400 students. CRU's Provost created this advising center to specifically address the persistence challenges of the population and dramatically turn around its 63% retention rate (CRU, 2017). The center's population profile comprises several attrition risk factors including but not limited to first-generation, Pell Grant eligible, traditionally underserved minorities, and college under-preparedness, as a majority place into developmental courses (CRU, 2017). Seven academic advisors analyzed past institutional data, developed, and then piloted several iterations of the HIAA before rolling out the full implementation.

The HIAA comprises six overarching strategies designed to support students' academic and social needs:

1. *Relationship Building* between advisors and their advisees and amongst advisees;
2. *Prescriptive Scheduling* in the first semester and mandatory advising appointments;
3. A *Caseload-Teaching Model* first-year seminar course taught by the students' advisors focusing on just-in-time skills, relationship-building, and proactive interventions;
4. *Enrollment Holds* placed on the students' records to prevent intentional or accidental enrollment changes that impact degree progression and/or financial aid harm;
5. An *Intrusive Advising Approach* that is both proactive and holistic in identifying and addressing issues before they negatively affect academics; and
6. A *Developmental Goal-Driven Process* beginning with the advisor and student drafting the student's Individual Success Plan: a short and long-term academic and personal goal setting document.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Advising approaches and strategies utilized on campuses vary nationally depending on student body needs and advisors' skill sets; however, one thing is clear: academic advising is fundamental to student success (Campbell & Nutt, 2003). Advising leaders who understand how to successfully engage, retain, and graduate their student populations improve the viability of their institutions, the economic vitality of their region, and of utmost importance to this study, the lives of their students (Goldin & Katz, 2009). This research seeks to fill a gap in the literature through an understanding of student perceptions of the advisor-student relationship and the role this relationship played in the students' academic success.

### **Methods**

This research is designed as a single, descriptive, holistic case study at one university focusing on students and their experiences in the 2013-2014 academic year. Descriptive case studies, as this case is, provide the reader with "rich and revealing insights into the social world of a particular case" (Yin, 2012, p. 49). Case study methodology was utilized to provide a rich narrative description of the program, its setting, historic enrollment figures, and current student population as a context for understanding the need for the HIAA. Because case studies "benefit from having multiple sources of evidence" (Yin, 2012, p. 10), research data comprises participant observations, the researcher's journal, semi-structured interviews with ten student advisees and two advisors, institutional enrollment data, and departmental advising records.

The researcher, who previously advised in this advising center during the HIAA design and implementation, acquired understandings about the participants' academic experiences through direct interpretation of the data as well as through an aggregation of all of the participants' data (Stake, 1995). To increase the validity of this case study, triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was employed for each interview to verify that the researcher is hearing and understanding the participants' experiences as described. The believability and trustworthiness of this study's findings will be further buttressed through a data collection technique termed, "data saturation" by R. C. Bogdan and S. K. Biklen, in *Qualitative research in education* (1998). Data obtained in the forms of interviews, observations and document analysis, were collected until any additional data does not provide novel experiences to diversify previously collected data. At the point of data saturation, an understanding of the case under study is complete.

## Results

### Description of Sample

Participants were students assigned to the advising center based on an algorithm of high school GPA (between 2.0 and 3.0) and ACT Composite score (between 16 and 36). The participant sample of ten students comprises: eight males and two females; one international student and nine students from within the region; eight first-time and two probationary or previously dismissed students. Participants were also given aliases (See Table 1).

	Name	Sex	Race/Ethnicity	Age	First-time, Previous probation or dismissal?	Retained?
1	Ali	M	Arabic	24	Previous dismissal	Y
2	Charlie	M	White	19	First-time	N
3	Kevin	M	White	22	First-time	Y
4	Steve	M	Black	21	First-time	Y
5	Tony	M	Black	20	First-time	Y
6	Aaron	M	White	22	First-time	Y
7	Christine	F	White	20	First-time	Y
8	Justine	F	White	22	Previous probation	Y
9	Scott	M	White	22	First-time	Y
10	Joey	M	White	19	First-time	Y

Table 1: *Composition of Sample, 2015*

### The Setting

The university under examination is a regional, public, research institution situated forty miles south of the state's largest city. There are no other public or private, non-profit, higher education institutions in the county, though there are three for-profit institutions and the surrounding counties contain several community colleges, large public universities, private institutions, and several career and technical centers. CRU is located in a rust-belt region that has experienced a population decline of more than 46,000 since 2010, exacerbating an already declining enrollment (Armon, 2017).

Students with attrition risk factors attend CRU, in part, because of its 95.7% acceptance rate (NCES, 2016) and for convenience purposes due to a long commute and lack of public transportation to other institutions. While CRU is essentially non-selective, it boasts several highly competitive and prestigious majors while also having a dual mission of serving the needs of locals who might attend a less expensive and more supportive area community college if one existed. Despite its open access, CRU's programs and policies are appropriately rigorous and are designed for more academically prepared students, yet many support services lack effectiveness. These challenges are some of the factors contributing to the abysmal retention rate for this population.

Advising at CRU is typically transactional in nature with students seeking out advisors once a semester to discuss course scheduling. Advising in the HIAA advising center, conversely,

aims to be transformative. Advisors proactively engage students frequently throughout the semester. Conversations focus on students' development with course selection taking a backseat to topics such as time management, study strategies, social development, and finances among others.

The advising center also differs physically from other student-serving offices across campus. Upon entering the center, one's senses are hit with the sights and sounds of a very lively, student-focused space. Two large flat screen televisions, one just outside the doorway where overflow seating is staged and one inside the main waiting area, are tuned to MTVu and the Game Show Network respectively. The longest wall in the waiting area is decorated with a large mural depicting the Tree of Success whose green leaves comprising the word "success" in more than 40 different languages. The opposite corner of the room, aptly called the "dorm," features commonly seen, inexpensive dormitory furniture and accessories, a small TV, and an old PlayStation. Wall outlets blossom with phone charging wires and students are huddled together charging their phones while watching their friends play video games.

Greeting students as they enter are two student workers (supervised by a full-time departmental secretary) staffing a reception desk. The highly trained student workers check students in, answer phone calls, and schedule appointments in addition to assisting in creating a warm and welcoming environment. Behind the reception desk are large tutoring labs where students work in groups while on-duty tutors revolve around the rooms. Just outside of the tutoring labs, difficult to miss, is a wall of colorful graffiti and a large 10-inch brass bell. Upon closer inspection, one can discern that the graffiti contains hundreds of signatures with a date and a major. Above the signatures is a large title reading, "Inter-College Transfer Wall." Students must fulfill certain requirements prior to transferring out of the advising center and into their major's degree-granting college.

The Inter-College Transfer (ICT) Wall tradition turns the daunting and sometimes nebulous transfer requirements into a celebrated rite of passage, on display for all students in the tutoring labs, waiting room, and advising offices to see. Student participants Al and Kevin reported that the experience of seeing peers reach the ICT milestone, while waiting for their advising appointments, was motivational and primed the subsequent advising appointments to include working toward that goal for themselves.

### **Relationship Building**

Relationships are found to be fundamental to college success. Chambliss (2014) shares that relationships with faculty, staff, and peers are a prerequisite for retention and integration and often need encouragement to germinate. Relationship-building is interwoven throughout this advising approach, beginning before orientation. As orientation registration fills, advisors are assigned a caseload and begin establishing student contact. Advisors have an average caseload of 300 students with first-year students, the population needing the most attention, comprising around 100. As a point of first contact, advisors use the excuse of calling pre-orientation students to welcome them to the university and assist them in checking-off various requirements such as placement testing and financial aid processing. These brief conversations may seem trivial but for the students they are useful in building anticipation, setting initial expectations, reducing anxiety, or merely getting to know someone they'll soon meet. Justine shared that she came to see her advisor as her go-to person for questions and concerns in the weeks leading up to her orientation.

Relationship-building continues at the day-long orientation in which nearly three hours comprises academic advising. Much of this time is dedicated to relationship-building between students and advisors and amongst students in an attempt to form a community of learners. Jonny recalls the awkwardness and benefit of one of several orientation group-building activities:

I remember being really excited and nervous about going to orientation and being overwhelmed once there. I didn't know anyone and I didn't know what we were going to spend the day doing so I just followed the group from place to place. While it was weird tossing a ball from person to person in my advising group, the name game helped me relax and feel more comfortable. I'm still friends with two people in my group from orientation. (M. Levinstein, personal communication, October 18, 2017)

Relationship-building continues between orientation and the fall semester. Through follow-up calls, emails, and a wide-reaching Twitter chat initiative, advisors and the advising center continue engaging with students, answering questions and disseminating relevant content.

In the students' first semester, one of the greatest relationship-building strategies implemented is the first-year seminar course taught in the Caseload-Teaching Model (Ruff, 2018). Ruff (2018) describes Caseload-Teaching as a strategy in which students are enrolled into the first-year seminar course taught by their own academic advisor to facilitate instructional, proactive interventions. This mandatory, credit bearing seminar provides students with the formal opportunity to check-in with their advisor, ask academic related questions, learn college-level study skills and relevant academic requirements, catalyze the transition to college student, and become familiar with the various student support services offered across campus. The seminar also addresses other topics found in the typical curriculum of a first-year seminar. Delivered in the classroom environment rather than in the environment of an office, caseload-teaching engages students through contextualized support. An aspect of the course that both participants and advisors echoed is the benefit of regular contact between student and advisor. Aaron shares that enrollment in the course taught by his advisor was beneficial:

It allowed me to check in with my advisor twice a week to stay on track. [I] didn't need to set up an appointment. During attendance, my advisor would call a name and then ask, 'How did the speech go? Did you go to tutoring for Algebra? Were you able to change your work hours?' it was an easy way for him to keep up with us and for us to know that he cared. (M. Levinstein, personal communication, July 5, 2017)

Struggling student participants sought help from their advisors whom they felt were non-judgmental, cared about their success, and focused on providing solutions to problems inside and outside of the classroom. Charlie shares his perspective when meeting with his advisor after his poor interim grades were released:

Having an advisor that knows me, says 'hey you're struggling, I see where you're coming from, let me give you my perspective,' was so helpful. Having an advisor that checked in on me was good because when I did do something good like getting an A on a test, I would race to tell him so that I can impress him. And when I was struggling, I had someone who made time to see me, asked questions, didn't judge, and helped me figure out what to do. (M. Levinstein, personal communication, July 20, 2017)

Across the participant group, students consistently shared that one explanation for their positive academic experiences was the relationship they had with the advisor as Scott explains:

There was one time when I met with a different advisor [in the same advising center] back in my first semester. There was nothing wrong with her but since then I made a point to only see my advisor and would sometimes wait for more than an hour to see him because I felt that he knew me and my story. He knew me as a high school student [at orientation] and now as a college student. He helped me make good decisions and adjust to college. I was able to be successful because I knew that someone was there for me and cared about me doing well. (M. Levinstein, personal communication, July 11, 2017)

The student-advisor relationship carries into how advising takes place. Advisor Jessica described HIAA as, “intrusively-holistic. We are looking at the whole student and all of their moving pieces to determine what it would take for them to be a successful student” (M. Levinstein, personal communication, November 17, 2017) which requires the advisor to understand the student beyond pre-enrollment data. Christine and Tony shared their comfort with the intrusive nature of their advising both owning initially that they often share honest aspects of their lives through social media and that, over time, trust has grown between them and their advisors allowing them to openly and honestly discuss barriers to their academic success. “I had no issue talking to my advisor about myself and what was going on in my life. I wanted to be a successful student and knew my advisor was there to help” (M. Levinstein, personal communication, July 6, 2017).

In sum, the student-advisor relationship, the student-centered advising office, and the holistic viewing of the student combine in a relational advising approach perceived by students to be a significant component of their success and retention to the following academic year. The fall-to-fall retention rate of the HIAA cohort (see Table 2) also increased by nearly 10%. In subsequent years, the retention rate significantly dropped possibly due to several factors including decreasing admissions standards for this pathway and an organizational change to advising. These dramatic retention rate fluctuations create possibilities for statistical analysis in future research.

Population	2012 Cohort	2013 Cohort	2014 Cohort
All Full-time, First-time	66.4%	73.9%	74.2%
All Direct Admits	83.3%	82.4%	83.7%
Non-Direct Admit: Non-HIAA advising offices	59.7%	66.2%	65.5%
Non-Direct Admit: HIAA advising office	53.8%	63.7%	58.4%
All First-Generation Students	57.7%	66.6%	65.1%
All Pell Eligible Students	58.1%	67.5%	64.0%
Ethnicity: African American, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, Pacific Islander, and two or more races	56.1%	66.6%	65.1%

Table 2: Cohort Fall-to-Fall Retention Rates

## **Discussion**

Relationship-building aims to facilitate student-advisor and student-student relationships that aid in the students' evolution in the first year. Data analyzed in this case study support much of Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1975). Fundamental to Tinto's theory and central to the HIAA are "the interactions between the student and other members of the institution especially during the critical first year of college" (Tinto, 2007, p. 3).

As was expected, given the role of advisor-student relationships in this approach, the data support Tinto's theory that retention is facilitated through ongoing, intrusive transitional support in the areas of social and academic integration. Tinto (1975) suggests, and this study supports, the theory that student development and learning depend on the student's level of involvement and engagement and that a student's active engagement within formal and informal social and academic environments increases the likelihood of persistence.

Through a personal, advisor-student relationship, many success and assistance barriers were mitigated. Students were less reluctant to ask for help and be held accountable because they perceived that their advisor cared about their success and well-being and were non-judgmental. The relationship-building infused orientations, advising appointments, and caseload-taught method first-year seminar together were perceived by participants to be a component of their success.

Practitioners interested in producing a relationship-centered advising program must prioritize the selection of enterprising advisors with strong interpersonal skills and partner with departments that may control the first-year seminar and orientation programs. The advising center's investment in on-going training, grassroots problem-solving and empowerment, and the distinctive backgrounds and experiences of its diverse staff combine to create and implement its successful advising approach. Lastly, successfully transforming any advising approach to yield better student success outcomes requires leadership with a vision and an effective implementation strategy, comfort in taking risks, and the full support of their superiors.

## **Conclusion**

The HIAA is an innovative, proactive, advising relationship-building strategy designed to provide academic and personal support from orientation to graduation. Student participants perceive it to have positively impacted their persistence and success. Through the infusion of relationship-building into existing advising touchpoints, students transitioning from high school to college are provided a more personal, holistic and intrusive support that benefited their success. The HIAA extended relational engagement from orientation to the first semester and brought relational advising into the first-year seminar classroom. While this case study is limited to just one case, this relationship focused approach is replicable in whole or in part so long as the students perceive their advisors know them, are accessible, and approach problem-solving from a non-judgmental position. Practitioners who successfully leverage their interpersonal skills to develop a holistic relational academic advising approach will see improved outcomes in their students, their institution and their region.

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## Biography

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## Parental Influences That Impact First-Generation College Students' College Choice: A Qualitative Inquiry of Student Perceptions

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### ABSTRACT

**This qualitative study explored first-generation college students' perceptions about the influence that their parents had on their college choice process. Using in-depth interviews and focus groups with first generation college students, this study explored their experiences and perceptions of the impact of their socioeconomic status. First-generation college students face obstacles in knowledge and resources and tend to have lower educational aspirations than non-first-generation students. I wanted to understand their experiences in their voice—providing support for the use of qualitative methods. Using the sociological concepts of social and cultural capital as a framework, this study found the participants knew that because of their socioeconomic status, they would have difficulty affording college. Participants were motivated to go to college because their parents did not go to college. These students were encouraged by parents and aspired to have a better life yet faced many barriers that impacted their college choice.**

### Introduction

Access to college is closely related to the level of education by the parents (Choy et al., 2000). First-generation college students face many obstacles in obtaining knowledge and resources to enroll in college. Despite these challenges, for many students, there is a great deal of encouragement from their parents. Parents, who lack the knowledge to help navigate the college choice process, nonetheless provide encouragement to their children to pursue an education (Ceja, 2006; Hossler, Schmit & Vesper., 1999). Despite the parents' lack of a college degree, parental encouragement is the single most important factor in predicting educational plans (Ceja, 2006; Palbusa & Gauvin, 2017).

This study explored first-generation college students' perceptions about college choice using a qualitative approach to provide "rich insight into human behavior" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 106). Qualitative data, found in quotations, observations and documents, describes and explores a phenomenon in great detail as it occurs in real world settings (Patton, 2002). Qualitative methods allow researchers to study issues with great detail (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Patton, 2002). In using open-ended interviews, the students' perception can be understood in the students' own words. Qualitative research is inductive and lends itself to discovery, inquiry, and exploration (Patton, 2002). Individuals draw meaning from events and experiences, which is paramount to this research study (Kraus, 2005). Using qualitative methodology, this

study explored the students' perceptions of what influenced their college choice and how they perceived their parents to influence this process.

## Literature Review

### Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status, based on occupation, education, wealth, and income, continues to be an influential factor in college choice (Hossler et al., 1999; Kinzie et al., 2004; McDonough, 1997; Nagaoka, Roderick & Coco, 2009; Teranishi and Behringer, 2008). First-generation college students are more likely to be from lower socioeconomic status and as a result, face many obstacles in college degree attainment (Bui, 2002; Nagaoka et al., 2009). Students with lower socioeconomic status are more likely to have parents who lack the knowledge, information, and experience to help their children navigate the college choice process.

For many first-generation college students, the educational environment is much different than the home environment. For first-generation college students, it may be difficult to identify with both their educational environment and with their communities (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019; McDonough, 1997; Schelbe, Swanbrow Becker, Spinelli & McCray, 2019). First-generation college students have two sets of status symbols: one set of status symbols for the community in which they grew up and one set of status symbols for the collegiate environment. Status symbols, including types of music, car, technology, and travel, are belongings or goods that denote status in one's society. Individuals who take on a group's culture and symbols become the insiders. This concept sets the stage for exploring college choice and provides understanding about the issues that first-generation students face because it explains the inequality of poverty, related to class found within our society.

### Social Reproduction

Many social reproduction theories analyze class systems that explain inequalities in educational stratification (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Tzanakis, 2011). Bourdieu purported that schools set up standards that favor the upper- and middle-class children, which reproduce class status (Kingston et al., 2003). Bourdieu believed that to maintain their class status, the upper class implemented processes to reproduce inequality evident in the educational system.

Bourdieu's theories assert that educational inequalities continue to reproduce current class structures (Allan, Garriott & Keene, 2016; Hinz, 2016; Lareau & Norvat, 1999; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). For Bourdieu, all behavior is situated within a field, where individuals have different forms of capital which can be utilized to reach their goals. Bourdieu explains that all individuals have social or cultural capital to activate or invest in a field, but not all social or cultural capital has the same value within the field. For this study, I discuss social and cultural capital as it relates to Bourdieu's social reproduction theories.

### Cultural Capital

Cultural capital is defined as the knowledge that upper- and middle-class families share with their children as means for maintaining class status (Dalmage, 2008; McDonough, 1997). Cultural capital is shown through an individual's language, vocabulary, taste in music, and arts (Dalmage, 2008; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Although cultural capital does not have monetary value, a college degree is treated as a status symbol in our society (Reay, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Smith, 2007). McDonough (1997) explains that upper- and middle-class families promote earning a college degree to ensure economic security for future generations. For college choice,

cultural capital could be an individual's parent's knowledge of admissions procedures. Cultural capital includes the student's knowledge and academic preparation such as the students' perception and responses to how prepared they felt to go to college, what options they explored and what information they had to make their decisions.

Economic inequality can create differential forms of cultural and social capital among social classes, which can lead to the exclusion of disadvantaged groups in society (Flora & Flora, 2008; Smith, 2007; Tobolowsky, Cox, & Chunoo, 2020). Cultural capital represents the knowledge a student has to navigate the processes involved in college choice. In this study, I employ the concept of cultural capital to understand how experiences yielded information and resources that students activated in the college choice process.

### **Social Capital**

Bourdieu's concept of social capital emphasizes the importance of relationships to explain organizational structures and behaviors within society (Field, 2003; Lin, 2001). Examples of social capital are an individual's network of friends, colleagues, and neighbors. Students with higher social capital are more likely to 'know' someone with connections to someone with information about the college admissions process than those who do not have a network of adults who have attended college—potentially providing an advantage. To explore social capital's role in college choice, I focus on the relationships the students had with parents to understand their motivation. Many people believe social capital helps students get into college, get jobs, or internships. Social capital involves trust, norms and networks that work to improve efficiency while encouraging upward mobility (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Field, 2003). Students with more educated parents may have an advantage in navigating the college choice process because they have may have greater social capital. For example, college educated parents may know someone who works in the college's administration who they can call with a problem. First-generation college students may have less social capital than students whose parents are better connected in terms of knowledge, awareness, and information (Chang, Wang, Mancini, McGrath-Mahrer & Orama de Jesus, 2020; Clayton, 2019; Saenz et al., 2007). Networks with limited resources, like potentially those of the first-generation college student, who are not as likely to have a network of college graduates, will yield poor social capital in the field of education (Hossler et al., 1999; Lin, 2001; McDonough, 1997).

Unlike students from higher classes who may assume and expect they will attend college; the expectations are not the same for their lower socioeconomic classmates (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2000). The entitlement, expectation, and mobilization of resources of upper- and middle-class students and families are strong illustrations of cultural capital. Even if the upper- or middle-class parents cannot provide financial support, the parents' greater cultural capital influences the children to earn their degrees. Members of the upper and middle-class youth may have access to knowledge about the policies and paperwork for college choice by contacting friends, family or colleagues that may work in college administration that the lower-class youth can't mobilize or activate.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

To recruit participants, purposeful sampling was implemented. This type of sampling allows for information-rich cases that demonstrate 'in-depth understanding of the phenomenon'

to be studied (Patton, 2002, p. 40). Purposeful sampling's objective is to show insight and understanding, as opposed to quantitative research's random sampling, which provides generalizability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Patton, 2002). Twenty-five participants were selected as part of the small purposeful sample. As Patton (2002, p. 245) explains, "the validity, meaningfulness, and insight generated by qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected than with the sample size."

A small campus of a large research university was selected for the sampling because of its large population of first-generation students. To begin, I emailed several staff members at the campus asking them to distribute flyers and email students to ask for volunteers to be interviewed. Although all the participants were students at the same campus, the participants were not homogeneous in terms of gender, sex, socioeconomic status, academic preparation and program, and hometown. The participants were from various geographic locations and represented diverse racial backgrounds, household incomes, and levels of academic achievement.

Interviews are the primary data collection method for qualitative research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Patton (2002) explains that in standard open-ended interviews, the questions need to be fully developed so that each participant receives the same questions, which can be an advantage in analysis because responses can be compared. Interview questions provide the participant to explain their perspective in their own words (Patton, 2002). I conducted 25 semi-structured individual interviews, after which a level of redundancy, or saturation, was achieved. Patton (2002) states that sampling may conclude when no new information is being shared by participants.

### **Procedure and Analysis**

For data analysis, I used NVivo, a software program designed to assist for categorizing, coding, and organizing data. I created codes within the software program and coded the transcripts line by line. During the data analysis, I examined themes and trends that developed. Initially, I coded the data based on my conceptual framework, which was developed based on college choice research using the concepts of social and cultural capital within the Hossler and Gallagher Model of College Choice (Hossler et al., 1999). The coding scheme was adapted throughout the analysis through reflection, review of transcripts, and line-by-line coding. Then, I conducted a word count query for the words, "better", "motivation", "parents" and "social class" to see if my initial feelings of repetition held true. In addition, I coded line-by-line in the text. I read and reviewed each transcript of the interviews and the focus groups. I used general codes such as 'family' but then I was able to further differentiate into smaller themes such as "parent expectations" and "parents' support". I created lists that used the concepts of social and cultural capital from the conceptual framework and the stages in the college choice model. Finally, I collapsed codes and combined codes for the data analysis. The purpose of this analysis was to establish emergent themes and create models that provide an explanation of the research questions. Through this process, I reviewed, collapsed and expanded codes through the coding process to better reflect what I was finding and the themes that were emerging.

### **Findings**

Understanding the college choice process for first-generation college students may increase the likelihood that these students enroll in college, providing them with potential benefits in status and social mobility that a college degree may offer. Increased understanding of the college choice for first-generation college students has the potential to improve access and

attainment of a college education for more students. A college degree affords these students increased opportunities for personal and professional advancement, status attainment and social mobility. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) explain that predisposition, or aspiration, is the first stage in the college choice model. They explain that if a student does not have the desire to go to college, then it is unlikely that he or she will follow through on the search or choice stages. Several themes emerged from the data collected in the interviews that pertained directly to the predisposition phase:

- Students are motivated by their socioeconomic status.
- Because of their SES, they knew college would be difficult to afford.
- Students think the process is easier for students' whose parents attended college.
- Students are influenced by their parents' support.
- Despite their lack of knowledge about college processes, parents often expect their children to attend.
- Students want to have better lives in terms of jobs, wealth, and neighborhoods.

As high school students, the participants knew that because of their socioeconomic status, they would have difficulty affording college. Next, the participants perceived the process to be very easy for students whose parents went to college. Finally, participants were motivated to go to college because their parents did not go to college and they wanted to achieve social mobility and status attainment. For practitioners, these findings demonstrate important implications for practice.

## **Socioeconomic status**

### ***Difficulty affording college***

When discussing their aspirations, participants knew that because of their socioeconomic status, or class, they would face challenges affording college. Raquel, a student from New Jersey, discussed how her mother's low income affects their lifestyle:

Um, like my mom, she didn't go to college. She's like paycheck to paycheck to pay the bills and to send out food and care packages to me [laughs] and, um, my friend's mom who can't afford to pay for her tuition because she decided, ya know, I'll just be a worker all my life and it gets hard and when the economy is like this, there's less money in your pocket and less stuff you can benefit your child.

Raquel explains that her mom lives paycheck to paycheck, which seems to make her lifestyle more difficult. Another student, Destiny, a female student, explained how she realized during high school that some students of lower socioeconomic status were unable to afford the high cost of attending college. She said, "I think different areas, um, depends on your um background, your family's income, some people can't afford. Some students wanna go to college, but can't afford it."

### ***Perceptions about students whose parents attended college.***

While the students perceived their families' insecure economic status could inhibit their opportunity to attend college, they viewed other students with parents with college educations as having an easier time navigating the college choice process. Vivian said, "The kids of people who have gone to college already are at an advantage. Um, uh, people of upper class, um, it's kind of expected of them or it's just get accepted, their name, the last name is what gets 'em in."

Vivian had many assumptions about the ease with which upper class students were admitted to college.

Participants assumed that wealthier students do not have to follow the same process and are ‘automatically’ admitted to college. Vivian summarized the perceptions of the group:

Um, the process is so much easier for them, children of parents who attended college. They just gotta fill out a name and they’re in, as opposed to someone, I gotta find out so what college is, how much it’s gonna cost me, transcript here, application here, letter of recommendation as opposed to — I would like to think a lotta their parents do that for them. They just gotta sign and that’s about it.

The students believed that those whose parents went to college did not need to complete the rigorous application process, but they would be admitted because of who their parents were.

### ***Socioeconomic status as motivation.***

First-generation college students are likely to have a lower socioeconomic status than those who are not first-generation college students. Socioeconomic status can influence a student’s educational expectations and experiences. For example, fifteen participants in the study talked about getting better jobs and earning more money than their parents.

Expressing concern about their own socioeconomic background and comparing their opportunities to middle- and upper-class students, the participants understood that class is a factor in college admissions. About half of the participants were either part of the working class or the poor class. Only two students reported a household income higher than \$100,000. Because many of the participants struggle with finances and their parents did not graduate from college, socioeconomic status influenced their college choice.

Many of the participants associated a college education with increased earnings. They believed that the college degree was the most important factor that would contribute to their mobility. For example, Laura, a student, shared how she reconciled the decision to attend college:

I’m like how does that sound like — I’m like so you wanna work at McDonald’s whereas workin at a 500 Fortune company like you tell me like you wanna make \$15,000 a year or you wanna make \$55,000 a year?

As Laura illustrated, participants believed that a college education is related to their future income potential. Similarly, Cody added, “Because on account of the economy and everything. If you don’t have an education, you’re gonna get a \$8.00 an hour job.” The students believed that a college degree would result in their upward economic mobility. Participants perceived their wealth, income and occupation to be very important to their status.

### **Parents’ influence**

#### ***Supportive parents***

Twenty of 25 interview participants felt their parents were supportive of their decision to attend college. For example, Sharon, a student, explained succinctly what her parents have done for her. She said, “They pushed me to keep moving forward.” James also said it was his mother’s persistence that has gotten him where his is today. Finally, Evan explained that his parents were

so positive because he was the first person in his family to go college. He said, “They – their attitude was to go for it because I was the first person to actually go to college.”

Twenty students mentioned their parents were happy about their child’s decision to go to college. Sharon shared a very empowering comment about how proud her parents are of her decision. Sharon said, “They always told me that I was very smart and intelligent and that anything I wanted to do, I could do. Um, they do treat me differently, but in a better way, a good way. They just always, just tell me how they’re so proud of me, ya know, and for me to keep pushin.” Sharon shared the sentiment of many of the participants that their parents were very encouraging in their pursuing a degree.

### *Expectations of parents*

Some students were fueled by their parents’ pride, support, and praise. Ten participants said they were going to college because their parents expected them to attend college. Many of these students said that it was understood that they would eventually enroll in a college or university. Not only did students mention parental education and income as factors contributing to college choice, many participants also shared their parents motivated them and had high educational expectations. A few participants, however, said that their parents were disapproving or fearful which in turn influenced their college choice decisions.

Generally, participants believed that students go to college for one of two reasons—self-motivation or persistent parents. Vivian explained, “It’s either self-motivation or you got a parent who just won’t leave you alone.” The students seemed to perceive that many students attend college because it is what their parents want. Farrah explained this perception, “I know a lot of people that want to go to school because that’s what their parents — want. So, a lot of people go just to please their parents — to get their parents off their backs.” Farrah explained that many students were going to college to make their parents proud; others were going to college to appease their parents. For participants in this study, most of their parents wanted their students to go to college- sometimes, more than the students—and these students were influenced by their parents’ expectations.

Several students shared expectations that their parents had for them. Carmen, a student from Philadelphia, said, “Yeah. Like you know when you go to college – everyone says it, like. It was like not an option, like of course I was gonna go to college.” James, another student from Philadelphia, said, “She [his mother] told me to go to college. That, that’s the way it be.” Cody, a student from rural Pennsylvania, added that because he is a first-generation college student, his parents expected him to go to college. He said, “Uh, they basically said I’m going whether I like it or not ‘cause they didn’t go and they know how it is.” Like Cody, Katelyn, a student from Philadelphia, explained, “she (her mother) said yeah, you goin to college [laughs].” Austin, a student from a small town in Pennsylvania, added that his parents also explained the importance of a college degree. Austin said:

Well my parents, they pretty much know that in today’s world you really need that college education in order to get — to be comfortable living. It’s really — I always quoted Obama when he — I — I listened to him one time and he said that it’s like a pre-required step in order for success to get further education.

These students’ experiences reiterate the value that parents place on earning a college degree to have the opportunity for greater wealth and income.

The participants' parents may have felt the need to push their children toward higher education because of their concern that their child would be kept out of the upper or middle class because the student would not have the credentials (the degree) to attain a certain status. Families often encourage education as a means to gain status because of credentialism (Brown, 2001; Kingston, et al., 2003; Meyer, 2001). This concern about meeting the standard or credentials for certain jobs is addressed through the concept of credentialism, where lower class parents and students are pressured into seeking more education as a basis for gaining status (Meyer, 2001).

### *Indifference by parents*

Although rare, four students' parents did not expect their children to attend college—or care if they went. These participants shared that their parents did not actually think their child would follow through, so they did not encourage attendance.

### *Motivated by parent's class*

In some situations, the parents were an influence because of the challenging road they had traveled. The students shared they wanted to do better than their parents had done, but the students often apologized, not wanting to appear rude or ungrateful. The students said things like, "they did the best they could," or "they tried to provide everything we needed." The students saw their parents' struggles and wanted their lives and careers to be different. Keisha explained:

I had to do something, cause where I came from. Was not the, like, the best. Even like, like for what like parents went through, they made like a really good life for us. They gave us so many opportunities, now I'm here at like Penn State, can you imagine from where I was born?

Keisha expressed her appreciation and even surprise that she was in college given her background. She felt very lucky because her parents were immigrants and struggled to establish jobs and a stable home life. Laura also shared how her family influenced her:

Like, come from a family you barely graduate from high school, so I wanted to kinda change that perspective. So, before I could get to high school, I had to have my mind set that I wanted to go to college.

Laura felt that growing up in a family that struggled to graduate from high school, she needed to do something different. She believed getting her education would allow her to change her future. Anisha discussed how having parents who did not go to college can affect how you think of yourself. She explained:

But I just like- I just think being able to say that your parents did something, like makes you feel better as a person and makes you feel like you—like you can do something!

She explained that if an individual's parents are successful, the child feels like he or she can be successful. Carmen also reiterates how she wanted more from her life including more opportunities for jobs and higher income. She added:

I didn't grow up badly. I'm not saying like, you know, but it's just like I just want better, like better than what my parents have. I want better than this, you know. I think it does motivate me. Like be – like be – I just wanna, you know be in a better environment, and I don't know. Do better for my family.

These students shared how appreciative they were to their parents, but they knew that they wanted their lives to be different than their parents. The students wanted more wealth, more job stability, and more options when looking for jobs.

## **Discussion**

### **Recommendations**

This study fills in the gap in understanding the college choice process for first-generation college students and the ways that parents influence them. Although parents do not have much knowledge, they are integral in supporting the student. Parents are key stakeholders in influencing enrollment for first-generation college students. Because parents have great influence, it is important for institutions to partner with them to provide information and training on how to use that information.

In addition to their parents' influence, the students' social class influences their aspiration, their motivation, and often their ability to see themselves as a college student. For first-generation college students, there are many obstacles in applying to college. The admissions and financial aid processes may seem too complicated, cumbersome, or confusing to first-generation college students and their families. To overcome these obstacles, students have to recruit support services and networks to provide the guidance they need to succeed.

There must be an ongoing plan for information sharing about the college search and enrollment for students and their families to navigate the college choice process (Reid & Moore, 2009). Because students often do not have the higher education cultural capital to navigate these processes, colleges administrators need to consider redesigning their admission and financial aid systems to better serve the potential students and their families (Horn & Moesta, 2019). Colleges need to examine and evaluate their policies and practices to remove the barriers and obstacles for first-generation college students. To improve transparency, these processes must be streamlined or redesigned to establish clear understanding for those who never attended college themselves. College administrators need to find additional ways to share information about savings accounts and college financing plans to better inform prospective students about cost and price. In addition, colleges need to reevaluate their messaging and communication platforms so that information is easily accessible and clear. It would serve colleges and universities to find ways to communicate in new and different ways with parents of first-generation college students.

College administrators need to encourage parents to support career exploration and college aspiration at an early age. Parents need support to help students excel academically. Individualized support programs like mentoring opportunities and bridge programs may provide assistance to first-generation college students and their families. To help future first-generation students, current first-generation college students need to become ambassadors at their former high schools providing information to navigate the college choice process. The peer-to-peer approach could have great potential in maximizing social capital for the high school students whose parents did not attend college. In addition, students can influence the culture in their schools and their neighborhoods to accept and develop college-going behaviors (Hinz, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

This study was an exploration of the influences that affect first-generation college students in their college choice process. The purpose of this study was not only to explore the influences of these students but also provide the participants with an opportunity to share their

story. Through this exploration, I add to the understanding of how class works to produce educational disparities and influence options for educational attainment. These students faced much of their lives as marginalized people in the afterthoughts of programs and processes. This research provides new insights into the decision-making of prospective students and may inform higher education recruitment efforts about the experiences and options of their potential students. This study allowed these first-generation college students to share their aspirations and their hope for a better future, beginning with their educational journey.

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## Biography

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## Navigating College Choice through Female Peer-to-Peer Capital: The Case of Somali American College-Seeking Women

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, we argue that higher education and student affairs has failed to pay sufficient attention to the role of female peer-to-peer social and navigational capital in college choice processes, especially among first-generation, underrepresented, and minoritized college-seekers. While Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005, 2006) highlights valuable forms of capital that marginalized, college-bound populations draw on, the general scholarship employing this model does not sufficiently account for the role of female peers as a connective thread that weaves various forms of capital together to support college choice. We consider the case of a group of Somali American undergraduate women attending a predominantly white-serving institution of higher education to illustrate the ways in which these college-seekers use female peer capital to access and negotiate college choice processes. Implications for higher education practice and research are examined.

Keywords: Female, peer-to-peer capital; College choice; Somali American students; Community Cultural Wealth

### Introduction

College access for first-generation, underrepresented, and minoritized (URM) students has been investigated across the social sciences. Scholarship identifies forms of capital that enable majoritized students to more readily access college, and which URM students, families, and communities lack (e.g. Perna, 2000a, 2000b). Yosso (2005, 2006) turns away from deficit perspectives of racialized and marginalized communities, elaborates six forms of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), and reframes “capital” among these college-seeking populations. In this work, we push the CCW framework further by arguing that it does not pay sufficient attention to female peer-to-peer capital. We use the case of Somali American women<sup>1</sup> students attending a predominantly white-serving institution of postsecondary education (PWI) to argue that this form of capital must be highlighted as a key component of CCW. Somali American women students represent a distinct group of first-generation, URM college-seekers who do not typically have access to traditional forms of college-going capital, but instead rely strategically and effectively on female peer capital. Their experiences can inform higher education’s understanding of college

<sup>1</sup> We used an open-ended question, “What is your gender identity?” in the demographic form that was administered to participants, with the aim of being inclusive of individuals who identify as non-binary. All nine participants identified as “female” and cisgender. Thus, following their chosen gender identification, throughout this work, we use “woman” and “female” interchangeably.

choice for other first-generation, URM college-seekers. The specific research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do Somali American women access higher education?
2. What supports do Somali American women draw on as they aspire to college and manage the college choice process?

This paper first reviews literature on college choice, including Yosso’s (2005, 2006) CCW. Next, we contextualize the case of Somali American women collegians. We then detail our methodological and analytical approaches and present our findings. The voices and narratives of participants are centered, as they illustrate their tenacious seeking of college knowledge through female peer networks. Finally, implications for centering this form of CCW by higher education practitioners are considered, and areas for additional research are elaborated.

This study contributes to the literature by underscoring an underexamined aspect of social and navigational capital – that which is provided by female peers. We argue that this form of capital is particularly productive in guiding female college-seekers to gain detailed information, find encouragement, build on the success of peers, and foster a culture of collectivist competition and striving for college success. Overlooking the contributions of women is already a widespread habit in academic analyses, even more so when considering those who are young and minoritized (Ahmed, 2017; Armato, 2013; Savigny, 2017). Instead, we highlight this form of wealth – that is, female, peer-to-peer social and navigational capital – and urge higher education professionals to incorporate this resource into college choice programming.

## **Literature Review & Theoretical Framework**

Rational choice models are often relied on to explain college choice. These models, like Perna (2000a, 2000b, 2006) and others (Cho et al., 2008; Nora, 2004; Perna & Titus, 2005), assert that college choice is made by drawing on forms of economic and habitus capital, both concepts adapted from Bourdieu (1977/2013). Such capital is composed of the skills, resources, and knowledge needed over time to gain access to college. In arguably the most robust iteration of this approach, Perna (2006) builds a model that assumes that individual students make rational choices for initial college enrollment, and that each student makes these decisions within a nested system of layers of situated context. Thus, demand for higher education (made up of academic preparation and achievement) and supply of resources (family income and financial aid) are compared with the expected benefits (both monetary and non-monetary) and expected costs (direct college costs and foregone earnings) of college attendance. This calculation leads to a student’s choice of college.

Smith and Fleming (2006) reason that these models are based on the experiences of white students, white parents – and we add – normative U.S. culture, which is deeply individualistic, ethnocentric, and steeped in whiteness as a system of hegemonic dominance. Therefore, what these models cast as “normal” processes and steps in college choice are actually based on experiences and data from a specific group of students and families (Kiyama & Harper, 2018). In other words, conceptions of inputs are biased towards recognizing and normalizing those that center white, upper and middle class, “American” families, thus constraining the ability to see the strengths and wealth that non-white, lower class, immigrant and refugee families bring to

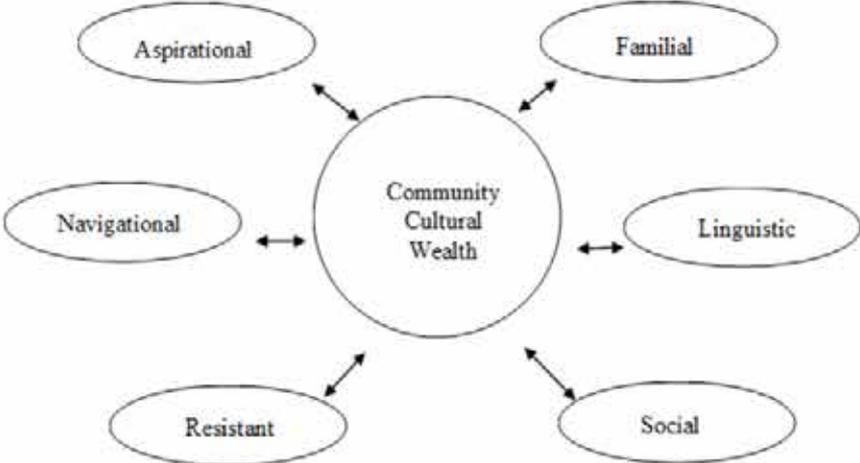
college-going processes. A number of scholars (Jayakumar et al., 2013; Nora, 2004; Oakes et al., 2002; Oakes, 2003; Oseguera, 2013; Pérez Huber, 2009; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012; Yosso, 2005, 2006) have articulated college choice models that push up against normative models.

**Community Cultural Wealth**

Drawing on Critical Race Theory, Yosso (2005, 2006) abandons deficit perspectives on racialized and marginalized communities and elaborates six forms of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) that exist in abundance in many communities. These include aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital (see Figure 1). Yosso (2005) defines these as “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77).

**Figure 1**

*A model of community cultural wealth. Adapted from Yosso, 2005.*



*Aspirational capital* centers on hopes for the future, dreams, and goals “even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). This capital derives from parental encouragement, storytelling, and the cultivation of aspiration. *Familial capital* is cultural knowledge that “carr[ies] a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). This entails collectivist responsibility and belonging, certainly beyond the nuclear family, including “lessons of caring, coping” and “inform[s] our emotional, moral, educational and occupational consciousness” (p. 79). *Linguistic capital* consists of abilities, knowledge, and insights that come from multilingualism, such as storytelling, poetry, music, and other art. *Social capital* comprises “network[s] of people and community resources” that aim to uplift larger

communities (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). *Resistant capital* is “knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (p. 80). *Navigational capital* includes “skills of maneuvering through social institutions,” particularly those not designed for Indigenous folks and people of color (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Both Yosso’s and subsequent work employing her model assert that forms of capital overlap, interplay, and co-construct resources for college-seekers.

### **The Case of Somali American College-Seekers in the Twin Cities Area**

Since 1992, large numbers of Somali refugees and immigrants have moved to the Twin Cities metropolitan area, and this region now constitutes one of the largest residential hubs in the U.S. (U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2004). The 2015 Census estimates that there were some 57,000 Somali Americans in Minnesota, although other estimates range from 30,000 to 100,000 (Wilhide, n.d.). Somalis have become part of the landscape and culture of the region. They are productive members of the larger community, contributing to the economic, political, and cultural health of the area (Bigelow, 2010; Carlson, 2007).

Pursuit of education is strongly valued among Somali Americans (Bigelow, 2010; Johnson, 2018). There is little published data about secondary and postsecondary enrollment and completion, but what does exist notes that “Somali student achievement ... has been consistently lower than white, native English-speaking peers’ academic achievement” (Johnson, 2018, p. 9). Unlike other “model minority” African immigrant college-goers, Somali Americans don’t often come to college with deep sources of financial capital or parental college knowledge (George Mwangi, 2018; Minnesota Compass, n.d.). However, a group of undergraduate women students attending a public institution seem to persist at higher than average rates as they pursue their postsecondary education. We use this case to explore how female peer capital serves as a source of CCW.

### **Method**

#### ***Participants and Data Collection***

Data came from 11 semi-structured interviews conducted from Fall 2015 through Summer 2017 with nine undergraduate Somali American women students attending a PWI. The initial round of nine interviews was conducted in Fall 2015 and Spring 2016. Participants were asked about college choice, the role of family, conceptualizations of higher education, and experiences in the classroom and on campus. Interviews lasted between 1.5 to 2.5 hours each. The second round of interviews was conducted with two of the nine women in Summer 2017, in order to follow up on experiences on campus after the contentious presidential election of 2016 and the anti-immigrant, Islamophobic rhetoric that targeted Somali Americans (Abdi, 2019; Stassen-Berger, 2016). Questions in the second round were less structured and focused on student sense of belonging on campus, the general racial climate, and several recent hate crimes.

Below are the demographic characteristics of the nine participants (Table 1). All identified as “female” and Muslim. Ages ranged from 18 to 29 years old, with the eldest being an individual who returned to college after several years off. Seven participants came from low-income backgrounds, and two were middle-income. All participants were naturalized U.S. citizens. The range in number of years lived in the U.S. was wide, from only six years to 25 years.

**Table 1***Demographic Characteristics*

Age	Gender	Citizenship	Years in U.S.	Religion	Socioeconomic Status	1 <sup>st</sup> to Attend College?
19	Female	U.S.	19	Islam	Middle income	No
19	Female	U.S.	8	Islam	Low income	No
20	Female	U.S.	20	Islam	Low income	Yes
20	Female	U.S.	10	Islam	Low income	No
18	Female	U.S.	13	Islam	Low income	No
20	Female	U.S.	6	Islam	Low income	Yes
20	Female	U.S.	12	Islam	Low income	No
18	Female	U.S./Somalia	13	Islam	Middle income	No
29	Female	U.S.	25	Islam	Low income	Yes

***Data Analysis***

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. The research team began analysis by individually reading the transcripts multiple times and generating a list of codes inductively (Saldaña, 2016). We each noted emerging understandings about the data alongside the margins of the printed transcripts. The team then met to compare and contrast initial codes, summarized what we had each tentatively learned, and identified and constructed together a broad range of themes.

Team members then reviewed individual transcripts a second time, specifically focusing on forms of CCW (Yosso, 2005, 2006). We also marked related components, for example, denoting “siblings” as a sub-code affiliated with familial capital, or “tutoring” as a sub-code affiliated with navigational capital. The team met again, compared codes, and assembled themes. This second cycle of analysis revealed the ways in which Somali American women relied on various forms of CCW to support their college-going aspirations. Specifically, data related to familial, aspirational, social, and navigational capital illuminated the ways in which participants assembled resources, made plans, and worked to secure desired outcomes. We use pseudonyms in order to protect participants’ identities.

***Researcher Positionalities***

While a thorough reflection is beyond the scope of this manuscript, it is critical to acknowledge that researcher positionalities influence both data collection and analysis. As such, we were thoughtful about what roles each of us would play. Since Orkideh is a generation 1.5 immigrant, is the most familiar with Muslim culture, and identifies as a cisgender woman, she served as the sole interviewer. She worked to establish rapport and create an open setting for the interview conversations. Seth and Fernando focused solely on analysis.

## **Findings**

All forms of CCW were evident across the data, although social and navigational capital seemed to play the most critical role in facilitating college choice. In addition, various forms of CCW often intertwined to work together. Below we present five components of CCW that stood out as powerful supports that Somali American women reported drawing on. We argue that the thread which runs through all the forms of CCW is that of female, peer-to-peer capital. It serves as a fastening agent that binds these resources and strategies together.

### ***Ambient Parental Support***

Most participants reported strong parental support for their college aspirations. Students expressed that their families valued and promoted achievement of higher education for all children within the family. Parents who had not attended school in the United States could not lend personal expertise to college choice (George Mwangi, 2018). Additionally, parents were often physically absent (e.g. working in another country, working a second or third job, divorced). Instead, parents offered ambient support through providing spending money, transportation, and encouragement.

### ***Guidance from Peer-aged Siblings***

All participants came from families with multiple siblings, and participants reported learning specific advice from female siblings who were close in age to themselves. Some students learned about college options from older siblings who had been the first in their families to attend high school in the U.S. Participants referenced siblings' successes and challenges to make course corrections that would increase their own chances of success in bachelors' programs. For example, Aliya expressed:

...my sisters have been going to [community college] for about, like six years, or like four years now, when the idea was two years [of community college] then transfer back [the credits toward a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution], but they are still, you know, like almost stuck...

Sibling role models encountered barriers at community college such as limited financial aid, challenges in balancing family responsibilities with course schedules, and ineffective or inaccessible advising. Aliya reported that for her sisters, "it isn't really their fault. It's just how they always have to stop their -- pause their education for a bit, and work, and then go back again, and sometimes do [school and work] simultaneously." Thus, Aliya decided to attend a four-year school immediately following high school. She learned from her sisters that balancing full-time school with full-time work caused significant challenges, and thus decided to pursue her degree on a full-time basis.

### ***Taking College Credits during High School***

Minnesota offers high school juniors and seniors opportunities to take college classes in a high school or community college setting, thus earning college credits. Many participants reported pursuing this route, in order to come into college with credits already completed and thus, to graduate with their baccalaureate degree in less than four years. For example, Muna earned 35 credits at a local community college. Another student, Talia, explained how she learned about post-secondary enrollment options (PSEO):

Well, I was a nosy kid ... So, there were kids in our school that did PSEO before us ... and so I would ask them questions about it, and then I went to the counsellor and I asked her about it ... I would do the research for it, and so I look[ed] up everything I didn't know about it, and ... I made sure that I was on track for everything that they had.

In the narrative above, Talia learned about the details of PSEO from fellow students and her school counsellor, but her individual initiative, research, and persistence were instrumental in allowing her to access this resource.

Fatimah's story about learning about PSEO is similar. She asked her friends and learned that some were already taking college credits at community colleges during their junior and senior years. Although her own high school did not formally offer this program, Fatimah pursued it on her own. Not only did these students realize that entering college with earned credits would ease their transition to baccalaureate education, but they were also already engaged in activities that prepared them for their college choice as high school juniors. They created opportunities for themselves which the institutions around them did not always offer. The navigational capital that this enhancement required is exceptional, especially for a pre-college individual with limited U.S. college knowledge.

### ***Participation in College Preparatory Programs***

Participants reported joining college preparatory programs such as College Possible, AVID, Genesis Works, and TRIO Upward Bound, where students obtained valuable information and guidance. Muna explained that program mentors "guided" and "pushed" her to "apply to as many scholarships in all the different colleges that I wanted to apply to." Maryam's cousins insisted that she get involved with TRIO, a federal program designed to prepare individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds for college. Throughout her high school career, Maryam came to campus as many as four nights per week in order to attend TRIO activities. In addition, she enrolled in PSEO and took courses at a local community college. This frequency and total amount of time on two different college campuses surely helped Maryam develop a sense of herself as a college-going individual.

Many students credited college access programs with helping advance their financial literacy. Students took advantage of program support to complete scholarship and financial aid applications. After being accepted for admission, many students made sophisticated decisions about paying for college. Aliya described using a cost calculator that helped her debunk the myth that the school with the lowest sticker price would always be the most affordable. Between need-based aid and scholarships, she ended up attending college with no direct out-of-pocket expenses. Talia and Maryam had similar stories. Talia explained how one institution essentially covered her full tuition, making her final choice clear:

[M]e and my friend, we applied to a lot of colleges. She applied to, like, 11, and I applied to, like, 7 of them... but I didn't go to them because of the financial factor, like they

weren't willing to pay full, all my tuition, and the [PWI] was willing to pay all my tuition, and I got some money back as well.

### *Networking with Female Peers*

Another source of guidance entailed the sharing of information with community members, even among newly made acquaintances. Maryam explained that whenever she saw “another Somali girl” in any of her community college classes, they “just naturally pull together” and “she was just telling me all this stuff” about college and related opportunities. Maryam’s use of the word “naturally” highlights the attraction of community members to one another and their commitment to the success of the larger collective. Participant stories revealed the frequency and depth of information exchange among community members. In one impressive anecdote, Talia recounted boarding public transportation with a friend, and within minutes, befriendng another Somali American woman who was already seated. Talia told the new acquaintance:

‘Oh, we’re like, we’re about to become [high school] seniors. We are looking for programs and whatever’ ... and she said, ‘Oh, you know, there’s a cool program called [program name].’ ...so I wrote it down ... And so, the next day I went online. I found that I couldn’t apply until like the spring, early spring. So I waited, and then I applied early spring. I did the interview that they required. I did the crash course over the summer, and then I [got the internship].

This particular internship program not only strengthened Talia’s college application materials, but also provided a college scholarship. This account exemplifies how community members turned to each other “naturally” through networking and exchanged critical information in order to advance higher education among the Somali American community as a whole.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The findings above show that family, community, schools, and programs were all part of a network of social and navigational capital that contributed to the college choice experiences of these women. However, it is clear that female peers were a key instrument in unlocking these sources of college-going capital. For example, these students learned about PSEO and College in the Schools (CIS) from female peers. They learned about various college preparatory programs from female peers. They were encouraged by peers to persist in these programs, and to take advantage of their offerings. Respondents reported attending college preparatory programs with other peers, almost every night of the week. Over time, respondents competed with one another for admission to various colleges. These female peers processed and discussed possibilities with one another, including how many schools to apply to, the range of institutional types, and the financial aid packages offered. They encouraged each other to make the best decisions for their individual situations.

Female peers looked for one another in classrooms, buses, and other settings, were drawn to one another, and engaged in strategic networking. Respondents listened to the advice of peer-aged female siblings and cousins and learned to avoid challenges that tripped up family members. Findings show that female peer capital is the thread that weaves through every form of guidance and support that these women accessed in the college choice process. In each case, it was interaction with female peers, advice from female peers, competition with female peers, and data exchange with female peers that initiated and upheld pursuit of postsecondary education.

Overlooking the contributions of women is already a widespread habit in broader society (Ahmed, 2017), and certainly in academic analyses (Armato, 2013; Savigny, 2017), even more so when considering women who are young, underrepresented, and minoritized. Thus, it is critical to highlight the role of female, peer-to-peer capital as a thread weaving through and connecting college choice resources for women college-seekers. Female peer capital is productive in guiding college-seekers to gain detailed information, build upon one another's progress, and strive for success in college.

### ***Implications for Higher Education & Student Affairs Practice***

Higher education and student affairs practice would benefit by recognizing female peers as one of the most potent sources of college information, as well as an interconnecting thread running through college choice processes. This has implications for many facets of higher education, such as college access programming, admissions, orientation, housing, campus activities, and more. For example, college access programs can anticipate that URM college-seeking women will look to one another for insider information, encouragement, and accompaniment. Such programs could restructure offerings to facilitate this support by prioritizing the hiring of female peer coaches or encouraging female peers to attend activities together. Admissions offices could also redesign their efforts. For example, information sessions and campus tours can welcome participation by groups of female peers, rather than by family groups alone. Information sessions could be held in traditional women's spaces and could be facilitated by female peers. Parallel adjustments could be made for campus orientation and other annual events.

There are also implications for retention and persistence. Administrators could intentionally design housing to allow first-generation URM women to live near one another or to participate in activities in groups. Higher education faculty and staff should work to center collectivist orientations and motivators – such as female peer capital – as valuable, in their programming and curricula, realizing that current conceptions of U.S. college motivations and success are deeply informed by individualistic norms and practices.

### ***Future Research***

The need for further research on female peer capital in college choice is evident. Studies on female peer capital among other URM populations are needed, both in the U.S. and in other national and regional contexts. Future research might break down the role of female peer capital in each of the three stages of the college choice process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Comparing female peer capital across institutional types, such as community colleges, private institutions, and research universities would also be valuable. Furthermore, how does peer capital show up for college-seeking URM men? Are there differences in how and when URM male and female students seek peer capital? More importantly, does peer capital play a role in the concerning gender gap that appears across college admissions, retention, and graduation rates?

### ***Conclusion***

We applied Yosso's (2005, 2006) theory of CCW to the case of nine Somali American college women enrolled at a PWI to investigate successful college choice. Findings revealed that female peer capital was an interwoven, connective thread running through the various forms of

capital that college-seekers relied on. Attention to female peer capital can inform practice and research in productive and valuable ways.

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## Biographies

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## Seeking Food Justice for College Students: The Prevalence of Food Insecurity, Risk Factors and Paths Forward

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated the prevalence of food insecurity among college students at a Mid-Atlantic state university, as well as what factors can help predict vulnerability to food insecurity. We surveyed a stratified random sample of 7,216 students; 26% (n=1,874) completed the online questionnaire. Results demonstrated that 31.7% (n=594) were food insecure. Race, financial aid, housing instability, students' annual income and prior use of food assistance were significantly associated with food insecurity. Proposed solutions to address food insecurity include reforms to federal and state food assistance programs, as well as additional uniform support services for food insecure students at the college/university level.

### Introduction

By 2020, 65% of jobs in the United States will require post-secondary education or training after high school, (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2013) as will 80% of jobs that support a middle-class lifestyle (Carnevale, Strohl, Cheah & Ridley, 2017). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the cost of higher education, including tuition, room and board at public institutions increased by 34% between 2005-06 and 2015-16, (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Pell Grants, which once covered around 80% of the average tuition at public colleges and universities for eligible low-income students, now on average covers only one-third of the costs (Kolowich, 2015; Goldrick-Rab & Kendall, 2016). As a result, young adults from low-income families face challenges that impact academic success and college retention, including food insecurity (Dubick, Mathews & Cady, 2016; Hemelt & Marcotte, 2011). This paper will focus on the issue of food insecurity among college students, including an examination of which students are most vulnerable, and recommendations for programs and policies at the college/university and government levels to better address this salient social justice issue.

### Implications of Food Insecurity Among College Students in the United States

Food insecurity is defined as a lack of adequate amounts of nutritious, high-quality foods on a regular basis. (United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), 2018). In 2017, the USDA reported 11.8% of U.S. households were food insecure (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, Gregory & Singh, 2018). One of the first studies on food insecurity in college students,

published in 2009 by Chaparro and colleagues at the University of Manoa in Hawaii, found 21% of students experienced food insecurity. Since then, there have been several studies supporting Chaparro's findings that demonstrate between 14% - 59% of college students experience food insecurity, with rates being especially high among community college students (Bruening, Brennhofner, Van Woerden, Todd & Laska, 2016; Gaines, Robb, Knol & Sickler, 2014; Patton-Lopez, Lopez-Cevallos, Cancel-Tirado & Vazquez, 2014; Monahan-Couch, Gilboy & Delshad, 2017; Morris, Smith, Davis & Null, 2016; Nazmi, Martinez, Byrd, Robinson, Bianco, Maguire et al., 2018, Silva, Kleinert, Sheppard, Cantrell, Freeman-Coppadge, Tsoy et al. 2017). In a recent (2018) systematic review of eight studies (52,085 students) on food insecurity among US college students, Nazmi and colleagues (2018) found that on average almost half (43.5%) of students surveyed experienced food insecurity. These studies provide evidence that college students across the U.S. are an at-risk population with much higher rates of food insecurity than the national average.

While it is inherently troubling, food insecurity among college students is particularly problematic from the higher education vantage point, because it has a substantial impact on academic outcomes. As Madeline Pumariega, chancellor of the Florida University System noted, "When a student is hungry, he does not feel safe, and it is hard to help him synthesize class material. We have to meet students' basic needs in order for them to fully concentrate..." (Goldrick-Rab & Kendall, 2016, p. 3-4). Consistent with decades of research in the K-12 domain, recent studies have reported food insecure college students have lower grade point averages than food secure students (Patton-Lopez et al., 2014, Maroto, Snelling & Linck., 2014). College students who are food insecure have also reported more difficulty attending class, as well as increased anxiety and irritability which can affect academic performance (Seligman, Larais, & Kishel, 2010). This contributes to the substantial gap in graduation rates based on income, with students from high income families being up to six times more likely to graduate from college than students from low income families, even considering prior academic performance (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2016; Martinez, 2016). Food insecurity also has health implications for college students, both mentally and physically, which impairs their ability to thrive academically. Gallagos and colleagues (2014) found that food insecure students were twice as likely to report fair to poor overall health compared to other students (also see Raskind et al. 2019). With the problem of college student food insecurity established, we will now turn to our research and recommendations.

## **Research Design**

We worked with the university's Office of Institutional Research to identify a stratified, random sample of undergraduate and graduate students in the spring semester of 2018 to achieve representation of the student population according to gender, age, race/ethnicity, college and Pell grant status. Chi-square analyses were done to ensure the study 'pool' was an accurate representation of the university based on the above characteristics. Of the 17,306 students enrolled at the university, 7,216 students were selected based on the stratified random selection criteria noted above; they received electronic invitations via their university email addresses to participate in the survey; two reminder emails were sent.1 Student participation was also encouraged through an incentive; all participants could choose to click a link to another web page to register for a drawing for one of ten \$100.00 VISA gift cards. The incentive web page was not connected to students' survey responses. This study was approved by the University's

Institutional Review Board, and all participants completed informed consent documents before beginning the survey.

The online 43-item survey was generated using Qualtrics software, version 2018 (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) and included questions related to food insecurity, socio-economic factors that may predict food insecurity status, and demographics. The online survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The first six questions of the survey measured food insecurity using the USDA Household Food Security SF-6-item short form, developed by the National Center for Health Statistics (<https://www.ers.usda.gov/media/8282/short2012.pdf>) which has been validated previously with a number of diverse populations (Blumberg, Bialostosky, Hamilton & Riefel, 1999). The SF-6 form includes “yes or no” questions that ask respondents, “In the last 12 months, have you: ever run out of money to buy food, had insufficient resources to eat a balanced diet, had to cut meal size or skip meals due to not enough money, had to eat less to make food last longer, experienced hunger due to a lack of resources for food, or felt unsure of where your next meal would come from?” Answers of “yes” indicate food insecurity. For each “yes” response a student scored one point, for a minimum score of 0 and a maximum score of 6 across the module of questions. For the SF-6 form, the USDA categorizes respondents as having food security (0 – 1 points), low food security (2-4 points) and very low food security (5-6 points). For much of the analysis in this study, we collapsed the categories of low and very low food insecurity into a combined “food insecure” category, wherein the scores were coded as food secure (0 – 1 points) or food insecure (2 – 6 points).

Socio-economic questions asked students if they had participated in food assistance programs, what type of meal plans they had, their income, financial aid, housing and whether students were first generation college students. Demographic data (student status, gender, race, veteran, marital status) were also collected. The survey was pilot tested with a convenience sample of 108 students enrolled in a community nutrition course during spring of 2017, the pilot results are not included in this analysis (authors).

We first used bivariate cross-tabulations (chi-squares) to examine the relationship between food insecurity and socio-economic or demographic factors that may predict food insecurity. We then calculated a multivariate logistic regression model to determine which of the independent variables found to be significant in the bivariate models were the most salient predictors of food insecurity among our sample. For all analyses, statistical significance was set at  $P < 0.05$ .

## **Survey Results**

Of the 7,216 students who received an online invitation to take the survey, 1,505 surveys were complete for a response rate of 20.8%. The stratified sampling technique we employed was successful in producing a sample reflective of the demographic breakdown of the student population at the university under study.<sup>2</sup> The majority of participants were full-time (90.6%,  $n = 1,362$ ), undergraduates (82.2%,  $n = 1,237$ ), between 18-24 years old (84.4%,  $n = 1,271$ ), white (80.6%,  $n = 1,210$ ), and female (72.6%,  $n = 1,091$ ). The largest minority racial group was Black (8.6%,  $n = 129$ ), followed by Hispanic (3.9%,  $n = 58$ ). (Table 1)

Overall, our results indicate that nearly one-third (31.6%) of the college students in our sample experienced food insecurity. Broken down further according to USDA criteria, we found that 20.0% ( $n = 376$ ) of the sample experienced low food security and 11.6% ( $n = 218$ ) experienced very low food insecurity (Table 2).

Among the bivariate analyses (Table 3), we found race to be a significant predictor of food insecurity, with almost half (46.2%) of students of color having experienced food insecurity compared to only 32.0% of their white counterparts. Economic disadvantage was also found to be a significant predictor of food insecurity, specifically, 43.4% of students who received income-based, federal and state grants experienced food insecurity. The highest rate of food insecurity (61.7%) was among students who moved more than two times in an academic year, indicating housing instability is a predictor of food insecurity in the college student population. Students who earned less than \$10,000 per year (32.6%) and those who had previously participated in food assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) were also significantly more likely to experience food insecurity than those in higher income categories and those who had not previously participated in food aid programs.

Additionally, our findings indicate that undergraduates experienced food insecurity at a significantly higher rate than graduate students, 36.2% versus 27.7%, respectively. In contrast, first generation college-students experienced food insecurity at a significantly lower rate than the sample as a whole (26.8% vs. 31.6%), though the difference was relatively small. Finally, being a veteran, a woman, having a campus meal plan, and being married were not significantly related to food insecurity in our analyses. It is worth noting that the food insecurity rate among veterans was relatively high, 41.4%, the lack of significance for this variable may be due to the small number of veterans in our sample.

We used the results from the analyses above to inform a multivariate model (see Table 4.); given that our dependent variable is dichotomous, we completed multivariate (binary) logistic regression analysis. The independent variables for this model are those that were significant in our bivariate analyses: housing instability, income, being an undergraduate student, being a first-generation college-student, being a federal/state grant recipient, race and prior participation in food assistance programs. We have included the coefficients in Table 4 below, however, the non-linear nature of logistic regression makes the odds ratios more easily interpretable.

Those with housing instability appear to be especially susceptible to food insecurity with students who moved two or more times in a year having 2.95 times higher odds of experiencing food insecurity than students who moved less than two times per year. Similarly, the odds of a student who earned less than \$10,000 per year being food insecure are 2.12 times greater than a student who earns \$10,000 or more per year. The odds of a student who receives state or federal grants being food insecure are 1.63 times higher than students who do not receive state or federal grants. Lastly, the odds of a student who previously participated in food assistance programs experiencing food insecurity are 1.34 times higher than students who have not previously received food aid. Being an undergraduate rather than a graduate student, or whether one was a first-generation college student were not significant in our multivariate model.

Last, we also examined to what extent food insecure students are experiencing other economic hardships (Table 5). We found that despite working, often full-time, food insecure students were frequently unable to pay all their bills (16.2%) to pay their rent in full (12.6%), and needed to borrow money (51.2%) to make ends meet. Some food insecure students reported that because of housing insecurity, they had to resort to sleeping in an automobile (7.4%), sleeping on someone's couch (20.7%), or seeking temporary residence in an emergency shelter (1.1%)

## Discussion and Recommendations

Nearly one third of college students in our study experienced food insecurity with some experiencing very low food security. These findings on food insecurity among college students are similar to those reported by other researchers in the last ten years (Bruening, et al., 2016; Gaines, et al., 2014; Patton-Lopez, et al., 2014; Monahan-Couch, et al., 2017, Morris, et al., 2016; Nazmi, et al., 2018, Silva, et al. 2017). Hence, at this point, food insecurity among college students is well-documented. We now need comprehensive, multi-level interventions to address this problem.

### Recommendations for College and University Actions:

- 1) Provide Institution Support for an On-Campus Food Pantry

Colleges and universities are beginning to address food insecurity on their campuses by opening food pantries (Freudenberg, Manzo, Jones, Kwan, Tsui & Gagnon 2011). In 2018, the College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA) reported that there are more than 300 food pantries on college campuses. On-campus pantries have proven extremely important for the student population, because community pantries are frequently inaccessible for students without vehicles and may have substantial limits on use/eligibility. However, funding and staffing are two important challenges impacting the success of pantries.

Four-year public institutions are experiencing a downward trend in funding overall, and a lack of funding for institutions is a major contributing factor to lack of adequate funding for campus pantries. The 118 campuses in the report Campus Food Pantries: Insights from a National Survey, “reported annual budgets averaging just more than \$15,000 per year....” (Goldrick-Rab, Cady & Coca, 2018 p. 7). To supplement their limited budgets, many campuses have had success in teaming up with their institution’s foundation to apply for external funding through grants and private donors. A growing practice among pantries, such as the South Seattle College, is to seek funding from student service and activity fees, (<https://www.southseattle.edu/student-life/food-pantry.aspx>) or their student government associations. At present, a successful pantry is likely going to have multiple funding sources, and staff will have to invest significant time in seeking necessary funding. We strongly advocate for colleges and universities to establish consistent budgeted funding for campus pantries (much as they do for other non-academic student resources, such as a Women’s Center). This would allow staff to spend more time in outreach and direct service to students and ensure that an increasingly vital student resource is able to persist.

Personnel for campus pantries is also an important issue, and it varies greatly. According to Goldrick-Rab, Cady et al., (2016, p. 8) Campus Food Pantries: Insights from a National Survey, “...in 38% of campus pantries, the dean of students office or the division of student affairs is in charge, while student government or student organizations operate 2% of pantries. Other common managing offices include service learning and health and wellness.” Typically, a staff member in the delegated department serves as the pantry administrator, overseeing: operations, finances/fundraising, and supervising student staff or other volunteers. Pantry administrators typically oversee a campus pantry as only one of many official duties, which can make it extremely challenging for them to keep the doors open and shelves full for students in need. Before a pantry is opened,

campus administrators should assess multiple possible departments to house and provide direct staffing, considering the financial and staffing resources within the departments, and dedicating at least one staff person's position to half-time oversight of the pantry with assistance from graduate students. This will yield greater fairness in workloads across staff, and higher odds of long-term success for the pantry.

## 2) Assistance in Applying for Federal and State Aid

Applying for government aid is a complex, tedious and confusing process, and college students need help with navigating the bureaucratic hurdles. Colleges and universities can and should provide this type of application assistance, and there are existing models to look towards.

Some states have already created models that are easily transferable. California, Minnesota, Missouri, and Rhode Island each have different programs wherein state SNAP officials have: engaged in regular caseworker training to make sure staff are informed about college student eligibility guidelines. They created policy statements to clearly list student eligibility requirements, and had on-campus clinics or "office hours" to meet with students and assist with eligibility questions and enrollment procedures (United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2018).

Many of the CUNY campuses are a part of the 30 universities that partner with Single Stop US, a non-profit serving low-income students by connecting them to a holistic range of social services (<https://singlestopusa.org/about/>). Single-stop counselors provide information about benefit eligibility and guide students through the application and enrollment process <https://singlestopusa.org/our-work/>. Other institutions should be looking to these early adopters as guides for establishing similar support services for their students.

## 3) Other On-Campus Opportunities:

There are many additional opportunities for reducing food insecurity among college students that are student led or student run, reducing the need for additional staffing and funding. These student-led programs are also important co-curricular learning opportunities that can help in combating shame and stigma among students in need by expanding overall awareness of the problem. Such options include: 1) Food recovery programs such as the Food Recovery Network (<https://www.foodrecoverynetwork.org/>) making surplus food from campus dining establishments available to food insecure students while maintaining recipient's anonymity; 2) Swipe Out Hunger or similar programs that allow students to donate unused dining hall meal swipes (purchased through their yearly meal plan) to their peers who are experiencing food insecurity (<https://www.swipehunger.org/about>). 3) College vegetable gardens that dedicate all or a portion of a garden to growing produce for food insecure students.

### State and Federal Actions:

While many steps can be taken at the campus level to help address food insecurity among college students, this problem is reflective of structural inequities that exist on a national-level and changes to government policies that reinforce these inequities is essential. In our study, a high volume of students experiencing food insecurity had received support from government

food assistance programs prior to entering college: 64% participated in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), 36% came from families enrolled in SNAP, and 26% came from families who received benefits through the Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program. In becoming college students, eligibility for these programs most often evaporates; removing barriers to accessing such programs is of paramount importance.

1) Reforms to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which provides benefits for eligible low-income individuals to purchase food, is impossible or extremely difficult for college students to access. According to the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Services (FNS), able-bodied students 18 – 62 years of age who are enrolled in higher education at least half-time are only eligible for SNAP if they meet one or more of the following exceptions: 1) They receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits.<sup>3</sup> 2) They work or are engaged in an eligible employment and training (E&T) program for at least 80 hours per month (the requirement is higher in some states). 3) They are the primary caregiver for a dependent (child under 6 years and/or a child 5 – 12 years and cannot get childcare to attend school). 4) They are unable to work due to a physical or mental disability (USDA, FNS 2019a).

According to a 2018 Government Accountability Office (GAO) publication there are currently almost 2 million SNAP-eligible students not receiving aid, primarily due to misinformation among social service workers at the state-level who are unaware of the exceptions that make a student eligible, and who automatically deem all college students ineligible. Retraining on this should be a top priority in the short-term.

A larger issue is the requirement surrounding work and the exclusion of college education from eligible E&T programs under SNAP. Requiring students to work 20 or more hours on top of being full-time college students has proven to result in poor educational outcomes for students from low-income backgrounds. A recent study indicates that working more than 15 hours per week is detrimental to academic performance and lowers the likelihood of degree completion for low-income students (Carnevale and Smith 2018). Working low-income students also take much longer to complete their degrees and accrue much higher amounts of debt in the process (Goldrick-Rab & Kendall, 2016). Moreover, higher education generally does not qualify as an E&T program even though it is inherently employment training that provides students with the skills and credentials necessary to succeed in the current and future labor market. We strongly recommend an amendment to SNAP eligibility requirements to allow college and university education to count as an E&T program.

2) Expansion of the Free/Reduced School Breakfast and Lunch Program

The National School Lunch Program, launched in 1946, is another public benefit that improves food security among low-income students throughout their K-12 years (USDA, FNS 2019b). The NSLP was created with the guiding principle that students will not be able to concentrate and succeed in school if they are hungry. To better achieve this goal, the program has expanded multiple times from only providing lunch to also offering breakfast and serving meals during the summertime in schools in the poorest

neighborhoods. Many lower income college students have participated in the NSLP for thirteen years, but do not have such a resource available at the college level.

We join with experts on college student food insecurity, including the HOPE Lab, in calling for a new expansion of the NSLP to include low income students at colleges and universities. This program could operate virtually identically to the way it is designed at the K-12 level in allowing low-income students to have free or reduced meals in the school cafeteria once they are deemed eligible. As in the K-12 version, this would improve the quality and quantity of food in students' diets, which has tangible benefits to academic performance

([https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/health\\_and\\_academics/pdf/factsheetDietaryBehaviors.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/health_and_academics/pdf/factsheetDietaryBehaviors.pdf)).

Being able to access the dining hall would also allow low-income students to experience a more normalized social experience during their college years; forming bonds with their peers and feeling welcome at college can increase both retention rates and GPA for low-income students (Makara et al. 2015).

## **Conclusions**

Our study provides insight into how to approach and better address a relatively new area of study; food insecurity among college students. We identified important socio-economic predictors of food insecurity among college students: housing instability, low-income family background, state and federal grant eligibility, minority racial background, and previous participation in food assistance programs. Our results support the need for universities to engage in outreach and assist food insecure students, particularly those in the categories above who are most at risk. As institutions whose very existence is dedicated to educating students, colleges and universities are obliged to address this salient barrier to academic performance and degree completion.

Beyond the campus level, we also strongly advocate for changes to federal hunger relief programs to make them accessible to college students. SNAP eligibility guidelines should be reformed to allow college/university enrollment to count as an employment training program thereby making low-income students eligible for food assistance. Building on prior expansions of the NSLP, we also recommend creating a college level free/reduced meal program, which would increase access to healthy food and increase social engagement among food insecure students. Beyond concerns for the students directly impacted, as a nation, the success of our economy and the competitiveness of our workforce depends on investing in higher education and empowering students to obtain the skills necessary for employment in the 21st century job market.

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## **Biographies**

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Dr. Delshad is an Associate Professor of Political Science at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. Her research and teaching focus on the intersections between food, environmental, and social policy. She also oversees the WCU South Campus Garden and serves on the WCU Resource Pantry Advisory Board.

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### **Mrs. Jodi Roth-Saks**

Mrs. Jodi Roth-Saks is the Executive Director of the Jewish Relief Agency. The Jewish Relief Agency aims to relieve hunger, improve lives, and strengthen communities across the Greater Philadelphia region. Previously, Mrs. Roth-Saks oversaw WCU's Department of Service-Learning and Volunteer Programs and the Resource Pantry.

### **Dr. Lynn Monahan Couch**

At the time of this study, Dr. Lynn Monahan Couch, DCN, RD was an associate professor at West Chester University of Pennsylvania, where she taught undergraduate and graduate courses on sustainable food systems, hunger, and food policy. She has presented at regional, national and international conferences on these topics.

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