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Editor's Note

Supporting Undergraduate Students During Challenging Times

Undergraduate students are pursuing higher education during a period of significant social, economic, technological, and institutional change. Although college students have always faced challenges associated with academic transition and personal development, today's students are also navigating rising educational and living costs, employment and family responsibilities, concerns about belonging and well-being, and rapid technological changes that are reshaping both higher education and the workplace. These realities reinforce an enduring principle in the student-success literature: providing access to higher education is important, but access without the structures necessary to support persistence and completion is insufficient.

Research on student persistence has consistently demonstrated that institutional environments matter. Tinto (2012) argues that students are more likely to persist when institutions establish high expectations, provide academic and social support, offer meaningful assessment and feedback, and create opportunities for students to become actively involved in their learning. Student success, therefore, should not be viewed solely as a function of an individual student's motivation, preparation, or resilience. Institutions also bear responsibility for creating conditions in which students can succeed.

This responsibility is particularly important for students who have historically encountered barriers within higher education. First-generation college students, for example, may enter college with fewer opportunities to acquire knowledge about institutional expectations, processes, and resources. National and institutional research has demonstrated persistent differences in access, persistence, and degree completion between first-generation students and students whose parents have attended or completed college (Cataldi et al., 2018). Research also suggests that academic support, social support, mentoring, encouragement, and meaningful relationships with faculty and staff can contribute positively to the experiences of first-generation students (Eveland, 2020; Gibbons et al., 2019).

A sense of belonging is similarly important. Students need more than admission to an institution; they need to believe that they are valued members of the academic community. Strayhorn (2019) identifies belonging as an important component of students' academic adjustment, engagement, achievement, and persistence. When students feel connected to faculty, peers, staff, and the broader institution, they are more likely to perceive themselves as legitimate and valued participants in the educational environment.

Institutions must also recognize that academic challenges frequently intersect with circumstances beyond the classroom. The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs (2025) reported that 59% of respondents in its 2023–2024 survey of more than 74,000 students experienced at least one form of food or housing insecurity. Such findings remind us that conversations about retention and completion cannot be separated from the material conditions in which students are attempting to learn. A student concerned about food, housing, transportation, employment, childcare, or other basic needs may find it considerably more difficult to devote the time and attention necessary for academic success.

Supporting undergraduate students during these times therefore requires an institutional approach that extends beyond isolated programs or individual offices. Academic affairs, student affairs, enrollment management, financial aid, advising, counseling, career development, tutoring, and other areas must work collectively. Equally important, institutions must develop systems that identify students who need assistance before academic difficulties become insurmountable. Effective student success work should be proactive rather than dependent upon students knowing when, where, and how to ask for help.

We should also move beyond an understanding of student support that focuses solely on preventing students from leaving college. Our responsibility is to help students thrive. Undergraduate students should have ac-

cess to educational experiences that deepen learning, develop confidence, strengthen professional skills, and help them connect their academic studies with their future aspirations. Internships, undergraduate research, service learning, collaborative projects, mentoring, study abroad, and other high-impact educational experiences can provide important opportunities for students to integrate knowledge and apply learning beyond the traditional classroom.

Yet access to these experiences must be intentional. Students who already possess extensive social and cultural capital are often better positioned to locate internships, establish relationships with faculty, participate in research, or pursue unpaid educational opportunities. Institutions committed to access and inclusion must therefore examine not only whether high-impact opportunities exist, but also who participates in them and who does not. Equity in higher education requires that transformative educational opportunities be accessible to students who may not otherwise know how to obtain them.

Technology presents another significant dimension of the contemporary undergraduate experience. Generative artificial intelligence is already changing how students learn, complete academic work, seek information, and prepare for employment. Rather than treating AI exclusively as a threat to academic integrity or as an unquestioned solution to educational challenges, institutions must help students develop the ability to use these technologies critically, ethically, and effectively. Kassorla et al. (2024) argue that AI literacy in higher education should include technical understanding, critical evaluation, responsible application, and awareness of limitations and biases. These competencies will increasingly become part of preparing students for academic, professional, and civic life.

At the same time, technology cannot replace the human relationships at the center of education. Students still need faculty members who know their names, advisors who recognize when something has changed, mentors who challenge them to see possibilities they may not have considered, and staff members who help them navigate unfamiliar institutional systems. The future of student success will undoubtedly include sophisticated technology and data-informed interventions, but it must remain grounded in human connection.

This is where the work represented in the *Journal of Access, Retention and Inclusion in Higher Education* remains especially important. Research on access must continue to examine who enters higher education and what barriers remain. Scholarship on retention must help institutions understand not merely why students leave, but what institutional conditions encourage them to remain and succeed. Work focused on inclusion must challenge colleges and universities to create environments in which students experience belonging, respect, opportunity, and meaningful participation.

During challenging times, it can be tempting for institutions to focus primarily on enrollment numbers, budgets, operational efficiencies, or external pressures. These issues are undeniably important. However, they must not obscure the fundamental reason colleges and universities exist: students.

Our responsibility is not simply to admit students and hope they succeed. It is to create educational environments deliberately designed to make success possible.

As scholars, practitioners, faculty members, administrators, and institutional leaders, we must continue asking difficult questions: Who is thriving? Who is struggling? Who is leaving? Who is participating in our most meaningful educational opportunities? Whose needs are our policies designed around? And what must we change when the evidence tells us that our existing approaches are insufficient?

Supporting undergraduate students is not peripheral to the mission of higher education. It is the mission.

John B. Craig, Ed.D.
Editor
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Foreword

Access Is the Beginning, Belonging Is the Bridge, and Success Is the Goal

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When we speak about access and belonging in higher education, we are not speaking about two separate challenges. We are speaking about different points along the same student journey. Access asks whether students can enter our institutions. Retention asks whether they are able and willing to remain. Belonging asks a deeper question: Once students arrive, have we created an environment in which they can see themselves, find connection, and believe that they can succeed?

For me, these questions are both professional and personal.

I am a first-generation college graduate who began my own higher education journey in remedial courses. Long before I became a professor, administrator, researcher, or President of the National Organization for Student Success (NOSS), I was a student who needed someone to see potential beyond placement. Faculty and staff invested in me, encouraged me, and helped me understand that where I started did not determine where I could finish. That experience has shaped much of my professional life and the way I think about student success today. Access may open the door, but opening the door is not enough. We must also ask what students experience once they walk through it.

As President of NOSS, I have the privilege of engaging with educators and student success professionals who confront this question every day. They work in classrooms, advising offices, tutoring centers, developmental education programs, first-year experiences, learning support programs, and administrative offices. Their titles and institutions may differ, but their work is connected by a common purpose: helping students move from opportunity to achievement. This work requires us to resist defining students by what they lack. A placement score, academic history, socioeconomic circumstance, transfer status, age, or first-semester struggle tells us something about a student's experience; it does not tell us the limits of that student's potential. Student success begins when institutions move away from asking, "What is wrong with this student?" and toward asking, "What can we do differently so this student has an opportunity to succeed?"

Higher education has made significant progress in expanding who has access to college. Yet our responsibility cannot end with admission. As researchers and practitioners, we must continue examining which practices work, for whom they work, and under what circumstances. We must be willing to evaluate programs, listen to students, share promising practices, and change approaches when evidence tells us something is not working as intended.

This is one reason I believe so strongly in the work of NOSS. Student success does not belong to one department, discipline, institution, or professional role. It is collective work. When we share research, practices, failures, innovations, and lessons learned, we strengthen not only our own institutions but also the broader profession.

The scholarship represented in this journal contributes to that collective responsibility. As you read the scholarship contained in these pages, I encourage you to consider not only what the data say but also whose experiences the data represent. Ask how these findings might influence a classroom practice, institutional policy, advising conversation, support program, or interaction with a student.

I often say that student success is the heartbeat of our work. That belief is rooted in my own journey, strengthened by my experiences as an educator, and reaffirmed through the students and professionals I encounter every day. As you reflect on the scholarship and perspectives shared throughout these pages, I hope you are inspired to move beyond simply providing students access to higher education. Let us commit to creating the conditions in which students feel supported, valued, and connected—and, most importantly, have every opportunity to succeed.

“It’s More Relatable”: Near-Peer Mentoring as Reciprocal Development in Undergraduate Education

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examines a formal peer mentoring program for first-year students and undergraduate peer mentors at a mid-sized Research II (R2) institution in the southeastern United States. Drawing on focus groups, open-ended survey responses, and programmatic data, the study explores peer mentoring's influence on belonging, social integration, and leadership development. Findings highlight six interconnected themes: the importance of near-peer relatability and major-aligned matching; differentiated leadership development among mentors; bilateral engagement challenges; mentors' role in academic and campus navigation; and onboarding and platform barriers to early relationship formation. Participants emphasized the primacy of in-person interaction for relationship quality, alongside challenges related to scheduling, multi-campus contexts, and communication preferences. The study underscores how structured peer mentoring programs can support student retention and inclusion during the transition to college.

Keywords: peer mentoring, first-year students, social integration, sense of belonging, leadership development

“It’s More Relatable”: Near-Peer Mentoring as Reciprocal Development in Undergraduate Education

The transition from high school to college represents a critical period for undergraduate student adjustment, persistence, and long-term success. First-year students often encounter academic, social, and emotional challenges as they navigate unfamiliar institutional environments, develop new peer networks, and adapt to increased autonomy. These challenges can contribute to decreased academic performance and increased attrition, particularly during the first year of college.

Peer mentoring programs have emerged as a widely adopted strategy to support student success, retention, and engagement (Dixon et al., 2023). By pairing incoming students with more experienced peers, these programs provide academic guidance, social support, and institutional navigation. The influence of peers in shaping student experiences is well documented, suggesting that peer mentoring can play a critical role in fostering connection, confidence, and persistence.

In response to these needs, a regional R2 institution in the southeastern United States developed a formal peer mentoring program (hereafter, “The Peer Mentoring Program”) in partnership with an external peer mentorship-focused education technology company. The program was sponsored by the division of student support and engagement and designed to provide structured peer connections for incoming first-year students while offering leadership development opportunities for upperclass mentors. Mentors were drawn from a campus-based scholarship program and matched with mentees by shared academic major. Mentees were incoming first-year students from an outreach initiative serving students from inner-city and rural backgrounds, including a disproportionate share of first-generation college students.

This study examines the perceived benefits and challenges of The Peer Mentoring Program through the perspectives of both mentors and mentees, exploring peer mentoring’s influence on sense of belonging, social integration, and leadership development.

Research Questions

This study corroborates the importance of the first-year transition and explains that first-year students often experience academic, social, and emotional challenges that may affect adjustment and persistence. By examining a structured peer mentoring program for first-year students and undergraduate peer mentors, the following research questions were developed to assess how peer mentoring supports students’ sense of con-

nection, campus engagement, ability to navigate institutional systems, and growth as aspiring leaders:

1. How do first-year mentees experience near-peer mentoring in relation to belonging, social integration, and institutional navigation?
2. How do undergraduate peer mentors describe the leadership and professional development benefits of serving as mentors?
3. What structural and relational factors support or hinder effective mentor-mentee engagement?

Literature Review

Peer mentoring is widely recognized as a high-impact practice that supports student success, retention, and persistence in higher education, with meaningful peer connections strongly associated with belonging, academic persistence, and degree completion (Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1993). These programs leverage social learning processes, allowing students to model behaviors, access institutional knowledge, and receive support from individuals with shared experiences—enhancing academic engagement, reducing isolation, and improving adjustment to college life (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Collier, 2015, 2017). For first-generation students in particular, near-peer mentors who have navigated similar institutional terrain serve as critical bridges to integration, providing guidance on processes and norms that may otherwise remain opaque (Collier, 2015). This integration is further maximized when programs leverage intentional matching; matching incoming students with upperclassmen by shared academic major concentrations significantly reinforces institutional belonging and reduces early transfer or dropout intentions (Lapon & Buddington, 2024).

In addition to benefits for mentees, peer mentoring programs also support the development of mentors. Undergraduate mentors often report gains in leadership, communication, and interpersonal skills, which are transferable to professional contexts (Glaser et al., 2006). The act of guiding others prompts reflective practice, encourages mentors to consolidate and articulate their own learning, and accelerates identity development in the role of emerging professional (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). While peer mentorship scholarship has historically focused almost exclusively on mentee outcomes, embedding upperclass peer leaders directly into academic spaces like first-year seminars serves as a powerful reciprocal vehicle that expands the mentors' own communication competence, professional networks, and leadership efficacy (Das, 2025).

Despite these documented benefits, challenges such as inconsistent engagement and limited partici-

pation—particularly in virtual or hybrid environments—remain common barriers to program effectiveness. Research also points to the importance of structural program elements, including intentional matching, adequate mentor training, and sufficient in-person touchpoints, as key moderators of program impact (Collier, 2017). This study contributes by examining both mentor and mentee experiences within a structured program, situating findings within broader conversations about student success and the specific needs of first-generation and underrepresented students.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), and social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). Together, these frameworks suggest that peer relationships serve as important sources of social influence, identity development, and social support.

Within peer mentoring contexts, these three frameworks operate in concert. Social learning theory explains how mentees acquire academic and social knowledge through observation of experienced peers (Bandura, 1977). Social information processing theory illuminates how students interpret institutional expectations through relational exchanges—an especially salient process for first-generation students who may lack prior exposure to college norms. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) accounts for how both mentors and mentees calibrate development, confidence, and belonging by benchmarking against peers at various stages of the college experience.

Critically, these frameworks apply in both directions within the mentoring relationship. As mentors guide others, they simultaneously engage in upward and lateral social comparison—reflecting on their own development and building professional identities. This bidirectional dynamic grounds the study's focus on mentoring as a reciprocal developmental process.

Methodology

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative case study methodology to examine the effectiveness of a structured peer mentoring program at a mid-sized, Research II institution in the southeastern United States. Case study design was selected for its capacity to capture the complexity and context-specificity of the mentoring experience, allowing for in-depth exploration of program outcomes across multiple data sources (Yin, 2018).

Participants

The Peer Mentoring Program enrolled a total of 35 undergraduate students, encompassing both peer mentors and first-year mentees. For this study, data were drawn from two focus groups—one with peer mentors and one with first-year mentees—conducted at the conclusion of the academic year. A subset of enrolled students participated in these sessions; participant counts for each focus group are noted below. All focus group participants were 18 years of age or older and enrolled as undergraduate students at the institution.

Peer mentors were drawn from an academically selective, campus-based scholarship cohort and were required to have completed formal mentor training before being assigned a mentee. Selection criteria for mentors included high academic performance, demonstrated campus leadership and involvement, and faculty or staff recommendation. Several mentors were in their senior year; at least one was a sophomore, indicating participation across multiple class standings. Mentors were matched with mentees according to shared academic major or field of study.

Mentees were incoming first-year students who voluntarily opted into the program through one of the university's scholarship-linked outreach initiatives. These programs specifically served students from underrepresented and under-resourced communities, including a substantial proportion of first-generation college students from inner-city and rural backgrounds. Several mentees self-identified or were identified through their questioning patterns as first-generation students navigating institutional processes—such as course registration, time tickets, and academic advising—for the first time.

Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple sources to support triangulation and enhance the credibility of

findings. Primary sources included: (a) semi-structured focus groups conducted separately with peer mentors and first-year mentees; (b) open-ended responses on program surveys administered through the proprietary mentoring platform; and (c) programmatic engagement data captured and provided by the education technology partner.

Two focus groups were conducted at the conclusion of the academic year. The mentor focus group included approximately five participants across two sub-sessions held in sequence, and the mentee focus group included approximately six to seven participants. Both sessions were facilitated in person by the program coordinator. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes to two hours. Focus group questions were semi-structured and explored participants' experiences, perceived benefits, challenges within the program, and the influence of mentoring on their social behaviors, sense of belonging, and professional development. Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Quantitative survey data collected through the platform—including questionnaires on mentor-mentee interactions and communication and engagement logs—were used as supplementary programmatic data to contextualize qualitative findings. Survey instruments measuring sense of belonging and self-efficacy were administered by the education technology partner at designated points during the program year and provided to the research team in fully de-identified, FERPA-compliant report. All electronic data files were stored on password-protected computers accessible only to the principal investigator and designated research assistants.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytic process proceeded through the following stages: familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and survey responses; initial open coding of all data sources; identification of recurring patterns and conceptual relationships across codes; development and refinement of themes; and interpretation of themes in relation to the study's theoretical framework and research objectives. Coding was conducted manually by the principal investigator. Quantitative programmatic data were analyzed descriptively to identify participation patterns and to contextualize qualitative findings. Findings across all data sources were triangulated to strengthen credibility and account for potential gaps or inconsistencies in any single data type.

Trustworthiness

To ensure methodological rigor, this study employed several trustworthiness strategies. Triangulation across three data sources — focus groups, open-ended survey responses, and platform engagement data — supported convergent validity. Member checking was conducted by sharing a summary of emergent themes with focus group participants, who were invited to review and respond to the accuracy and completeness of the interpretations before themes were finalized; no significant challenges to the findings were raised. To address potential analytic bias, the principal investigator engaged in ongoing reflexivity throughout the coding process, maintaining a reflective journal to document interpretive decisions, assumptions, and emerging analytical moves. The researcher's dual role as program coordinator and principal investigator was explicitly acknowledged as a positionality consideration; this relationship was disclosed to participants, and particular care was taken to ensure that interpretations were grounded in participant language rather than institutional expectation.

Ethical Considerations

This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the participating institution and received an exempt determination under Category 1 (education research) and Category 2 (surveys and interviews). Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and all identifying information was anonymized to protect confidentiality; participant names used in this manuscript are pseudonyms. Data were stored securely, and identifiers were maintained separately from research records in accordance with IRB protocols. Given that some participants were members of a campus outreach program with a direct relationship to the research site, particular care was taken to ensure voluntariness and minimize the potential for coercion.

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. This study received no external funding. Programmatic engagement data were provided by the external education technology partner as part of a formal institutional partnership agreement; the partner had no role in the design of the study, data analysis, interpretation of findings, or preparation of this manuscript. The use of these data was disclosed to and approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Findings

Analysis of focus group transcripts, open-ended survey responses, and programmatic data yielded five primary themes: (a) near-peer relatability and the value of major-aligned matching; (b) differentiated forms of leadership and professional development among mentors; (c) the bilateral and structural nature of engagement challenges; (d) concrete navigation support for first-year transition, particularly for first-generation students; and (e) platform and onboarding friction as a barrier to early relationship formation. Together, these themes illuminate both the promise and the implementation challenges of structured undergraduate peer mentoring.

Near-Peer Relatability and the Value of Major-Aligned Matching

Across both focus groups, participants consistently identified relational proximity as the program's foundational asset. Mentors and mentees alike distinguished the quality of near-peer guidance from support received by faculty, professional staff, or alumni—not as superior in all respects, but as uniquely valuable for its currency and specificity. As one mentor, *Brandon*, articulated:

> I think it's more relatable…you talk to an adult and they'll say, 'Oh, college for me was like this,' and it's just like, that adult sometimes is 10, 15, 20 years from college. Things have changed a lot."

A senior mentor, *Justin*, extended this observation by reflecting on the developmental value of the guide role itself:

> When you become a sophomore and a junior and a senior, sometimes you're just doing school… but then you get to, like me, a senior right now, and I think about everything, how I got here. It was really cool to get to share that to somebody else.

This framing—mentoring as a vehicle for consolidating and narrating one's own institutional trajectory—recurred across mentor accounts and connects directly to social learning and social comparison theory (Bandura, 1977; Festinger, 1954).

Equally prominent was the benefit of major-aligned matching. One mentor, *Stephanie*, noted that her conversations with mentees were almost entirely discipline-specific:

> I think it was really good that we matched with someone in our same major because pretty much ev-

erything that I talked about with my mentees is nursing-related…the nursing program, what they had to get in the class to be a nurse. All things were nursing-related, which I thought was very helpful.

Mentees echoed this sentiment, with one reflecting that she wished she had been matched with someone in her major, speculating it "would have been a lot more helpful in the long run." The matching function thus operated not only as a logistical convenience but as the mechanism through which mentoring conversations achieved their greatest specificity and perceived relevance.

Differentiated Forms of Leadership and Professional Development Among Mentors

Mentors reported substantial and varied gains in leadership and professional competencies over the course of the program. These gains were not uniform; they reflected the particular relational challenges each mentor navigated and the ways those challenges prompted reflection and skill-building.

Several mentors described the experience as having drawn them outside their natural comfort zones in ways they found professionally formative. *Brandon*, reflected:

> Just learning to be there for other people…I talk to my mentees, and they don't always talk about their problems. I'm not gonna try to force it out of 'em…just being there, letting them know that you're there, and just trying to be consistent about that. That's something I can put into my later career—being present, being in the moment.

A senior nursing student, *Stephanie*, connected her mentoring experience explicitly to professional orientation:

> I think being a mentor and hearing the types of questions that my mentee has…can help me when I start my career, and I become like the mentee, and knowing what to ask. For nursing, you don't just start right away. You start in a six-month period where you're just an orientee.

This anticipatory professional socialization—using the mentoring relationship as a rehearsal space for future role transitions—was a recurring theme among upperclass mentors.

A third form of leadership development emerged around the competency of recognizing and navigating the limits of one's own knowledge. Multiple mentors described instances in which they could not answer a mentee's question directly and made deliberate decisions to redirect. As one mentor put it: "I think being

a leader is also knowing when you can't answer the question, and I redirected her to somebody that would know the answer to that question." Another said simply: "Small isolated stuff I couldn't answer, I directed to the program coordinator. I'm just like, 'Talk to her. I don't know the answer to this question. She probably does.'"

Finally, several mentors described the experience as prompting unexpected self-reflection—a process of looking backward at their own development through the lens of mentee questions. One mentor described responding to a mentee's question about frustration: "It made me think about how far I've come…I had to think about it because I'm like—it made me think about how I used to be. Sometimes you're just on autopilot and just going through and you don't really think about your actions and habits, how they've evolved." This reflective dimension of mentoring—in which guiding another produces insight about oneself—aligns with both social comparison theory and the reciprocal identity development literature.

Bilateral and Structural Engagement Challenges

The engagement challenges documented in this study were more complex and multidirectional than the existing literature typically frames them. Rather than a simple problem of mentee disengagement, the data reveal a bilateral pattern in which both mentors and mentees bore responsibility for inconsistent contact, and in which structural program conditions compounded relational friction.

From the mentor side, several participants reported that mentees were difficult to reach, would respond days late, or went silent after initial contact. As one mentor noted: "I know we're supposed to report it and put it in [the mentoring platform], but it's like, what are we doing wrong? We're reaching out, we're trying, but they just don't give back." Mentors hypothesized that mentee silence was less about disinterest than about uncertainty: "I don't think it was because they didn't want to talk. It was like, they just don't know what to ask."

From the mentee side, the picture was more varied—and in some cases, the relational failure ran in the opposite direction. Several mentees reported receiving little to no outreach from their assigned mentor. One mentee, *Veronica*, described an experience of almost complete non-contact: "I really was excited for the program and to have a mentor, but we didn't really keep in contact at all…I wasn't reached out to at all. We just had that one event where we were supposed to meet them, and that's the only time we spoke." Another reported communicating a total of five times across the entire academic year. Yet critically, mentees also

acknowledged their own role in the dynamic. Another mentee, *Kim*, shared: "I don't want it to sound like it's one-sided where it's like, only my mentor's at fault because I'm at fault just as much as she is."

Structural factors further complicated engagement. Multiple mentees and mentors identified digital-only communication as insufficient for building genuine connection. One mentee observed: "You don't know who you're talking to. It's like talking to a stranger, really…it's like somebody who would DM you or snap you on social media." Mentors agreed, with one noting: "More face-to-face would have been good…I feel like, with my mentees, I would have to reach out to them more than they would reach out to me, and I don't think it was because they didn't want to talk." At the same time, participants resisted a one-size-fits-all solution: one mentee who preferred monthly text check-ins reported the arrangement as entirely satisfying, noting: "At least I knew there was someone there that was consistently checking in."

These findings collectively suggest that engagement is not simply a function of motivation but is shaped by relational design, communication preferences, structural opportunity, and the clarity of expectations on both sides. Interventions that treat engagement as a mentee problem miss the full picture.

Concrete Navigation Support and First-Generation Student Needs

Peer mentors played a tangible and specific role in helping first-year students navigate the operational and cultural landscape of the university. The range of topics mentors addressed was notably concrete: course registration and time ticket processes, parking logistics, locating and scheduling appointments with academic advisors, using the writing center and tutoring center, office hours etiquette, and understanding what co-curricular resources like the campus student life platform offered. One mentor connected this practical guidance directly to first-generation experience:

> A lot of [my mentees] were first-generation students as well as I am, so they were asking questions that I think I was afraid to ask that seemed obvious to everybody else. They were just simple stuff like, how is the parking? How do I register for a class? What is my time ticket? Simple stuff like that that you might not think somebody might not know.

Mentors also shared personal advice about academic sustainability—time management, the importance of breaks and campus engagement, and the risks of overextension. One mentor who had worked full-time while beginning college described sharing a granular scheduling strategy with mentees: "I was like, try

to schedule it all out. Having a planner really helps you see what you have to do…I can schedule in a little break. It all depends on being more individualized to you." Another mentor surfaced personalized learning strategies, recommending that a mentee who was a kinesthetic learner try listening to lectures while doing non-cognitively demanding tasks—a method the mentor had independently discovered for herself.

Mentors also described guiding mentees through interpersonal barriers that first-year students often struggle to articulate. One mentor advised her mentees to approach professors directly: "There are some situations where you want to do something, but you don't have the courage to do so, such as talking to professors. I tell my mentees, 'It's okay. They're human too. Just go up and speak to them.'" This guidance—normalizing access to authority figures—carries particular weight for first-generation students who may have internalized barriers to such interactions.

From the mentee perspective, the value of this navigation support was acknowledged, though several noted that the program's full potential went unrealized due to limited contact. One mentee reflected that the graduation coaches ultimately provided more consistent support than her peer mentor—a finding that underscores both the value of that parallel infrastructure and the need for peer mentoring to be implemented with sufficient structure to match it.

Platform and Onboarding Friction

A theme that was consistent across mentee accounts was confusion and friction related to the program's technology platform and onboarding process. Several mentees described the sign-up and matching experience as cumbersome and unclear. One mentee said: "When I was doing it, I was just like, okay. What all do I need to do to get my mentor? It was a lot." Another mentee reported losing her mentor mid-semester without a clear path to being re-matched, noting simply: "I actually lost my mentor. She left me."

Some mentees also expressed that the program's purpose and expectations were not sufficiently communicated at the outset. One mentee suggested that clearer onboarding—including an in-person introductory meeting before the digital relationship began—might have set a stronger relational foundation: "I think maybe before we actually get assigned to our mentor, we can meet them…so that way, when we do start the mentoring process, it could go a little more smoothly." Program coordinators acknowledged in the session that they were reconsidering the vendor platform and exploring a more in-house approach for future iterations. This response suggests institutional awareness of this structural limitation.

Table 1

Table 1 summarizes the five themes identified, the primary evidence supporting each, and corresponding implications for practice.

Theme	Key Evidence from Data	Implications for Practice
Near-peer relatability & major-aligned matching	Mentors and mentees valued proximate, discipline-specific guidance over adult or alumni mentoring	Prioritize major-aligned matching; structure conversations around field-specific milestones
Differentiated mentor leadership development	Four competencies emerged: relational presence, anticipatory socialization, knowing limits, reflective self-assessment	Frame mentoring as leadership development; document and credential these competencies
Bilateral & structural engagement challenges	Both mentor and mentee non-contact; structural barriers (digital-only, multi-campus, unclear expectations) compounded relational gaps	Implement structured outreach protocols and multi-campus equity provisions
Concrete navigation support for first-generation students	Mentors provided guidance on registration, time tickets, advising, office hours; normalized access to authority figures	Pair peer mentoring with explicit navigation curriculum for first-gen students
Platform & onboarding friction	Cumbersome sign-up experience, unclear program purpose, no re-matching pathway described	Evaluate platforms for simplicity; deliver in-person onboarding before digital engagement begins

Discussion

The findings illuminate the multidimensional and reciprocal nature of undergraduate peer mentoring as both a student success intervention and a leadership development vehicle. For first-year students, peer mentors provided support that was qualitatively distinct from what faculty, staff, or alumni could offer—more proximate, more specific, and more recognizable as relevant to students' immediate lived experience. This near-peer quality connects to social learning theory's emphasis on observational modeling and the particular needs of first-generation students navigating institutional cultures for the first time (Collier, 2015; Tinto, 1993).

For mentors, the program produced leadership development that was richer and more differentiated than a single outcome label captures. The four competencies that emerged—relational presence and con-

sistency, anticipatory professional socialization, knowing the limits of one's own knowledge, and reflective self-assessment—are precisely the transferable professional skills that employers and graduate programs identify as core, and they arose organically from the structure of the mentoring relationship itself.

These outcomes—for both mentees and mentors—carry meaningful implications for student retention and persistence, even as this study does not directly measure those outcomes. The literature consistently positions sense of belonging, institutional navigation competence, and peer connection as proximal determinants of first-year persistence (Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1993). To the extent that the Peer Mentoring Program supported mentees in developing navigation knowledge, reducing isolation, and building relational anchors within the institution, it engaged precisely the mechanisms associated with retention. Similarly, mentors' deepening professional identity and sense of purpose within the institution may itself function as a retention factor—a dimension of peer mentoring programs that receives insufficient attention in the literature. Future research employing longitudinal designs and institutional data would be needed to test these relationships directly.

The engagement challenges documented here complicate a common framing in the mentoring literature that locates the primary barrier in mentee disengagement or reluctance. This study's data reveal a bilateral dynamic: mentors sometimes failed to initiate or maintain contact, mentees sometimes did not know how to respond or did not understand what the program was for, and structural conditions—digital-only communication, multi-campus logistics, unclear onboarding, and vendor platform complexity—amplified both tendencies. The variability in outcomes across mentor-mentee pairs was substantial, with some relationships rich and academically consequential and others involving as few as five exchanges over an entire academic year. This heterogeneity of implementation fidelity is itself a significant finding: program effectiveness cannot be assessed at the aggregate level without attending to the distribution of relational quality.

The platform and onboarding findings underscore that technology infrastructure can introduce friction at the precise moment when first impressions and early relational formation are most consequential. A relationship-first onboarding experience—including an in-person meeting before digital communication begins—may be more effective than optimizing the digital platform itself.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study generate a set of specific, data-grounded recommendations for institutions

designing or refining undergraduate peer mentoring programs.

First, programs should prioritize in-person introductory events before mentoring relationships go digital. Mentees who met their mentors in person described substantially richer relational experiences than those whose contact remained entirely text-based. An early in-person meeting serves as the relational anchor from which digital communication can build rather than substitute.

Second, structured mentor outreach protocols should replace open-ended engagement expectations. Providing mentors with a structured cadence of outreach—including suggested prompts, conversation guides, and check-in touchpoints keyed to the academic calendar—reduces the ambiguity that allows relationships to go dormant. One mentor framed this recommendation precisely: "Maybe there should be certain not objectives, but certain things that mentors say to their mentees just to make sure they're on track with certain things."

Third, programs serving students across multiple campuses must deliberately extend programming to all sites. A recurring theme in the mentee focus group was that events held on the main campus were inaccessible to students based primarily at satellite locations. Multi-campus programming or asynchronous alternatives with equivalent relational value is essential for equitable access.

Fourth, mentee onboarding should explicitly communicate the program's purpose, the mentee's role and expectations, and the process for re-matching if a mentor relationship fails. Several mentees entered the program with limited clarity about what they were signing up for. Clear, early orientation—ideally delivered in person—can close this gap.

Fifth, technology platforms should be evaluated for their user-facing simplicity at onboarding. The first interaction a mentee has with the program shapes their willingness to engage, and a cumbersome sign-up process undermines relational formation before it begins. Institutions should invest in clear, supported onboarding regardless of platform choice.

These recommendations are particularly relevant for institutions serving students from historically underrepresented and first-generation backgrounds, for whom peer mentoring may represent a critical point of institutional connection and a primary source of the social and navigational capital that supports persistence.

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the single-institution case study design limits generalizability, and focus group participants represent a subset of total program enrollment whose experiences may not reflect the full cohort. Second, the study relies primarily on self-reported data gathered through focus groups and open-ended surveys, which are subject to social desirability bias and retrospective recall limitations. Third, the absence of longitudinal data constrains conclusions about sustained program outcomes, including retention and degree completion. Fourth, while programmatic data from the technology platform provided useful contextual information, differences in how engagement was defined and measured may limit comparability with other studies. Future research should explore peer mentoring outcomes across multiple institutions, incorporate quantitative measures of retention and academic performance, and employ longitudinal designs capable of tracking impact beyond a single academic semester.

Conclusion

The Peer Mentoring Program examined in this study demonstrates both the transformative potential and the implementation complexity of structured peer-to-peer support in higher education. When it worked—when mentor-mentee pairs connected meaningfully, met in person, and engaged around shared academic and personal challenges—the program produced outcomes that aligned closely with its stated goals: first-year students developed a clearer sense of how to navigate the institution and a stronger sense of belonging within it, while mentors developed leadership competencies and professional identities that extended well beyond the program itself.

At the same time, this study's honest accounting of the program's uneven implementation underscores that peer mentoring's promise is not self-executing. It depends on intentional design, adequate structural support, and sustained attention to the relational, logistical, and technological conditions that allow mentoring relationships to form and persist. The students who participated in these focus groups offered candid, specific, and generous feedback about what would make this program better. That feedback, synthesized into actionable recommendations, represents the program's most important data.

As peer mentoring programs continue to expand across higher education, rigorous and participant-centered examination of their benefits and design challenges remains essential. This study contributes to that effort by centering the voices of both mentors and mentees across the full arc of the mentoring

experience and by situating those voices within a theoretical and empirical literature that affirms peer relationships as foundational to student success. This study's core contribution lies in reframing near-peer mentoring not as a unidirectional support service but as a reciprocal, relational, and structurally mediated developmental process — one that shapes the institutional belonging, navigational capacity, and professional identity of both the mentored students and their mentors.

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Promoting Persistence Through Integrated Support: Student Success Practices in the Louisiana Educate Program

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Abstract

This article analyzes the Louisiana Educate Program (LEP) at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette as a success story of fostering persistence and completion among Pell-eligible students. The Louisiana Educate Program is a comprehensive program that includes financial aid, on-campus living, personal academic success coaching, and formal opportunities for engagement and belonging while a student at the University. These components collectively remove some of the frequent barriers experienced by low-income, first-generation students but continue to foster student connectedness. Guided by evidence and based on the practice of the Louisiana Educate Program, this article emphasizes how integrated and purposeful support can have a direct impact on student retention and the successful acquisition of a baccalaureate degree. In demonstrating that institutions must look beyond one-off interventions and, instead, focus on the creation of holistic, authentic student experiences that attend to both academic and social needs to foster greater completion outcomes, the Louisiana Educate Program represents a model that can guide efforts to support student success at other institutions.

Keywords: Pell-eligible students, Louisiana State Educate Program (LEP), student retention, student experiences

Promoting Persistence Through Integrated Support: Student Success Practices in the Louisiana Educate Program

The Louisiana Educate Program (LEP) is a four-year residential scholar program offered at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette to support high-achieving Pell-eligible students (Mowreader, 2023). These financial, academic, and social support services strive to create a "barrier free" student experience for students that may otherwise experience difficulty completing their degree (Mowreader, 2023). Low-income and first-generation students typically face numerous obstacles that hinder completion, which fall within four main barriers: finance, transition, belonging, and college navigation (Forrest Cataldi et al., 2018; Renn, 2022). A persistent challenge in higher education is that many institutions fund scholarships to expand access, but fail to provide the integrated academic, social, and residential supports required to convert that access into degree completion.

Retention efforts must integrate specific, intentional, and holistically structured support services which address both academic and non-academic obstacles to student persistence (Tinto, 2012). The Louisiana Educate Program is one example of an institutionally driven, supported experience which assists students to successfully persist through college. Financial assistance, residential housing, individually focused success coaching, belonging-based practices, and specific student involvement expectations assist the Louisiana Educate Program students in navigating college beyond scholarship opportunities alone.

This article is a practice-based program analysis presented as a program model and practice brief, offering applied insights drawn from implementation experience. The article provides a model of how financial assistance, residential housing, success coaching, sense of belonging, and student involvement, which make up the Louisiana Educate Program at University of Louisiana at Lafayette, is supporting Pell-eligible students in higher education. Student success practices that address retention may be influenced by the way the Louisiana Educate Program integrates these core components into their practice.

The Louisiana Educate Program as a Student Success Model

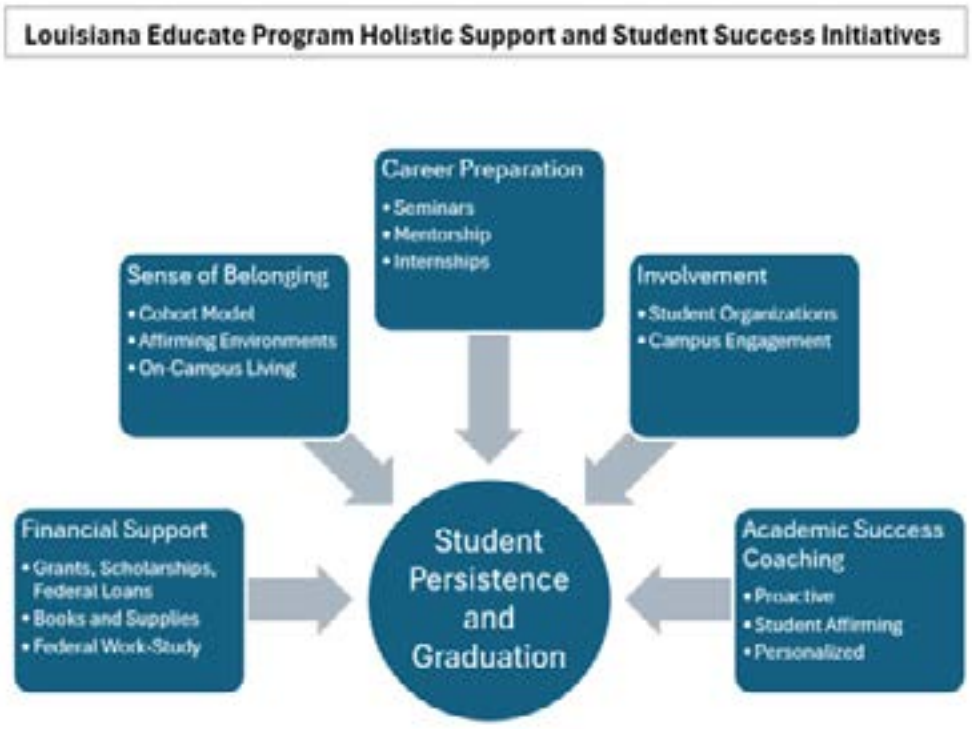
The Louisiana Educate Program was designed with the idea of limiting the financial stress on students and allowing the student as much as possible to focus on their academic success (Espinosa et al., 2019). Students who are accepted into the program receive a financial package of grants, scholarships, federal student loans, and a campus work study job that ensures all direct college expenses are fully cov-

ered. The Louisiana Educate Program scholars also receive an added level of academic and social support to guide them toward degree completion and overall success (Louisiana Educate Program, n.d.).

The Louisiana Educate Program serves as a transformational model that supports low-income students by addressing things such as financial instability, structured academic support, and campus comfortability. Through its intentional cohort design, structured expectations, and responsibilities for program participants, the Louisiana Educate Program has narrowed the achievement gap for Pell-eligible students that perform exceptionally at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (Nola.com, 2026). Considering what the data suggests, if college campuses found capability in implementing similar initiatives, this could potentially increase persistence rates and the number of college graduates. This would highlight the potential that intentional integrated support programs benefit students. Figure 1 outlines the structural design of the program model, depicting how wraparound supports converge to drive student persistence.

Figure 1.

The Louisiana Educate Program Integrated Support Model



Financial Support as a Retention Initiative

The role of finances in the success of a college student earning a degree is very prevalent for today's college student (Espinosa et al., 2019). The Louisiana Educate Program was designed with the idea of limiting the financial stress on students and allowing the student as much as possible to focus on their academic success (Espinosa et al., 2019). According to the Louisiana Educate Program (n.d.):

> Students who are accepted into the program receive a financial package of grants, scholarships, federal student loans, and a campus work study job that ensures all direct college expenses are fully covered. The Louisiana Educate Program scholars also receive an added level of academic and social support to guide them toward degree completion and overall success.

By designing a financial package for students that includes loans, grants, and scholarships, it allows for all these forms of aid to work in concert to provide the necessary financial support for students.

Through this program, students are allowed to work in on-campus employment but are not allowed to work off-campus jobs. Studies show that students who work off-campus have a harder time focusing on their academic needs than those students who work on-campus (Bui, 2025). Many times, there is not a consistent work schedule with off-campus employment, and students can end up working over 30 hours per week which can begin to have a significant impact on their academic success (McCormick et al., 2010). By working an on-campus job, this is an opportunity for students to earn money and be in a space that is supportive of the student earning a degree (Millard, 2020). By having the Louisiana Educate Program students work on campus, this is meant to remove as many financial barriers as possible for a student to be successful and earn their degree.

Students involved in the Louisiana Educate Program are also eligible to receive Federal Pell Grants. A Federal Pell Grant is "only awarded to undergraduate students who are determined to have exceptional need and who have not received a bachelor's, graduate or professional degree" (Federal Student Aid, n.d.). Unlike loans, grants do not need to be repaid unless there is a special circumstance that will warrant returning the funds back from the student. Although a Federal Pell Grant does not cover all college tuition, the Federal Pell Grant is available to assist college students and their parents to finance college costs (Eng & Matsudaira, 2021). When students are awarded more than one form of educational grant, like a Federal Pell

Grant and another form of grant, this can allow the student to maximize their ability to finish college with a smaller likelihood of acquiring debt (Eng & Matsudaira, 2021).

Students involved in the Louisiana Educate Program must also be eligible to receive a Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) scholarship offered by the state of Louisiana (Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance, 2025). A student is awarded a TOPS scholarship if they have successfully completed the high school curriculum for college with a minimum of a 2.5 grade point average and if they achieved a minimum ACT score of 20 or a minimum combined SAT score of 1030, or a minimum combined CLT score of 66 (Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance, 2025). While there are different types of TOPS, every TOPS award will cover the minimum cost of tuition at the institution the student will attend once the student has graduated from high school and enrolled at a Louisiana institution for post-secondary education during the upcoming fall semester (Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance, 2025). A TOPS award will remain active as long as the student maintains eligibility.

Many of the students in the Louisiana Educate Program are low-income, first-generation students which makes these students the first in their family to go to college. Nationally, only about 11 percent of low-income, first-generation students graduate from college within a six-year time frame. This is compared to 55 percent of students who are not first-generation students (Renn, 2022). Many times students who are the first in their family to go to college struggle with handling the responsibilities associated with being a college student both inside and outside the classroom (Renn, 2022). For colleges to continue to serve students, there needs to be an increased focus on low-income, first-generation students as this population will continue to grow and attend college (Forrest Cataldi et al., 2018). With students who do not have the financial means to attend college, there may be limitations on being able to afford the tuition, fees, and all of the other fees associated with the cost of attendance (additional course fees, books, supplies, technology, etc.). The students in the Louisiana Educate Program are allocated funds for books and supplies for each enrolled class every semester to make sure they are ready to meet the demands of the course (Louisiana Educate Program, n.d.).

Financial stress on college students can have a negative impact on students' well-being and their overall satisfaction with their personal life and their collegiate experience (Zhang & Chatterjee, 2023). As many of the students in the Louisiana Educate Program come from low-income backgrounds, it is important

to be able to provide the financial support that these students qualify to receive and work with the students to minimize the financial burden to allow the students to focus on their academic goal of earning their degree.

On-Campus Living Requirement

As part of the requirements for the Louisiana Educate Program, students are required to live in on-campus housing. This requirement is necessitated because students who live on campus while attending college are more likely to remain at the institution (Tinto, 1993). Through living on campus, students develop a sense of belonging that is crucial to connecting the student to the institution. If a student is struggling to see how they belong to an institution, their likelihood of persisting and continuing to enroll is very low (Hausmann et al., 2009).

Having first-year students live together in the Louisiana Educate Program helps to connect students to each other and begin to develop a foundation within their cohort. All the Louisiana Educate Program students in their first year will live in the same on-campus residence hall and have a Resident Assistant (RA) that works directly with the cohort in the residence hall. By having a Resident Assistant assigned to work with the Louisiana Educate Program students, it allows for a full synergy of building connections within the specific first-year cohort. When students feel like they matter and that their involvement within a group is important for the success of the group, this can have a successful impact on the organization (Schlossberg, 1989). Students have to find a way to connect and be involved on a college campus which increases the likelihood of persisting at the institution (Astin, 1999). This interaction can happen as part of the Louisiana Educate Program.

When students live on campus, they are more engaged with the institution, can learn from their peers to navigate the student experience, and have the opportunity to create meaningful connections within the institution (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Christie et al., 2005). Generation Z students, born between 1995 and 2010, are the students who are current, traditional students on campus today (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). The characteristics of Generation Z include being the most tech savvy generation, as well as being a “mature and focused group of students who have concern for others” (Seemiller & Grace, 2016, p. 8). All of these studies relate back to the design of the Louisiana Educate Program and meeting the needs of Generation Z.

Creating communities in on-campus living environments plays a large role in the retention and success of students (McCartney & Rosenvasser, 2023). Through having students live on campus, it provides

seamless access to be able to check-in on students whether it is in an on-campus residence, classroom, or within the Louisiana Educate Program Center. Being able to connect with the students and provide the wrap around services is a key factor to the success of the program. With the Louisiana Educate Program, it is important that community is created in the on-campus living environment and in the classroom for the student to have the best chance at success and earning their degree.

Individual Academic Success Coaching

Student participants in the Louisiana Educate Program receive academic success coaching as a requirement of the program. The academic success coaching that is provided to the student is grounded in both cultural relevance and student affirmation, all while utilizing intrusive coaching methods. Similar to what expert Ladson-Billings (1995b) describes as "culturally relevant" educational settings, the Louisiana Educate Program academic success coaches avoid referring to students using labels that may be a part of their eligibility for the program such as "low-income" or "Pell-eligible." Instead, the one-to-one coaching sessions accentuate a reflective practice, where consideration is focused on their own approaches, communication methods, and/or expectation shifts to better support the success of the students in the program (Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

An important mantra in the Louisiana Educate Program is to ensure that students are met where they are and provided with resources and opportunities to succeed holistically. This is crucial to helping the student create their narrative while a college student and to progress to the next level. Practicing these reframing positions the academic success coach's adaptability, rather than a student's circumstances, as the starting point for building rapport and developing meaningful progress.

It is also indicated that some interventions (like proactive advising and structural support) can both support a sense of belonging as well as improve academic achievement (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). The Louisiana Educate Program has incorporated this best practice in providing required academic success coaching which involves constant check-ins with students and offers tailored and proactive support (outreach). Students are assigned with specific academic success coaches who become knowledgeable of the students' experiences, struggles, and talent, which in turn highlight the practice of these types of programs that involve specific, intentional support at every phase of the student journey (Gopalan & Brady, 2020).

The Louisiana Educate Program academic success coaching promotes shared responsibility where

coaches help students network and encourage peer collaboration. Through this, students recognize that their academic progress contributes to the overall success of the program's learning community (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). As is mentioned by Fly Five (2025), students need to be exposed to affirmative representations of identity in their learning communities if they are to believe they belong there. In addition to these identities in learning environments, studies show the importance of student exposure to similar role models with shared oneness and life circumstances within academic settings (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). The Louisiana Educate Program academic success coaching adheres to this by pairing students with peers and professionals that reflect these characteristics and can relate to their struggles and successes while pushing the limits of what these students can accomplish.

Witnessing people who are "like" to them and come from the same kind of backgrounds, or similar social capital, being successful increases the students' own self-belief of possibility (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). The one-on-one academic success coaching in the Louisiana Educate Program provides a space where the students' backgrounds, experiences, and identities are acknowledged; by infusing culturally relevant resources, positive encouragement, and identity-building dialogue into their conversations, the coaches work with the students to reconstruct their sense of possibility.

Belonging as Foundational to Success

Belonging is an essential component of undergraduate student success, serving as both an emotional foundation and a practical support system that builds students' ability to persist throughout their college experience. Within the Louisiana Educate Program, belonging is intentionally crafted through intrusive coaching, structured support, and experiential opportunities designed to help students feel connected to the university. Creating a climate of belonging requires rejecting "deficit paradigms" and the narratives that frame students in terms of what they lack rather than the assets they bring to college (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). The Louisiana Educate Program mirrors this commitment by affirming students' experiences throughout their academic journey.

A strong sense of belonging is not only beneficial, but it also has measurable effects on the students' well-being. Feeling like a valued member of the campus community acts as a buffer against stress and correlates with improved mental health outcomes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However, for students to fully experience the gain from belonging, structural challenges (e.g. life circumstances, institutional barri-

ers, etc.) must be given attention so that students can focus on social and academic integration (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). This is important to consider based on underrepresented and first-generation students tend to report lower levels of belonging at four-year colleges (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Low sense of belonging can be detrimental to these groups which brings these students uncertainty about where one belongs and lower persistence rates (Gopalan & Brady, 2020).

Some factors such as faculty interactions, staff engagement, and campus environment also have a direct impact on how students perceive their sense of belonging (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). The staff in the Louisiana Educate Program work exclusively with program participants and operate from the LEP Center, a dedicated space for these students that promotes community, familiarity, and stability. By having the LEP Center which is centrally located on the University of Louisiana at Lafayette campus, this exclusive space is designed to be a place for students to gather, study, and build community within the program and on campus.

All Louisiana Educate Program students are assigned a first-year seminar in which they participate in a cohort model for the course. Louisiana Educate Program students who qualify also enroll in a cohort style college algebra course taught by faculty who have a focus on first-year student success. Beginning in their second semester of attendance, the Louisiana Educate Program students enroll in a specific seminar course where students engage in activities for personal and professional exploration. The seminar courses are designed to give continuous career development preparation throughout the Louisiana Educate Program student's undergraduate career. From an in-depth study of professionalism to internship preparation and leading to employment placement upon graduation, the Louisiana Educate Program seminars have a goal of preparing students for professional life after college. Since research has shown that learning communities, the pairing of courses in which students take courses as a cohort, help build both social and academic connections (Tinto, 2012), these opportunities for students to build a network with their peers not only builds a stronger sense of belonging but also encourages academic behaviors for success. Combined, these structural and relational aspects create an environment that supports the Louisiana Educate Program students.

When students feel a sense of belonging, they are more likely to take advantage of campus resources like academic advising, career counseling, and financial aid counseling, which is another indicator of behaviors for success (Strayhorn, 2012). By incorporating a sense of belonging into each component of the stu-

dent experience, the Louisiana Educate Program not only supports students' academic journeys but an entire framework for student success that empowers students both socially and emotionally.

Student Involvement

Student involvement plays a part in shaping academic achievement, persistence, and success for students. Research has consistently shown that a student's connection to their institution has a direct impact on retention (Tinto, 2012; Hawkins, 2010). Tinto (2012) notes that student success is not accidental but is the outcome of intentional, structured, and proactive institutional efforts. Expectations, support, assessment, feedback, and involvement are all core conditions institutions must have to improve student retention (Tinto, 2012).

It is important for students to have opportunities to engage and learn through involvement. Tinto (2012) argues that when students learn in community with others, they are more likely to feel connected, supported, and academically motivated. The Louisiana Educate Program promotes the use of learning communities as a framework by its cohort structured model and annually admits a group of undergraduate learners based on criteria as college freshman. Research also further challenges assumptions that involvement distracts students from academics whereas instead, involvement is positively associated with higher achievement for undergraduate college students (Hawkins, 2010). Students who are members of at least one organization had significantly higher GPAs than the general student population, with GPA steadily increasing for students involved in up to six organizations (Hawkins, 2010). Although involvement beyond ten organizations showed diminishing returns, moderate engagement was strongly linked to academic benefits, retention, and ultimately the earning of a degree.

The Louisiana Educate Program intentionally integrates such principles into its program design by creating expectations and responsibilities to encourage students to join one socially focused organization and one academic focused organization for a total of two student organizations. This way holistic engagement is promoted, and their campus networks are broadened. In addition to these external involvements, all Louisiana Educate Program scholars are members of the Louisiana Educate Program Association, which connects them to service-learning projects, leadership development opportunities, and collaborations across the university community. These structured expectations reflect Tinto's (2012) call for proactive design that promotes engagement as a pathway to student retention and achievement.

Outside of traditional academic progress, student involvement also supports psychosocial development. Students who are involved in student organizations often experience increased self-confidence, gained leadership skills, and have improved career decision-making expertise (Hawkins, 2010). Student organizational membership gives students opportunities to form support groups and informal study partnerships through peer-to-peer interactions which is encouraged by faculty and staff (Hawkins, 2010). These types of networks also tend to foster students' sense of relevance and illustrate how coursework relates to aspects of their lives outside of academia. By establishing expectations, building learning communities, and encouraging leadership among students, the Louisiana Educate Program ensures student engagement throughout their experience. This promotes not only academic success but also establishes the network and self-esteem students require to excel in campus life.

Program Design and Implementation

To be eligible for the Louisiana Educate Program, students must meet all of the following criteria: be a graduate of an Orleans Parish public high school or another participating parish or school identified during the application year, graduating in the same year they begin their fall semester at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette; be admitted to University of Louisiana at Lafayette as a first-time freshman for the fall term immediately following high school graduation; be eligible for Louisiana TOPS at the Excellence, Honors, Performance, or Opportunity level; and have completed the current Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) with a Student Aid Index (SAI) of 0 or below. Currently, students admitted into the Louisiana Educate Program enter the program with a TOPS core curriculum GPA of 2.5 or higher and an ACT score of at least 20, ensuring the cohort begins with a strong academic foundation. Once students have met eligibility, they must complete and submit the Louisiana Educate Program application within the required deadlines. Qualified applicants who meet all program requirements will be contacted to schedule a virtual interview with program staff.

Based on interviews, selected students will be invited to join the upcoming cohort until all available spots are filled. Table 1 provides an overview of Louisiana Educate Program cohort sizes and scholar counts from the inaugural cohort to the current academic year, tracking annual participant intake and total program enrollment over time. Notably, the lower enrollment in Fall 2021 (LEP Cohort 4) reflects the widespread disruptions caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic (Causey et al., 2021; NCES, 2022). However, participation has since rebounded.

Table 1.

Summary of Louisiana Educate Program Cohorts and Annual Student Intake

Semester and Year	Cohort	Number of students
Fall 2018	LEP Cohort 1	43
Fall 2019	LEP Cohort 2	41
Fall 2020	LEP Cohort 3	41
Fall 2021	LEP Cohort 4	20
Fall 2022	LEP Cohort 5	32
Fall 2023	LEP Cohort 6	49
Fall 2024	LEP Cohort 7	36
Fall 2025	LEP Cohort 8	51

The Louisiana Educate Program staffing structure consists of one Program Director, three Academic Success Coaches, one Administrative Coordinator, and depending on university allowances, two Graduate Teaching Assistants. The program is also supported by a cross-departmental Louisiana Educate Program Advisory Board that guides program direction and ensures students receive the most current information and resources throughout their time in the program.

Once admitted into the Louisiana Educate Program, students are expected to meet a series of program requirements designed to strengthen their academic performance and enhance their overall college experience. Participants must attend Freshman Orientation, live in a residence hall with fellow Louisiana Educate Program students during their first year and in any campus residence hall thereafter, and enroll in and successfully complete the Louisiana Educate Program course each semester as their schedule allows. They are required to join at least one student organization, meet at least once per week with an Academic Success Coach, and complete a minimum of six study hall hours each week. Students must also participate in Student Success Programs each semester, follow all campus rules and regulations, maintain eligibility for TOPS and Federal Financial Aid, and be employed a maximum of fifteen hours per week in an oncampus workstudy position, as offcampus employment is not permitted. These expectations ensure students remain in good standing and continue to benefit from the grants, scholarships, and workstudy opportunities provided through the program.

The Louisiana Educate Program Impact

Students who participate in the Louisiana Educate Program have persistence and graduation rates at higher levels than national college persistence standards. Louisiana Educate Program students have an

average 90% persistence rate from first-to-second year and have an overall graduation rate of 60% which is higher than state-wide average for Pell-eligible students throughout the UL System (NOLA.com, 2026; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2025). As noted by a Louisiana Educate Program alum, a core impact of the program is the mitigation of imposter syndrome, homesickness, and social isolation (NOLA.com, 2026). By requiring students to live on campus in shared residential communities, the Louisiana Educate Program creates a cohort model that helps students feel they belong on campus, which is a key driver for staying enrolled (Hausmann et al., 2009; Tinto, 1993).

Students in the Louisiana Educate Program have an opportunity to positively change the trajectory of their life and potentially for their families and support systems. By earning a college degree, graduates are more likely to earn more, have a lower chance of experiencing poverty, be employed, have health insurance and retirement plans, and have a safer job environment (Trostel, n.d.). Through these benefits, the Louisiana Educate Program works to provide an academic setting conducive to the success of the membership.

The Louisiana Educate Program serves as a transformational model that supports low-income students by addressing things such as financial instability, structured academic support, and campus comfortability. Through its intentional cohort design and structured expectations and responsibilities for program participants, the Louisiana Educate Program has narrowed an achievement gap for Pell-eligible students that perform exceptional at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Considering what the data suggest, if college campuses found capability in implementing similar initiatives, this could potentially increase the number of college graduates and persistence rates which would highlight the potential that intentional integrated support program benefit students.

Limitations

The Louisiana Educate Program is situated at a single large public university (University of Louisiana at Lafayette) which outcomes for this type of program may vary at private, rural, or non-residential institutions (University of Louisiana at Lafayette, n.d.). Eligibility is tied to Louisiana state TOPS levels and specific high school/parish pipelines, which may affect direct transferability to other state policy contexts (Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance, 2025). Institutional backing for dedicated staffing (director, coaches) and housing guarantees may present scaling or budget constraints for under-resourced campuses.

Regarding the number of cohorts that can be tracked with the standard six-year graduation rate, currently only two cohorts have met this mark as part of the program. Having a true understanding of the perceived success of these students by way of measuring graduation outcomes is still limited due to a small number of cohorts meeting this requirement. As more cohorts complete the six-year graduation rate standard, this will show a more comprehensive view of the persistence of the Louisiana Educate Program students.

To understand the feasibility of expanding this program to serve more students who have financial needs, there will have to be further study of the success of each part of the Louisiana Educate Program Holistic Support and Student Success Initiatives Model. A program like this does have the potential to increase its scalability to serve a larger population. In order to meet the needs of the student, there has to be balance throughout the support and further understanding of the necessary resources required for the success of these students.

Conclusion

Success among students is often a consequence not of motivation on the student's part, but rather of thoughtful institutional design that assists students in overcoming challenges and staying engaged with their studies (Tinto, 2012). By offering students structural support, including its cohort design, the Louisiana Educate Program exemplifies how institutions can cultivate environments conducive to the academic and social growth of its students. Through thoughtful, comprehensive support, students are afforded opportunities needed for continued success and persistence. Rather than offering only one intervention strategy, the Louisiana Educate Program uses a plethora of means including financial support, programmed housing, mentoring, involvement, and belonging to holistically support student development (Nola.com, 2026; Louisiana Educate Program, n.d.).

In its search for program strategies to impact the rates of student retention and degree attainment, institutions should look to programs such as the Louisiana Educate Program, which supports historically financially disenfranchised students within the context of a research university. The practices presented throughout this article would offer insights into how a holistic support system plays a significant role in ensuring students' success and persistence. By working today to create support for students to succeed and complete their degree will have the potential to affect change for future generations of college students.

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A Three-Pathway Equity Framework for AI-Driven Student Success: Toward Algorithmic Justice in Higher Education

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence increasingly shapes student success in American higher education through predictive analytics, early alerts, automated advising, and course recommendations, yet its equity effects remain contested. This conceptual article synthesizes research in AI ethics, critical data studies, educational stratification, critical race theory, and advising to propose three institutional pathways: equity amplification, which expands access to high-quality support; equity mitigation, which depends on sustained human mediation; and equity stratification, which reproduces inequality through biased data, deficit framing, and surveillance-oriented design. Five design choices affect these pathways: data inputs, risk thresholds, automation versus relational advising, accountability metrics, and stakeholder governance. Procurement and student contestation serve as additional boundary conditions. The pathways function as ideal types and support six testable propositions. Institutional cases and practical assessment tools connect the framework to procurement, implementation, and program review. The article argues that algorithmic justice depends on the futures AI systems produce for students, rather than prediction accuracy alone.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, student success, educational equity, algorithmic bias, higher education, predictive analytics, sociotechnical systems, algorithmic accountability, equity audit, institutional assessment

A Three-Pathway Equity Framework for AI-Driven Student Success: Toward Algorithmic Justice in Higher Education

Over the past decade, artificial intelligence has become embedded in the infrastructure of student success in American higher education (George, 2026; George & Wooden, 2023; George & Sevak, 2026). Predictive analytics now identify students as "at risk" before they complete their first semester. Early alert systems trigger automated outreach when assignment submissions decline. Chatbots answer advising-related questions outside regular office hours. Algorithms recommend course loads calibrated to predicted completion probabilities. These technologies have been adopted rapidly, often justified through the language of care: institutions seek to reach students before they disengage from higher education systems (Roshanaei et al., 2023; Reddy & Aileni, 2025).

The efficiency gains are substantive. Advisors at large institutions, often responsible for a thousand or more students, struggle to maintain meaningful relationships with every student without additional support. Automation is presented to address that gap, broaden access to institutional attention, and reduce the likelihood that students disengage without notice (Ayeni et al., 2023; Naseer & Khawaja, 2025). Studies report improvements in engagement, retention, and achievement when AI personalizes learning and supports struggling students (Yuan et al., 2025; Albahli, 2025; Zhang & Yie, 2024).

Yet efficiency is not equivalent to equity (Roshanaei et al., 2023; Holstein & Doroudi, 2021; Supramaniam et al., 2024). This article asks: under what conditions does AI-driven support for student success function as an equity-enhancing tool, and under what conditions does it reproduce or intensify existing educational stratification? Every algorithm encodes assumptions about what matters, what counts as success, and who receives intervention (George & Wooden, 2025; Baker & Hawn, 2021). This article identifies those assumptions and subjects them to institutional scrutiny. AI's equity consequences are not inherent properties of the technology. They emerge from the sociotechnical context, the policy framework, and the degree to which those affected participate in design and deployment (Roshanaei et al., 2023; Bulathwela et al., 2024; Viberg et al., 2024).

This manuscript offers a conceptual framework and an institutional assessment approach for evaluating the equity implications of AI-driven student success systems. It is a theory-building article in the sense Jaakkola (2020) describes as theory synthesis, and it draws its evidentiary base from an integrative reading

of published scholarship rather than original data collection (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). Judged against Whetten's (1989) criteria, the framework specifies what varies (three equity trajectories), how the variation is produced (five design choices, bracketed by procurement and contestation), why the mechanism holds (historical data, classification effects, and the political economy of advising labor), and under what conditions the account should be expected to travel (the boundary conditions stated in the limitations).

We pursue four goals. First, it synthesizes scholarship from AI ethics, critical data studies, educational stratification, and student success to build a conceptual framework for evaluating how AI-driven systems shape equity. Second, it proposes the three-pathway model, distinguishing among equity amplification, equity mitigation, and equity stratification, and illustrates each pathway through composite scenarios paired with documented institutional cases. Third, it identifies the design choices, governance structures, and institutional conditions that push AI deployments toward one pathway or another, and it states six propositions through which the framework can be tested and, if wrong, refuted. Fourth, it converts the framework into instruments that administrators, advisors, and policymakers can use in procurement, workflow design, and program review.

Positionality and Standpoint

Qualitative research requires investigators to document their roles and relationships to the study phenomenon to examine and mitigate potential bias (Kline, 2008). Conceptual work carries the same obligation, as the institutions an author inhabits shape the categories they find compelling. As a research team, the present authors identify as scholars committed to advancing equity in education. Two members of the research team identify as minority / African American males and are affiliated with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). These cultural and institutional experiences inform our perspectives on access, equity, and systemic barriers in education. Working at institutions that serve large proportions of first-generation and Pell-eligible students shapes what we treat as a serious risk and what we treat as an acceptable cost of adoption. Our backgrounds in higher education leadership, technology management, and interdisciplinary scholarship widen the analytical lens, and they also narrow it: we are more attentive to under-resourcing than to the governance dilemmas of well-endowed research universities. Collectively, we engaged in reflexive dialogue regarding how our historical, racial, and sociopolitical identities shape our interpretations of artificial intelligence in educational systems. The framework advanced here is normative. It takes the position

that a system that concentrates classification error on students already burdened by historical exclusion has failed, regardless of its aggregate accuracy. Readers who do not share that normative commitment may still consider the framework's descriptive claims analytically useful while contesting its evaluative conclusions.

Approach and Framework Development

Synthesis Design

This manuscript follows the logic of an integrative conceptual synthesis, in which literature from disconnected fields is read for the mechanisms it proposes rather than for effect sizes, and those mechanisms are recombined into a structure that none of the source literatures supplies on its own (Torraco, 2005; Snyder, 2019). In Jaakkola's (2020) typology of conceptual articles, the design is theory synthesis: the contribution lies in the integration, not in the novelty of any single component.

Corpus Construction

We searched Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, the ACM Digital Library, and arXiv for work published between January 2015 and December 2025, using combinations of terms for the technology (predictive analytics, learning analytics, early alert, algorithmic decision support, artificial intelligence), the setting (higher education, postsecondary, college, advising), and the outcome of interest (equity, fairness, bias, stratification, discrimination). Backward and forward citation chasing from a small set of anchor works extended the corpus into critical data studies, science and technology studies, and the algorithmic fairness literature, none of which surfaced reliably in education-database searches.

We retained a source if it met three conditions. It had to be a peer-reviewed archival conference paper or an institutional report from an organization with a publicly available methodology. It had to address a mechanism connecting an algorithmic system to a distributive outcome across student groups, rather than reporting accuracy alone. And it had to be readable in full text. We excluded sources that addressed K-12 settings with no transferable mechanism, that were vendor materials making performance claims that could not be independently checked, or that included equity only as a concluding gesture toward future work. Two exceptions to the K-12 exclusion were made, and are flagged in the text, where a documented case supplied evidence about a mechanism that operates identically in postsecondary early alert systems. Vendor and journalistic materials appear in the article as institutional artifacts and event documentation, not as evidence of effect.

Derivation of the Three Pathways

Derivation proceeded in three passes. In the first, we extracted from each source every claim about a causal mechanism linking an algorithmic system to a student outcome, recording the direction of the claimed effect and the conditions attached to it. The same mechanisms recurred across otherwise unrelated fields: historical data encoding prior discrimination, classification altering the classified, triage concentrating resources where returns are highest, and automation displacing discretion under load.

In the second pass, we grouped mechanisms by the outcome trajectory they produced rather than by the technology that carried them. Three groupings held. Some mechanisms widened access to support and opportunity. Some gains persisted only when a human being intervened between the score and the student. Some sorted students in ways that tracked existing hierarchies. These became amplification, mitigation, and stratification.

The third pass was abductive. For each mechanism, we asked what an institution would have had to decide differently for it to run the other way. The answers clustered into five decision points, which became the design-choice set: what goes into the model, how risk is defined and thresholded, whether the output triggers a message or a conversation, what the institution counts as success, and who sits at the table when these questions are settled. During revision, two further decision points emerged from cases in which all five were nominally handled well, yet outcomes were still poor: the contract governing what the institution may inspect, and the recourse available to a student who believes the classification is wrong.

Alternative Frameworks Considered

We tested four rival formulations against the corpus and rejected them. A binary typology sorting deployments into beneficial and harmful was the simplest, but it failed because it cannot represent the unstable middle, where most institutions sit. A maturity model with ordered levels was attractive to practitioners we consulted informally, and we rejected it because maturity models imply that progress is monotonic and that regression is a failure of execution. The evidence suggests the opposite: mitigation degrades under ordinary budget pressure, and the degradation is a feature of the design rather than a lapse. A taxonomy organized around fairness metrics was rejected because it locates the decision inside the model, where administrators cannot reach it, and because the impossibility results discussed below show that metric selection is technically optional. An actor-network account of the advising assemblage would have described the phenomenon

well but would have offered limited practical guidance for institutional decision-makers.

The pathways are therefore best understood as ideal types in Weber's (1949) sense: analytical constructs that no institution instantiates purely, held up against cases to make deviation visible and explicable. A single platform can place an institution on different pathways for different student subgroups and often does.

Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

Understanding AI's equity implications requires drawing on several intellectual traditions that usually do not communicate. Synthesizing these perspectives yields the theoretical architecture needed to analyze how algorithmic systems interact with existing structures of educational inequality.

Sociotechnical Systems Theory

Sociotechnical systems theory emphasizes understanding technologies within the social contexts in which they operate (Holstein & Doroudi, 2021; Supramaniam et al., 2024). An algorithm is not a disembodied mathematical function; it is a set of instructions written by people, trained on historical data, deployed within institutional structures, and interpreted by human actors who bring their own biases and constraints. The algorithm that flags a student as high-risk is inseparable from the advisor who receives that flag, the institutional culture that shapes how advisors respond, and the historical patterns encoded in the training data (Idowu, 2024; Viberg et al., 2024).

Selbst and colleagues (2019) provide a detailed analysis to support this insistence. They identify five abstraction traps that arise when fairness is treated as a property of a model rather than of a system. The framing trap draws the boundary around the algorithm and excludes the advisor, the caseload, and the appeal process. The portability trap assumes a fairness solution developed in one setting will function in another. The formalism trap converts contested social concepts into mathematical constraints that cannot carry their meaning. The ripple effect trap ignores how introducing a tool reshapes the behavior of the people around it. The solutionism trap assumes the problem was one that software could solve. Each trap has a direct institutional analog in student success work, and the design-choice set developed below is, in part, a list of the places where these traps are sprung.

This perspective challenges techno-solutionist narratives that position AI as a solution for complex

social problems. As Bulathwela et al. (2024) argue, artificial intelligence alone will not democratize education; techno-solutionism fails to account for the broader social and infrastructural conditions that shape learning outcomes.

Critical Data Studies

Critical data studies extend this analysis by questioning whose knowledge counts as data and whose experiences quantification renders invisible (Baker & Hawn, 2021; Boateng & Boateng, 2025). When student success is predicted using variables such as high school GPA, standardized test scores, and credit accumulation, institutions are not simply measuring students' abilities. They are measuring the outcomes of prior systems stratified by race, class, and geography (Jiang & Pardos, 2021; Li et al., 2022). The algorithm does not encounter a student as a whole person; it processes a vector of numbers that carries the effects of historical inequality. Data are not raw inputs; they are produced through institutional choices and classifications (Gitelman, 2013).

Two ideas from this tradition do more work in the framework than the general critique of quantification. The first is that classification systems are infrastructure, and that infrastructure becomes invisible precisely as it becomes consequential (Bowker & Star, 1999). A risk tier that began as a decision aid becomes, within a few semesters, the category through which an advisor perceives a student before meeting them. The second is Hacking's (1995) looping effect: humankinds, unlike natural kinds, are aware of being classified, and they change in response. A student labeled high risk is not a rock labeled igneous. The label enters the student's self-understanding and alters the behavior that the label was meant to predict.

Perdomo and colleagues (2020) formalize the same insight from the machine learning side. Under performative prediction, deploying a model changes the distribution on which it was trained, so a model can be accurate about a social context it helped create. The issue is not merely that predictions are imperfect. The issue is that prediction in a student-success system acts as an intervention while being evaluated as an observation. An institution that evaluates its early alert model by asking whether flagged students subsequently struggled has learned little about whether the flag helped them and has already excluded the possibility that the flag harmed them.

Research on algorithmic bias in education documents how biased data and model design reflect and amplify historical inequities (Baker & Hawn, 2021; Farheen et al., 2025; Gaskins, 2022). This occurs not

through malicious intent but through the seemingly neutral process of pattern recognition applied to historically stratified data.

Competing Definitions of Algorithmic Fairness

When base rates differ across groups, no risk score can simultaneously be calibrated within groups and equalize false positive and false negative rates across them, except in degenerate cases (Chouldechova, 2017; Kleinberg et al., 2017). The trade-off is arithmetic. A better vendor, a larger training set, or a more sophisticated model cannot engineer it away.

Choosing a fairness criterion is choosing which students absorb the system's errors. Calibration protects the meaning of a score; equalized error rates protect students from bearing an unequal share of mistaken classification. An institution that optimizes calibration will, where base rates differ, produce more false alarms for the group with the higher base rate, which in most American postsecondary settings means more false alarms for Black, Latino, and Pell-eligible students. That is what the internal equity analysis of the statewide early warning system found (Feathers, 2023). No evidence suggests that the vendor selected this outcome maliciously. The outcome may therefore result from an unexamined default rather than an explicit institutional decision.

Two empirical findings clarify the issue. Gardner and colleagues (2019) show through slicing analysis that models with acceptable aggregate performance routinely conceal substantial disparities in error across student subgroups, and that these disparities are invisible unless one looks for them deliberately. Yu and colleagues (2021), working with records for well over ninety thousand students at a large public university, found that removing protected attributes from a dropout model neither improved overall performance nor improved fairness, because the remaining features carry the information anyway. Fairness through unawareness does not work. Excluding race from the model prevents the institution from understanding how the model interacts with racial factors.

Because the choice among fairness criteria is distributive rather than technical, it belongs to governance. This decision is the pivot on which the framework turns: institutions decide the pathway in committee rooms and contract negotiations, not in the model.

Educational Stratification and Tracking

Educational stratification research has long documented how institutional processes sort students into different tracks, with consequences that compound over time (Shoval, 2025; Li, 2023). Tracking in K-12 education, placement testing in community colleges, and selective admissions all function as sorting mechanisms that distribute educational resources unequally. AI-driven student success systems represent a new layer in this architecture of sorting, one that operates continuously rather than at discrete decision points (Nopas, 2025; Zhang, 2024). Zeide (2017) names the structural consequence: data-driven education redistributes authority over a student's trajectory from the student, the teacher, and the institution toward whoever specifies the model, and it does so without any of the procedural protections that accompany other consequential educational decisions.

Digital divides limit access to AI tools for students in under-resourced or rural areas, exacerbating existing gaps (Gabriel, 2024; Lin et al., 2023; Fazal et al., 2025; Vesna et al., 2025). Students who might benefit most from personalized support are often those least likely to have equitable access to the technologies that provide it (Adewale et al., 2024; Hussein et al., 2025).

Student Success and Advising Theory

Student success and advising theory reminds us that retention and graduation are not ends in themselves (Kizilcec, 2023; Bhatnagar & Sharma, 2024). Higher education exists to develop people: intellectual growth, identity formation, and the cultivation of purpose and agency. When student success becomes synonymous with institutional metrics, we risk optimizing for the wrong outcomes. Nopas (2025) asks: What happens to student agency when predictive systems increasingly shape educational pathways?

Three commitments from this tradition constrain what a defensible student success algorithm can look like. Bensimon (2007) argues that equity-minded practice locates the explanation for outcome gaps in institutional practice rather than in student characteristics; a model whose most predictive features are all student attributes has, by construction, encoded the opposite assumption. Yosso (2005) shows that students from communities of color arrive with forms of capital that institutional data systems do not record: aspirational, navigational, linguistic, familial, social, and resistant. What the data warehouse cannot see, the model treats as absent. Harper (2010) reframes the research question itself from why students of color fail to how they succeed, and an early alert system trained only on failure has no representation of the second question.

Deficit framing does not enter these systems through prejudice. It enters through the target variable.

Intersectionality and Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is indispensable for this analysis, particularly given the racial dimensions of educational stratification in the United States (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT holds that racism is embedded in institutional structures and policies, not confined to individual prejudice. Applied to AI in education, CRT highlights how algorithmic systems can function as race-neutral proxies for racialized outcomes. When an algorithm uses zip code, school district, or family income as predictive variables, it operates on data shaped by decades of residential segregation, school funding inequities, and labor market discrimination. The algorithm does not mention race, but race is inscribed in its inputs. Benjamin (2019) names this the New Jim Code: discriminatory outcomes produced by systems marketed as objective and rendered harder to contest precisely because they are automated. Noble (2018) and Eubanks (2018) trace the same pattern through search and social services, and Barocas and Selbst (2016) show why existing antidiscrimination doctrine struggles to reach it, since disparate impact analysis presumes a decision-maker whose reasoning can be interrogated.

Intersectionality, as developed by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), adds a further layer. Students do not experience educational systems along a single identity axis. A first-generation Black woman attending a community college while working full-time encounters the institution differently than a white male transfer student with family financial support. AI systems that treat "at-risk" as a monolithic category flatten these intersecting dimensions of experience, producing interventions calibrated to an average that may represent no one in particular. The methodological implication is specific and testable: disaggregation along a single axis will miss the harm. A model can show acceptable error parity by race and income while concentrating false positives on low-income Black women. Institutions that report equity metrics one variable at a time have built a dashboard that cannot see the students the framework is most concerned with.

The synthesis of these perspectives yields a core claim: AI systems embed institutional values, assumptions, and priorities, often invisibly, thereby shaping students' educational trajectories and life chances (Roshanaei, 2024; Abimbola et al., 2024; Alzahrani, 2024).

Literature Synthesis: AI, Student Success, and Equity Gaps

Prevailing Research Emphases

Researchers have focused heavily on prediction accuracy and scalability. Studies report that AI-driven infrastructure can enhance equity through personalization and early intervention, with evidence from diverse settings showing improved outcomes for marginalized students when systems are properly designed (Roshanaei et al., 2023; Ayeni et al., 2023; Chine et al., 2022; Dagunduro et al., 2024; Nemani, 2025; Boateng & Boateng, 2025). Early identification of students who are struggling enables timely intervention and resource allocation (Reddy & Aileni, 2025; Naseer & Khawaja, 2025; Alotaibi, 2024), and assistive technologies improve accessibility for students with disabilities or language barriers (Zhang & Yie, 2024; Ni & Bai, 2025; Angwaomaodoko, 2025). These are legitimate contributions. They are also insufficient for understanding equity implications because each is measured at the aggregate level.

Critical Gaps in the Literature

Three dimensions remain undertheorized. First, the literature often fails to examine differential impact across student populations with adequate granularity. An algorithm might achieve 80% overall accuracy while systematically misclassifying first-generation students or those from under-resourced high schools (Baker & Hawn, 2021; Jiang & Pardos, 2021; Gardner et al., 2019). Aggregate accuracy masks disparate error rates that compound existing inequities.

Second, we know little about how being flagged as "at risk" affects students' identities, motivation, and sense of belonging. The psychological literature on stereotype threat and labeling suggests that institutional classifications can become self-fulfilling prophecies. When a student learns that an algorithm has predicted their failure, how does that knowledge shape their subsequent effort and engagement? Students who spoke publicly about being labeled high risk in the statewide early warning case described the label as discouraging and inescapable (Feathers, 2023), which is a data point, not a study. Systematic evidence remains scarce.

Third, the literature largely ignores power dynamics (George, 2026). AI-driven student success systems create asymmetries of knowledge and surveillance. Institutions know more about students than students know about themselves, at least as data subjects. Students rarely understand how they are being

classified, by whom, or with what consequences (Boateng & Boateng, 2025; Vesna et al., 2025). Slade and Prinsloo (2013) and Prinsloo and Slade (2017) frame the resulting dilemma as an obligation to act: once an institution knows that a student is at risk, inaction is itself a decision, and the ethical weight of collecting the data cannot be discharged by leaving the dashboard unopened. Selwyn (2019) presses the prior question of whether the learning analytics enterprise has ever established that its predictions produce better outcomes than the interventions institutions would otherwise have made.

A fourth gap is the most striking one. The field has produced principles and models, but very few insights to help a vice provost determine whether her dashboard's nine-point gain is genuine or an artifact. Table 1 positions the present framework against the approaches that come closest.

Table 1

Positioning the Three-Pathway Framework Among Adjacent Approaches

Approach	Unit of analysis	Central question	What it does not answer	Relation to this framework
Algorithmic fairness metrics (Barocas & Selbst, 2016; Chouldechova, 2017; Kleinberg et al., 2017)	The model	Does the score satisfy a formal fairness criterion?	Which criterion the institution should want, and who decides	Metric selection is treated as one design choice among five, and as a distributive decision for governance
Learning analytics ethics (Slade & Prinsloo, 2013; Prinsloo & Slade, 2017)	The data practice	What does the institution owe students once it knows?	What outcome states the obligation is meant to produce	Supplies the outcome states: amplification, mitigation, stratification
AI ethics principle frameworks (Fedele et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2021)	The system lifecycle	Is the system trustworthy, lawful, and transparent?	How principles distribute across student subgroups after deployment	Converts principles into pathway-diagnostic indicators and a rubric
Design justice (Costanza-Chock, 2020; Gaskins, 2022)	The design process	Who participates in building the system?	Post-deployment drift when participation ends	Participation is one design choice; drift is modeled explicitly
Equity-minded practice (Bensimon, 2007; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015)	The practitioner	Do practitioners read gaps as institutional failure?	How algorithmic mediation reshapes practitioner judgment	Locates practitioner discretion as the mechanism that makes mitigation possible and unstable
Technology maturity models	The institution	How advanced is adoption?	The direction of the equity effect at any level of adoption	Rejected: pathways are reversible states, not ordered stages

The Three-Pathway Equity Framework

To make sense of AI's varied effects on equity, this article proposes a framework organized around three pathways: amplification, mitigation, and stratification. The pathways are ideal types. No institution fits perfectly into one pathway, and a single platform can position an institution along different pathways for various student subgroups. Their analytic value lies in making deviation visible: an institution that believes it is amplifying, and finds that its indicators match the stratification profile, has learned something it could not have learned from an accuracy report.

Pathway 1: Equity Amplification

In the amplification pathway, AI enhances access to timely, high-quality support for underserved students. This pathway is achievable, and the conditions are demanding. Interventions must be universal rather than targeted, so that receiving support does not mark a student. Algorithmic logic must be transparent enough that students and advisors can understand and contest classifications (Ni & Bai, 2025; Fedele et al., 2024). Advisors must be empowered to exercise professional judgment rather than to execute recommendations (Chine et al., 2022). Governance must ensure fairness, transparency, and data privacy (Holstein & Doroudi, 2021; Alotaibi, 2024).

The system must also be designed to identify opportunities, not just risks; to ask what resources might help a student thrive, not merely what deficits might cause them to fail. Consider a counterfactual: What if early alert systems flagged students for proactive outreach about undergraduate research opportunities, scholarship applications, or honors programs? The same predictive infrastructure could be used to expand access to enrichment rather than to sort students into remediation. Even this reframing carries a hazard worth naming. An opportunity-recommendation engine that allocates enrichment by predicted return will steer research placements toward the students who least need them, reproducing stratification in a more flattering vocabulary. The design that survives scrutiny is a universal floor of opportunity-framed contact for every student, with algorithmic targeting used only to allocate supplementary intensity above that floor, and with subgroup-level auditing of the allocation.

The large urban public university case is instructive about cost. The institution did not achieve amplification by buying better software than its peers. It substantially expanded advising capacity, reduced caseloads, centralized the advising function, and had already been improving outcomes for years before the

analytics platform arrived (Kurzweil & Wu, 2015). The generalizable lesson is not that predictive advising works. It is that predictive advising amplifies whatever advising capacity already exists, including none.

Pathway 2: Equity Mitigation

In the mitigation pathway, AI identifies students who may need support, but equity gains depend on intentional human mediation. The algorithm surfaces information: humans decide what to do with it. Research on hybrid human-AI approaches suggests this pathway can narrow achievement gaps when advisors use risk flags as starting points for relational engagement rather than as triggers for standardized interventions (Chine et al., 2022; Roshanaei et al., 2023). Outcomes remain uneven because they depend on individual advisor capacity, caseload, and commitment.

The mitigation pathway is inherently unstable. Under resource constraints, it tends to stratify. When advisors are overwhelmed, algorithmic recommendations become defaults rather than suggestions. Three bodies of literature explain why this shift is structural rather than incidental. Automation bias describes the well-documented tendency of human operators to accept automated recommendations without independent verification, especially as workload and time pressure rise (Skitka et al., 1999). Green (2022), surveying forty-one policies that require human oversight of government algorithms, finds that people often cannot perform the oversight function assigned to them, and that oversight requirements can legitimize the deployment of tools that would otherwise face greater scrutiny. Elish (2019) describes this resulting role as a "moral crumple zone," where the human actor absorbs responsibility for harms caused by a system the actor could control only to a limited extent. An advisor with a caseload of nine hundred does not function as an effective oversight mechanism when instructed to exercise professional judgment on four hundred daily alerts.

Mitigation is therefore metastable rather than merely fragile. It persists only while a specific and costly condition holds: the human actor interposed between score and student must have the time, authority, training, and information required to disagree with the score, and those disagreements must be recorded and examined. If advisors override the system and no one counts the overrides, the institution lacks evidence that mediation is taking place.

Pathway 3: Equity Stratification

In the stratification pathway, AI reinforces deficit framing and intensifies the surveillance of already

marginalized students. Risk labels trigger interventions experienced as intrusive rather than supportive. Students flagged as at-risk may be steered away from challenging coursework, counseled toward lighter loads, or subjected to check-ins that feel like monitoring rather than mentorship (Farheen et al., 2025; Li, 2023).

The stratification pathway operates through several mechanisms. First, historical data encodes historical discrimination. If past students from certain backgrounds had lower completion rates due to less support, using that data to predict future outcomes risks perpetuating the same disparities (Jiang & Pardos, 2021; Roshanaei, 2024; Brooks, Whittaker, Adams, & Chen, 2024). Second, risk-based triage concentrates resources on students deemed most likely to succeed with intervention, potentially diverting attention from those with the greatest need. Third, classifying students can change their behavior. A student labeled high-risk may internalize that label, reducing the effort they invest in their education (Hacking, 1995), and the model that predicted the reduced effort is then vindicated (Perdomo et al., 2020). Fourth, and least discussed, the accountability metric can convert a support system into a sorting system without anyone changing a line of code. The small private university case did not require machine learning to identify students it wished to remove before the census date; it required a retention metric and a risk instrument (Svrluga, 2016). Where the metric rewards the appearance of persistence, prediction supplies the list.

Digital divides compound these dynamics (Nopas, 2025; Adewale et al., 2024; Hussein et al., 2025). Insufficient policy and oversight fail to address ethical, cultural, and contextual factors, leading to unintended negative consequences (Gabriel, 2024; Abimbola et al., 2024; Alzahrani, 2024).

This framework demands a fundamental reorientation: we must stop asking whether AI predicts accurately and start asking what futures AI helps produce. Prediction is not passive observation. When institutions act on predictions, they alter the conditions under which those predictions were made. The relevant question is not, "Did we correctly identify who would fail?" but "Did our interventions help students succeed who would not have succeeded otherwise, without harming others in the process?" (Holstein & Doroudi, 2021; Bulathwela et al., 2024).

Asymmetric Movement Across Pathways

Institutions move between pathways, and movement is easier in one direction than the other. The shift from mitigation to stratification can occur without an explicit policy decision. It can result from a hiring freeze, an unreplaced retirement, or an enrollment increase absorbed without new advising lines. The

technology continues to operate as specified while the condition that made it defensible gradually disappears. Reversing the shift is costly, because students who learn that a flag produces a standardized message rather than a conversation may become less willing to treat subsequent outreach as support.

Two implications follow for institutional practice. Adoption decisions should be evaluated against the advising capacity the institution expects to have in its worst budget year, not the capacity it has in the year of purchase. The design choices that best protect against drift are structural, such as the universality of contact and the contestability of classification, because these features continue to function even when discretionary human attention is withdrawn.

Observable Indicators of Institutional Pathway Position

For the framework to support institutional assessment, it must be operationalized through observable indicators. Six indicators distinguish the pathways using data that most institutions already hold. The first is disaggregated error: false-positive and false-negative rates for the risk model, computed separately for race, Pell status, first-generation status, and their intersections. The second is contact framing: the proportion of algorithmically prompted student contacts that offer an opportunity rather than name a deficit. The third is contact modality by subgroup: the ratio of automated messages to human conversations received per flagged student, compared across groups, which detects the substitution of message volume for relational attention where advising is thinnest. The fourth is the advising capacity trajectory across the adoption period, measured as students per adviser. The fifth is contestability: whether a student can learn that a classification exists, see its basis, and trigger human re-review with authority to override. The sixth is documentation: whether a model card and a datasheet exist for the deployed system, and whether the institution or only the vendor holds them (Gebru et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2019).

An institution on the amplification pathway shows error parity within a defensible tolerance, majority opportunity framing, stable or improving caseloads, functioning appeal, and documentation held in-house. An institution on the stratification pathway shows concentrated false positives, deficit framing, rising message-to-conversation ratios among the students with the highest flag rates, deteriorating caseloads, no appeal, and documentation it has never seen.

Propositions

The following propositions emerge from the discussion above:

P1. Holding model performance constant, institutions that pair AI deployment with increased advising capacity will show larger reductions in equity gaps than institutions that hold capacity constant or reduce it. Required data: student-to-adviser ratios and disaggregated persistence, before and after adoption.

P2. Systems that deliver opportunity-framed contacts to all students will produce smaller belonging penalties among flagged students than systems that deliver deficit-framed contacts to a targeted subset. Required data: contact content coding and validated measures of belonging by flag status.

P3. Group-disaggregated error rates, not aggregate accuracy, predict differential outcomes. Institutions that monitor only aggregate accuracy will fail to detect stratification as it occurs. Required data: subgroup confusion matrices and realized outcomes.

P4. Mitigation is metastable. As advisor caseload rises past the threshold at which discretionary review of each alert is feasible, adherence to algorithmic recommendations increases and equity gains decay. Required data: override rates, caseloads, and outcomes over time.

P5. Contestability moderates the labeling effect. Where students can see and challenge their classification, the association between being flagged and reduced engagement weakens. Required data: appeal availability, appeal use, and engagement measures.

P6. Procurement terms that secure audit rights and model documentation raise the probability that an institution detects disparate error before it compounds. Required data: contract clause coding across institutions and time-to-detection of subgroup disparity.

Illustrations and Documented Institutional Parallels

The following illustrations show how the same category of AI infrastructure can produce different equity outcomes depending on design, governance, and institutional capacity. The scenarios are composite and hypothetical; they clarify the framework. The following documented cases, which have been anonymized, carry empirical weight.

In an amplification scenario, a mid-size public university uses predictive analytics to prompt opportunity-framed advising about tutoring, scholarships, undergraduate research, and honors eligibility. Every

student receives proactive contact, advisors treat the outputs as conversation starters, and annual audits examine subgroup performance. In a mitigation scenario, a community college uses early alerts effectively while advising caseloads are manageable, but the system begins to slide toward stratification after budget cuts reduce relational follow-up. In a stratification scenario, a regional four-year institution uses a course recommendation engine trained on historical data, steering students with lower predicted GPAs away from gateway courses and reproducing prior underinvestment through apparently neutral recommendations.

Predictive advising can close equity gaps, as evidenced by a large urban public university. The case is instructive because the institution paired analytics with expanded advising capacity, reduced caseloads, and broader organizational redesign, while outcome improvements had begun before the platform arrived (Kurzweil & Wu, 2015). A statewide dropout early warning system illustrates stratification through disparate false alarms, limited educator training, stigmatizing labels, and unequal error distribution (Feathers, 2023). A small private university shows that the accountability metric can produce harm even without machine learning, when risk classification is used to protect reported retention rather than support students (Svrluga, 2016). Together, these cases show that the same category of technology can amplify equity, partially mitigate inequity, or deepen stratification depending on institutional choices.

Applying the Framework

The pathway an institution follows is not determined by the technology. Institutional design choices, often made without explicit attention to their equity implications, determine the pathway an institution follows. Five choices sit inside the deployment. Two more bracket it and are developed after.

Data Inputs and Historical Bias

What variables does the algorithm use? If the training data reflects historical patterns of unequal support, the algorithm will learn to reproduce those patterns (Baker & Hawn, 2021; Idowu, 2024). Institutions must audit their data for embedded biases and consider whether certain variables, such as standardized test scores, should be excluded or down-weighted. As Gaskins (2022) argues, interrogating algorithmic bias requires moving from speculative concern to liberatory design practices that actively work against historical patterns of exclusion. The counterintuitive corollary is that protected attributes usually belong in the audit even when they do not belong in the model, since an institution that does not record race cannot measure

what its model does with race (Yu et al., 2021). The decision is whether institutional research should retain disaggregation authority over vendor-supplied scores, and who will own that decision.

Risk Labeling and Intervention Thresholds

How is "risk" defined, and who decides? A student working full-time while caring for family members might be flagged as at-risk based on enrollment intensity, even though their circumstances reflect resilience rather than deficit. The categories we construct shape the interventions we imagine (Boateng & Boateng, 2025; Farheen et al., 2025). Research shows that the framing of algorithmic outputs significantly influences how educators and students respond (Kizilcec, 2023; Viberg et al., 2024). Thresholds are a second, quieter decision. In the statewide early warning case, the threshold accepted many false alarms for each correctly identified dropout, a ratio that became indefensible once the false alarms landed disproportionately on Black and Hispanic students (Feathers, 2023). Threshold setting determines the fairness trade-off described above, typically by an analyst and often without a formal policy.

Automation Versus Relational Advising

When algorithms trigger automated outreach through email, text, or chatbot, they may increase efficiency while decreasing the relational depth that supports persistence. The choice between automated and human-mediated intervention reflects what kind of institution we want to be (Chine et al., 2022; Mariyono & Hd, 2025). The measurable version of that choice is the ratio of automated contacts to human conversations, tracked by subgroup. When the ratio rises fastest for students with the highest flag rates, the institution has automated attention away from the students it claims to serve.

Accountability Metrics

What does the institution measure, and what does it reward? If retention and graduation rates are the primary metrics, AI systems will optimize for those outcomes, potentially at the expense of student learning, development, and agency (Nopas, 2025; Alzahrani, 2024). Alternative metrics include students' sense of belonging, engagement with high-impact practices, and post-graduation outcomes. The ALTAI checklist and similar frameworks offer tools to assess the ethical and legal implications of AI deployment in educational contexts (Fedele et al., 2024). The small private university case shows how the metric can cause harm on its own (Svrluga, 2016). Before an institution asks whether its model is fair, it should ask what its model is

being asked to maximize, and whether any student would recognize that quantity as their own interest.

Governance and Stakeholder Engagement

Multi-stakeholder collaboration in designing and governing AI systems is essential if they are to serve equity goals (Holstein & Doroudi, 2021; Abimbola et al., 2024; Rasheed et al., 2025). Ethical frameworks, continuous monitoring, and participatory design mitigate risk (Lin et al., 2023; Adeniyi et al., 2024). This means that educators, students, technologists, and communities should be involved in decisions about the development and deployment of AI systems. Participation without the power to set agendas is merely consultation, and such consultation ratifies existing decisions. A student advisory body that can place an item on the governance committee's agenda, and that receives the disaggregated error report before the committee does, is a different institution from one that convenes a listening session after procurement (Costanza-Chock, 2020).

Procurement and Contestation as Boundary Conditions

The five choices above assume the institution can inspect its system and that a student can challenge a classification. Neither assumption holds by default, and both are settled elsewhere.

Procurement is the earliest and least examined equity decision an institution makes about AI. By the time the governance committee convenes, the contract typically dictates what the institution can access. Contracts that would support the amplification pathway secure a right to audit model performance on institutional data, require disaggregated performance reporting as a deliverable rather than as a courtesy, oblige the vendor to supply a model card documenting intended use, training population, and known performance disparities (Mitchell et al., 2019) and a datasheet documenting how the training data were assembled (Gebru et al., 2021), prohibit secondary use of student data, and specify exit terms that return the institution's data and its derived features. None of this is exotic; all of it is routine in health system procurement. The office that signs it is procurement, not the provost, which is precisely why the equity conversation arrives too late.

Contestation is the downstream counterpart. A risk score is generated from education records, and its status under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act is unsettled, which means students in the United States often cannot inspect the classification that shapes their advising. European institutions operate under a different presumption, since the General Data Protection Regulation grants data subjects meaningful

information about automated decisions and the right to contest them. Institutions need not wait for regulatory clarity to adopt a policy. Four elements are sufficient: notice that classification occurs, an explanation of its basis in terms the student can act on, an appeal that reaches a human being, and authority for that human being to override the classification and have the override recorded. Recorded overrides are also the only reliable evidence that human mediation exists (Green, 2022).

Figure 1 below illustrates how institutional design choices mediate the relationship between AI infrastructure and equity outcomes. Pathway 1 (Equity Amplification) requires universal interventions, transparency, and opportunity-focused design. Pathway 2 (Equity Mitigation) produces partial gains contingent on human mediation but remains unstable under resource constraints, risking degradation toward Pathway 3. Pathway 3 (Equity Stratification) results from biased data, deficit framing, and surveillance-oriented design, reinforcing existing inequalities. The framework positions institutional choices, rather than technology itself, as the primary determinants of equity outcomes.

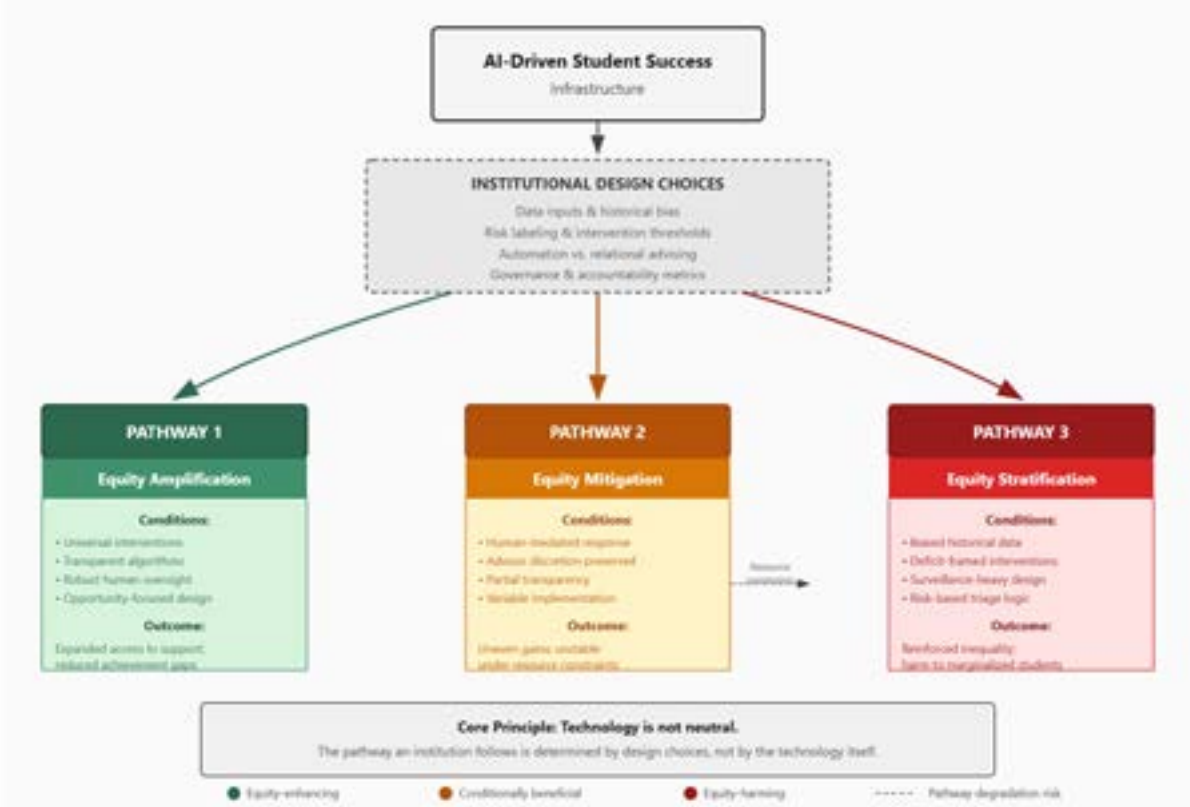


Figure 1. Three-pathway equity framework for AI-driven student success systems.

Figure 1 is intended as a working instrument rather than a summary, and it should be read in both directions. Read left to right, it is a planning tool: an institution contemplating adoption walks the middle column before signing, asking of each design choice which pathway the current answer implies. Read right

to left, it is a diagnostic: an institution that already has a platform begins with the outcomes it is observing, identifies the pathway those outcomes describe, and traces backward to the design choice that produced them. The arrow between Pathway 2 and Pathway 3 is the one that most institutions will need. It marks a slide that occurs without any decision being taken, and the only reliable warning is a rising ratio of automated contacts to human conversations among the students with the highest flag rates.

Table 2 converts each design choice into an operational commitment.

Table 2

Implementation Table: From Design Choice to Assessment Metric

Design choice	Equity risk	Recommended practice	Responsible office	Assessment metric
Procurement and contracting	Contract forecloses audit; institution cannot see what it bought	Require right to audit on institutional data, disaggregated performance reporting, model card, datasheet, no secondary use, data return on exit	Procurement, with sign-off from Institutional Research and the provost	Percentage of active AI contracts containing all six clauses
Data inputs and historical bias	Proxies reproduce prior underinvestment; protected attributes removed, so bias becomes invisible	Audit features for proxy structure; retain protected attributes for audit even when excluded from the model; document exclusions and their rationale	Institutional Research; Data Governance Committee	Subgroup false positive and false negative rates, reported annually and at every model retraining
Risk labeling and intervention thresholds	Threshold choice silently allocates error to students with higher base rates	Set thresholds by policy, not by analyst default; state which fairness criterion the institution has chosen and why; review annually	Governance committee, with student representation	Ratio of false alarms per correct identification, reported by subgroup
Automation versus relational advising	Message volume substitutes for attention where advising is thinnest	Guarantee a minimum number of human conversations per student per term, independent of flag status	Advising leadership; Academic Affairs	Automated contacts per human conversation, by subgroup and by flag status
Accountability metrics	System optimizes for reported retention rather than student interest	Publish the target variable; pair every retention metric with a belonging or agency measure; prohibit use of risk scores in enrollment management actions	Provost; Institutional Effectiveness	Belonging and engagement measures reported alongside retention, disaggregated

Governance and stakeholder engagement	Consultation ratifies decisions already made	Give students and advisors agenda-setting power and early access to the disaggregated error report	Governance committee; Student Government	Proportion of agenda items originating outside the administration; time from report release to committee review
Consent, transparency, and contestation	Students cannot see or challenge a classification that shapes their advising	Provide notice, an actionable explanation, an appeal reaching a human, and authority to override with the override recorded	Registrar; Dean of Students; Legal Counsel	Appeal availability, appeal uptake, override rate, and outcomes of overridden cases

Table 3 provides a self-assessment rubric for determining whether an institution's AI-driven student success system reflects stratification, mitigation, or amplification across eight domains. Institutional teams can compare current practices with the pathway indicators and use the listed evidence to identify gaps, document strengths, and set improvement priorities.

Table 3

Institutional Self-Assessment Rubric for AI-Driven Student Success Systems

Domain	Stratification	Mitigation	Amplification	Evidence to collect
Data sources and bias audit	No subgroup audit; protected attributes dropped and unrecorded	Audit performed once at adoption	Subgroup error rates computed at every retraining and reviewed by governance	Subgroup confusion matrices; retraining log
Transparency and explainability	Model logic held by vendor; institution has never seen documentation	Documentation exists; few staff can interpret it	Model card and datasheet held by the institution; advisors trained to read them	Model card; datasheet; training records
Student consent and contestation	Students unaware they are scored; no appeal	Notice given; appeal exists on paper	Notice, actionable explanation, appeal to a human, recorded override authority	Notice text; appeal logs; override records
Advisor training and professional judgment	Alerts routed to staff with no interpretive training; overrides untracked	Training offered; overrides occur but are not counted	Training required; overrides recorded, reviewed, and fed back into model governance	Training completion; override rate and review minutes
Equity-disaggregated outcomes	Aggregate retention reported alone	Disaggregation by single variables	Intersectional disaggregation reported alongside every retention claim	Dashboards; intersectional outcome tables

Student experience and belonging	No measure; complaints treated as anecdote	Belonging measured institution-wide	Belonging measured by flag status and subgroup, with results acted upon	Belonging survey; flag-linked analysis
Opportunity expansion versus deficit remediation	Contacts name deficits; enrichment allocated by predicted return	Mixed framing; enrichment offered to some	Universal opportunity-framed floor; targeted intensity audited by subgroup	Contact content coding; enrichment participation by subgroup
Governance and accountability structures	No named owner; procurement decided the design	Committee exists; consults after decisions	Named owner; students set agenda items; published withdrawal rule	Charter; agendas; withdrawal rule text

Implementation Conditions: Feasibility Under Resource Constraints

Institutions enrolling the largest shares of first-generation, low-income, and racially minoritized students often lack the ability to fund the governance structures this article recommends. Community colleges, regional public universities, HBCUs, and Hispanic-serving institutions almost never have dedicated algorithmic auditing units. This resource gap matters because it affects the institutions the framework is intended to serve. Three responses follow.

A Tiered Governance Floor

Governance can be tiered without being abandoned. At the lowest tier, which costs nothing beyond attention, an institution names one accountable owner for each deployed system, publishes what data the system ingests, and disaggregates one outcome by one protected characteristic. At the second tier, which costs a few days of institutional research time each year, the institution cross-tabulates risk flags against realized outcomes by race, Pell status, and first-generation status, producing the two-way table from which disparate error rates are read directly, and requires a model card at contract renewal. At the third tier, which requires money, the institution commissions an external or consortia audit every three years and seats a student advisory body with agenda power.

The second tier matters, and it's the one most often skipped. Computing subgroup error rates for a deployed early alert system requires the flags, the outcomes, and a demographic file, all of which the registrar already holds. It is an afternoon of work. The statewide early warning case involved exactly this kind of internal analysis: the disparity was identified before public reporting forced action (Feathers, 2023), suggesting that the binding constraint is often governance rather than analytic capacity.

Consortia Capacity

Audit capacity has the economics of a public service and should be organized accordingly. State systems, HBCU consortia, and multi-institution improvement networks can maintain shared audit templates, pool the technical staff required to interpret vendor documentation, and negotiate procurement terms jointly, since a single regional public university has little leverage over a national platform vendor and forty of them together have a great deal. When a state coordinating board procures a common student success platform, the audit obligation belongs at the system level, and the resulting subgroup performance report should be public.

Minimum Protective Condition for Deployment

Under resource constraints, the most protective decision an institution can make may be to decline to deploy a system whose behavior it cannot inspect. An unaudited risk model at an under-resourced institution likely concentrates its errors on students with fewer resources to absorb them, and the institution may fail to detect the harm. Tiered governance is a minimum condition for responsible deployment, and no tier makes a non-inspectable system safe.

Common Objections and Responses

Four objections deserve a direct answer.

The first holds that equity auditing is a luxury for institutions with slack. The core audit is a cross-tabulation of flags against outcomes by subgroup, which is within reach of any registrar with a spreadsheet. Measurement is usually not the major cost. Acting on the results may require resources, and an institution unwilling to allocate those resources should reconsider its deployment.

The second holds that removing race from the model eliminates the problem. Yu and colleagues (2021) tested this hypothesis precisely using records for well over 90,000 students and found that omitting protected attributes neither improved performance nor fairness, because the remaining features carry the same information. Excluding protected attributes from the model may reduce the institution's ability to observe how model outputs vary across racialized patterns in the data.

The third holds that a human-in-the-loop is a sufficient safeguard. Green (2022) demonstrates that human oversight requirements often fall short of their intended purpose and, more concerningly, validate deployments that would not withstand scrutiny; additionally, automation bias suggests that overrides will decrease precisely when workload increases (Skitka et al., 1999). Human mediation is a real mechanism, and this framework depends on it. It is also the mechanism most likely to be claimed and least likely to be evidenced. The remedy is to count overrides.

The fourth holds that a normative framework cannot be scientific. The framework is normative in its evaluations and descriptive in its causal claims, and readers can separate the two. The six propositions above are falsifiable without accepting the article's normative commitments. The framework rejects the premise that threshold setting is neutral. A threshold must be set, and each threshold allocates error across student groups. Analysts often make that choice through defaults rather than formal institutional deliberation. Making the choice visible allows it to be examined and contested.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Leadership

For Administrators

The first imperative is governance. Institutions should not adopt AI systems without explicit deliberation about their equity implications, ongoing monitoring of differential impacts, and mechanisms for student voice and contestation (Viberg et al., 2024; Vesna et al., 2025). Institutions must build algorithmic accountability into their structures rather than leave it to individual discretion. Institutional readiness, encompassing infrastructure, leadership, and policy, is critical (Reddy & Aileni, 2025; Alotaibi, 2024; Basnet et al., 2025). In practice, this approach requires four commitments with dates attached. First, institutions should move equity review into procurement, before the contract is signed, because a contract without audit rights forecloses later accountability. Second, every dashboard reporting a retention gain should also report subgroup error rates, so that the two numbers are interpreted together. Third, institutions should fund the advising capacity that alerts presuppose; otherwise, they should not purchase alerts. Fourth, institutions should adopt a public withdrawal rule that specifies what disparity, sustained over what period, will trigger suspension of the system. An institution that cannot identify the evidence that would lead it to stop using a tool has weakened its own accountability structure.

For Advisors and Educators

The challenge for advisors is maintaining professional judgment in an environment increasingly shaped by algorithmic recommendations. This requires training in critical data literacy: the ability to interpret algorithmic outputs, recognize their limitations, and exercise independent judgment when warranted (Gabriel, 2024; Fazal et al., 2025; Mariyono & Hd, 2025). Advisors should understand that AI recommendations are starting points for inquiry, not endpoints for action. The student flagged as at-risk may need support or may be navigating circumstances the algorithm cannot see (Chine et al., 2022; Bhatnagar & Sharma, 2024). Two practices make this intervention observable. First, advisors should record disagreements with the system because an unrecorded override remains invisible to governance and cannot inform future review. Second, before each algorithmically prompted conversation, advisors should consider what information would help the student understand the contact as an opportunity rather than a summons. Advisors are especially well positioned to observe when a system presented as support begins to function as surveillance, yet they are often excluded from procurement and governance decisions.

For Policymakers

The key insight for policymakers is that AI is not a solution to under-resourcing. Institutions that adopt AI to compensate for inadequate advising capacity will likely slide toward the stratification pathway. Technology cannot substitute for the relational work that supports student success (Bulathwela et al., 2024; Angwaomaodoko, 2025). Policy frameworks must ensure that AI deployment is accompanied by, not a substitute for, investment in human capacity and institutional infrastructure. Three levers are available and underused. State authorizers can condition system-wide platform procurement on public reporting of subgroup performance, which converts an internal courtesy into an accountability document. Accreditors can ask, during program review, what a flagged student is told and what recourse the student has, questions that require no technical expertise to pose and that a stratifying system can answer poorly. Funders may refuse to support platform adoption unless it is accompanied by advising capacity, as the frequently cited predictive advising case shows that expanded advising capacity was part of the intervention (Kurzweil & Wu, 2015).

These implications are especially time-sensitive for two-year institutions and under-resourced campuses, where advising ratios are most challenging and where student populations include higher proportions of first-generation students, working adults, and students of color (Fazal et al., 2025; Hussein et al., 2025). These are precisely the contexts where AI could do the most benefit or the most harm.

Future Research Directions

This investigation raises several new questions for future research.

First, what are the long-term impacts of AI-driven student success systems on educational equity across diverse contexts? Longitudinal designs that track subgroup error rates and advising capacity together, rather than either alone, would directly test P1 and P4. Second, how can researchers identify and mitigate algorithmic bias in educational AI systems in real-world deployments (Baker & Hawn, 2021; Idowu, 2024)? Slicing analyses of deployed models across institutional types would establish whether the disparities documented in single-site studies generalize (Gardner et al., 2019).

Third, what models of advisor training and data literacy best support equitable AI adoption in resource-constrained settings (Gabriel, 2024; Basnet et al., 2025)? Override rates offer an unobtrusive behavioral measure of whether training changed practice. Fourth, how do students experience and respond to algorithmic classification? Research on the psychological and motivational effects of being labeled "at risk" remains scarce. Studies that vary contestability while holding the model constant would isolate the mechanism proposed in P5.

Fifth, comparative institutional case studies are needed to test the three-pathway framework empirically. Researchers should examine how institutions of different types, sizes, and resource levels navigate the amplification, mitigation, and stratification pathways in practice. Longitudinal studies tracking student cohorts before and after AI system deployment would be particularly valuable for understanding whether equity gains persist, erode, or reverse over time. Such work should include HBCUs, tribal colleges, Hispanic-serving institutions, and community colleges, where student populations are most affected by the equity dynamics this framework describes. Sixth, procurement represents an underutilized area for research. A content analysis of contracts for student success platforms across a state system would establish the base rate of audit rights and test P6 at low cost.

Limitations

Certain limitations constrain this analysis's scope and applicability. As a conceptual and literature-based article, this manuscript does not present original empirical data. The three-pathway framework, while grounded in published research, has not been validated through institutional case studies or longitudi-

nal assessment. The practice-based illustrations offered here are hypothetical composites; they are plausible and reflect documented patterns, but they do not constitute empirical evidence. The documented cases that accompany them were selected purposively for maximum contrast among pathways. They demonstrate that each pathway occurs; they cannot establish how often.

The framework is normative, and its evaluative conclusions follow from a commitment readers may decline: a system that distributes classification error toward historically excluded students has failed regardless of aggregate performance. Its descriptive claims stand independently of that commitment. The pathways are ideal types and therefore simplify; a large institution will sit on different pathways for different subgroups, different tools, and different colleges within the same campus, and the framework offers no rules for aggregating those positions into a single institutional verdict.

The literature reviewed is predominantly from North American and Western European contexts, which limits the framework's generalizability to higher education systems with different structures, funding models, and student demographics. AI-driven student success tools operate differently in centralized versus decentralized governance systems, in well-resourced versus resource-constrained institutions, and in cultural contexts with varying conceptions of student autonomy and institutional authority. Scholars working in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America have raised concerns about the transferability of Western equity frameworks to settings where the digital divide is more pronounced and where institutional capacity for AI governance may be nascent (Angwaomaodoko, 2025; Hussein et al., 2025). The regulatory analysis in the section on contestation is specific to United States law and will not transfer without modification.

The framework also focuses on undergraduate success systems and may not account for the distinct dynamics of graduate education, professional programs, or non-degree credentialing. The rapid pace of AI development means that the specific technologies discussed here may shift in capability and design before institutional governance structures catch up. Generative systems that advise students directly, rather than routing recommendations through an adviser, remove the human mediation on which the mitigation pathway depends, and the framework's account of that pathway may require revision as such systems spread. These limitations point toward the need for empirical testing of the three-pathway framework across diverse institutional types and national contexts.

Conclusion

AI-driven student success infrastructure is not inherently equity-enhancing or stratifying. Its impact depends on the design, implementation, and context in which it is deployed. When these systems are developed with attention to fairness, inclusivity, and transparency, and paired with investments in digital infrastructure and educator capacity, they can reduce achievement gaps and support marginalized learners. When they are built on biased data, deployed without inspection rights, or asked to compensate for advising capacity an institution has chosen not to fund, they reinforce the inequalities they were purchased to address.

Algorithmic justice in higher education requires treating technology as a site of ethical and political deliberation, rather than merely as an object of technical optimization. It requires institutions to ask, "For whom does this work, and at whose expense?" It also requires sustained attention to the experiences and perspectives of students whose lives are shaped by these systems, especially those historically marginalized by educational institutions (Gaskins, 2022; Adeniyi et al., 2024).

The three-pathway framework offers a conceptual tool for institutional self-assessment. It asks whether an institution amplifies equity, mitigates inequity through human mediation, or stratifies students through algorithmic sorting. Table 3 is intended to make that question answerable with evidence rather than intention. The answer depends on choices about data, design, governance, and the relationship between algorithmic recommendations and human judgment. The path from algorithmic efficiency to algorithmic justice is as much an institutional problem as a technical one. It depends on governance, resource allocation, and a willingness to let evidence constrain adoption. For educators and institutional leaders, the question is whether AI systems will be designed and governed in ways that affirm the dignity, agency, and potential of every student they affect.

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Affiliation as a Mechanism of Student Success: Rethinking How Institutional Support Environments Drive Access, Belonging, and Persistence

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Abstract

This article introduces affiliation as a conceptual mechanism linking institutional design to student success outcomes in higher education. While existing research has emphasized the importance of access, engagement, and belonging, it offers less precision in explaining how students interpret and act within institutional systems. As a result, students may engage with available supports without translating that engagement into sustained academic progress. Affiliation is defined as "the extent to which students identify with, trust, and perceive relevance in institutional support environments." Under this definition, institutional conditions such as identification, communication, and coordination shape affiliation, which influences belonging and persistence-related behaviors. By clarifying how institutional structures are translated into student understanding and action, this article contributes a mechanism connecting institutional design to student outcomes and offers practical implications for improving retention and progression through more coherent and navigable systems.

Keywords: higher education, institutional support, military-affiliated students, persistence, student success

Affiliation as a Mechanism of Student Success: Rethinking How Institutional Support Environments Drive Access, Belonging, and Persistence

Institutions of higher education have long invested in programs and services intended to improve student access, retention, and success, particularly for students navigating complex academic and administrative environments. These efforts are commonly evaluated through measures such as service utilization, participation rates, and student satisfaction. While these indicators provide insight into access, they do not explain why students who engage with institutional supports still fail to persist or progress (Kuh et al., 2010; Tinto, 1994). As a result, institutions may demonstrate high levels of engagement while continuing to face gaps in retention and progression. This disconnect reflects a broader problem in student success research and practice: the absence of a clearly defined mechanism explaining how institutional support efforts are translated into meaningful student outcomes.

This limitation is especially visible among military-affiliated students, including veterans, service members, and their families, who often navigate overlapping academic requirements, financial processes, and institutional expectations (Jones, 2015; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). However, these challenges are not unique to this population. Similar patterns are observed among first-generation, adult, and other students from historically underserved backgrounds. Students may access available services while remaining uncertain about how those services connect to their academic progression. This pattern reflects a broader systems problem in which institutional design does not consistently translate into a coherent student experience.

Foundational scholarship across sociology, social psychology, and organizational theory has emphasized the importance of individuals' relational ties to systems, from analyses of social forms (Simmel, 1908/1955) to mechanisms of social influence (Kelman, 1958) and affective commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Collectively, this work suggests that individuals develop varying degrees of psychological alignment with systems, which shapes how they interpret, trust, and act within structured environments.

More recent literature extends these ideas through research on identity-based motivation, psychological safety, and perceived organizational support, emphasizing that individuals are more likely to engage systems they perceive as relevant, trustworthy, and aligned with their sense of self (Edmondson, 1999;

Eisenberger et al., 1986; Oyserman, 2015). Across these perspectives, a consistent pattern emerges: individuals engage more effectively with systems they perceive as interpretable and trustworthy. Emerging scholarship further highlights the role of system interpretability and institutional trust in shaping whether individuals can effectively navigate complex environments (Kahn et al., 2022). For military-affiliated students navigating institutional processes, federal education programs, and academic requirements, system interpretability determines whether resources translate into coherent academic action or remain fragmented.

Across applied domains, research demonstrates that access to resources alone is insufficient without a corresponding sense of connection and interpretive alignment. However, existing literature fragments these dynamics across constructs such as engagement, commitment, belonging, or utilization, but does not isolate the mechanism through which individuals interpret, trust, and act within institutional systems. What remains underdeveloped is not whether support matters, but how students translate institutional support into meaningful academic action. This gap underscores the need for affiliation as a distinct construct.

To address this gap, this article introduces affiliation as a construct defined as the extent to which students identify with, trust, and perceive relevance in institutional support environments. Unlike engagement or utilization, affiliation reflects a form of connection that enables students to interpret and navigate institutional systems. Whereas engagement captures behavior and belonging captures affect, affiliation captures the interpretive alignment that enables both. In this way, affiliation functions as a mechanism through which institutional conditions are translated into student understanding, belonging, and persistence-related behaviors.

The conceptual framework integrates literature on sense of belonging, perceived organizational support, and persistence to explain how institutional environments function in practice. Institutional conditions shape students' opportunities to engage with support systems. Affiliation functions as a linking mechanism that influences students' sense of belonging and clarity in navigating academic pathways, which in turn contributes to persistence-related behaviors, including continued enrollment and institutionally directed engagement. This framework provides a model for aligning student support efforts with measurable improvements in access, retention, and progression.

The framework is informed through synthesis of existing literature and practice-based observations derived from the design and implementation of institutional support environments serving military-affiliated

students. These observations reveal consistent patterns in which students accessed services but lacked clarity in how institutional processes aligned with their academic goals, prompting the need to conceptualize a mechanism that accounts for variation in outcomes.

The need for an additional perspective has become increasingly pronounced as higher education environments have grown more decentralized and administratively complex. Expanding online services, evolving financial aid processes, transfer pathways, and increased institutional accountability for retention require students to navigate interconnected systems rather than isolated services. Under these conditions, understanding how students interpret institutional support environments becomes increasingly important for leaders and administrators in higher education. Drawing on an iterative synthesis of scholarship and professional practice across military-affiliated student environments, this article presents a conceptual framework that positions affiliation as the link between institutional design and persistence-related behaviors.

Conceptual Development of the Affiliation Framework

The conceptual development of this framework emerged through an iterative synthesis of student success scholarship and recurring practice-based observations from the design and implementation of institutional support environments serving military-affiliated students. Rather than originating from a single theoretical tradition, the framework developed through examination of literature addressing how students establish relationships with institutions, navigate complex organizational environments, and translate institutional support into meaningful academic action. Across these bodies of work, a consistent pattern emerged: although existing theories explain important dimensions of student success, they provide less precision in explaining how students come to interpret institutional support environments as coherent, trustworthy, and relevant to their educational goals.

Within higher education, student success has traditionally been understood through constructs such as academic and social integration, engagement, and sense of belonging. Foundational models proposed by Tinto emphasize the importance of students' integration into institutional communities as a predictor of persistence, while subsequent research demonstrates the substantial contribution of engagement and belonging to retention, learning, and academic achievement (Hausmann et al., 2007; Kahu & Nelson, 2017; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1994, 2017). Similarly, research on relationship-rich education argues that meaningful interactions with institutional agents shape students' educational experiences by increasing access to information,

support, and developmental opportunities (Felten & Lambert, 2020). Collectively, this literature establishes that relationships with institutional environments matter; however, it offers less explanation of how students interpret institutional systems in ways that enable them to navigate these systems effectively.

Related scholarship from organizational and psychological perspectives provides additional insight into how individuals develop relationships with organizations and institutional support environments. Research on organizational identification suggests that individuals develop relationships with organizations that extend beyond participation alone, incorporating organizational membership into their understanding of themselves (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Similarly, perceived organizational support research emphasizes that individuals are more likely to engage organizations they view as supportive and invested in their success (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Kurtessis et al., 2015), while research on identity-based motivation and sensemaking suggests that individuals are more likely to act when institutional environments are understandable, trustworthy, and aligned with their goals (Oyserman, 2015; Weick, 1995). Although these perspectives explain important aspects of organizational relationships, they generally examine identity, support, trust, or behavior independently rather than as part of a broader construct through which individuals develop meaningful relationships with institutional environments.

Throughout the iterative development of this framework, recurring patterns observed in professional practice consistently align with themes identified in the literature. These observations were drawn from the design, implementation, administration, and continuous improvement of military-affiliated student support environments across multiple institutions, while also informed by advising interactions, military-affiliated student services, cross-functional institutional collaboration, program assessment, and institutional policy implementation. Across these settings, military-affiliated students frequently accessed educational benefits, advising, transition programming, and other campus support services while continuing to experience uncertainty regarding how these processes connected to one another or to their broader academic progression. Similar challenges are documented throughout the military-affiliated student literature, which describes students navigating overlapping academic requirements, institutional policies, federal education benefits, evaluation of military training and experiences, and campus support services across multiple institutional units that are often experienced as fragmented and difficult to interpret (Ackerman et al., 2009; Barry et al., 2014; DiRamio et al., 2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Jones, 2015; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

Research further suggests that military-affiliated student centers facilitate transition support, connection with campus resources, and assistance with navigating institutional systems (Barmak et al., 2023; Jones, 2017; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010; Vacchi & Berger, 2014) beyond the necessary transactional work of education benefit processing. Comparable patterns have been documented among other historically underserved students, who frequently encounter institutional processes that are complex, decentralized, and difficult to navigate without intentional guidance from the institution (Means & Pyne, 2017; Stephens et al., 2012).

Taken together, research and practice-based perspectives informed the development of affiliation as a conceptual mechanism linking institutional design to student access and retention. Rather than replacing engagement, belonging, or service availability and utilization, the proposed affiliation framework integrates insights from each to explain how students interpret institutional support environments and translate available resources into meaningful academic action. The following sections situate affiliation within student success scholarship, distinguish it from related constructs, and further develop the conceptual framework.

Background and Theoretical Framing

Student success research has consistently emphasized the importance of students' connection to their institutional environment as a central mechanism influencing persistence, engagement, and completion. Foundational models of student departure and integration position persistence as a function of students' academic and social integration within the institution, arguing that students are more likely to remain when they perceive themselves as part of the institutional community (Tinto, 1994, 2017). Subsequent work on sense of belonging further refines this perspective, demonstrating that students' perceptions of mattering, inclusion, and fit are significant predictors of persistence intentions and academic outcomes (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019). Experimental and intervention-based studies reinforce this relationship, showing that even brief efforts to strengthen belonging can produce measurable gains in retention and performance (Murphy et al., 2020; Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Parallel to this line of work, research on student engagement and institutional conditions has shifted attention toward the role of the environment in shaping student outcomes. Rather than focusing solely on student characteristics, scholars have emphasized the "conditions that matter" within institutions, including access to support, clarity of expectations, and opportunities for meaningful interaction (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). Relationship-rich education and mentoring frameworks similarly highlight that structured, intentional

interactions with institutional agents can influence students' academic trajectories by increasing access to information, reinforcing expectations, and fostering developmental support (Crisp, 2010; Felten & Lambert, 2020). This body of work suggests that student success is not simply a function of individual effort, but of how effectively institutions design environments that students can understand and navigate.

A third body of literature extends these insights to specific student populations, particularly those navigating complex transitions into higher education. Research on first-generation, low-income, and military-affiliated students demonstrates that institutional systems are often experienced as fragmented, opaque, or misaligned with students' prior experiences and expectations (Barry et al., 2014; Means & Pyne, 2017; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015; Vacchi & Berger, 2014). These challenges are compounded by broader cultural dynamics within higher education, where implicit norms around independence and self-navigation may disadvantage students who are unfamiliar with institutional processes or who operate within different identity frameworks (Stephens et al., 2012). In these contexts, access to resources alone is insufficient; students must also be able to interpret institutional signals, determine relevance, and understand how to act within the system.

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that student access and retention depend not only on the availability of institutional support, but also on their ability to effectively navigate and engage institutional environments. Although constructs such as belonging, engagement, service availability and utilization, and others explain important aspects of the student-institution relationship, they provide less explanation of how institutional conditions are translated into meaningful student action. Addressing this limitation requires a construct that moves beyond participation or perception alone to capture the interpretive and relational process through which institutional conditions are translated into meaningful student action, positioning affiliation as a necessary extension of existing student success theory.

Distinguishing Affiliation from Other Constructs

While numerous constructs, including belonging, engagement, mattering, validation, navigational capital, perceived organizational support, institutional agents, and sensemaking have been advanced to explain relationships between students and institutions, each of the constructs captures an important but distinct dimension of the student experience. Collectively, scholarship demonstrates that student success is shaped by relationships with institutional environments through affective connection, behavioral participa-

tion, interpersonal support, access to institutional resources, and the ability to navigate institutional systems (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kahu & Nelson, 2017; Rendon, 1994; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Strayhorn, 2019; Weick, 1995; Yosso, 2005). However, these perspectives examine individual dimensions of the student-institution relationship, providing less attention to the interpretive process through which students determine whether institutional support environments are understandable, trustworthy, relevant, and useful. Affiliation is proposed to address this conceptual space by explaining how students make sense of institutional support environments and translate available support into meaningful academic action.

Table 1

Comparison of Affiliation with Related Student Success Constructs

Construct	Primary Focus	Central Question	How Affiliation Differs
Sense of Belonging (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019)	Affective connection	*Do I feel accepted and valued here?*	Affiliation may contribute to belonging but focuses on how students interpret institutional support environments before affective attachment develops.
Student Engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2017)	Behavioral participation	*How do I participate in educationally purposeful activities?*	Engagement reflects what students do, while affiliation explains how students determine whether institutional environments are understandable, trustworthy, and relevant.
Mattering (Schlossberg, 1989; Schlossberg et al., 1989; France & Finney, 2010)	Personal significance	*Do I matter within this institution?*	Mattering reflects perceived significance, while affiliation focuses on students' interpretation of institutional support environments.
Validation (Rendon, 1994)	Interpersonal affirmation	*Do institutional representatives recognize and support me?*	Validation emphasizes affirming interactions with institutional representatives, while affiliation encompasses students' relationship with the broader institutional support environment.
Institutional Agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011)	Human guidance and advocacy	*Who helps me navigate the institution?*	Affiliation describes students' relationship with the broader institutional environment, rather than with individual people.
Navigational Capital (Yosso, 2005)	Student knowledge and strategies	*Can I successfully navigate institutional systems?*	Navigational capital reflects students' capacity to move through the institution, while affiliation explains how institutional design shapes their navigation.
Perceived Organizational Support (POS) (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Kurtessis et al., 2015)	Organizational care and support	*Does the institution value and support me?*	POS emphasizes students' perceptions of support from the institution, while affiliation additionally incorporates interpretation, trust, and perceived relevance.
Sensemaking (Weick, 1995)	Interpretation of organizational environments	*How do I understand organizational situations and systems?*	Sensemaking broadly explains interpretive processes, while affiliation applies those processes specifically to students' relationships with institutional support environments.

Although these constructs differ in emphasis, they should be viewed as complementary, rather than competing, perspectives. Affiliation is not intended to replace these established constructs, but rather to integrate insights across them by explaining how students interpret institutional support environments before translating their resources into action. In this way, affiliation extends multiple student success theories by identifying an interpretive mechanism linking institutional design to student understanding and behavior.

Affiliation extends beyond affective connection and behavioral participation by capturing how students interpret institutional support environments. Students may experience belonging while remaining uncertain about navigating institutional processes or participate in services without integrating them into their academic decision-making. Affiliation therefore explains how students position themselves in relation to institutional support environments before translating available resources into meaningful action.

Mechanistically, affiliation functions as a filter through which institutional conditions are translated into student action. It shapes whether students recognize available resources as applicable to their needs, trust the information and guidance provided, and integrate those resources into their academic decision-making. Without affiliation, institutional support may remain fragmented or underutilized, even when access and participation are present. By isolating this process, affiliation provides a more precise explanation for variation in how students navigate similar environments, particularly in contexts where institutional complexity requires students to actively interpret and coordinate multiple systems. As such, affiliation operates as the connective mechanism between institutional design and student behavior.

Affiliation as a Connecting Mechanism

The proposed framework below positions affiliation as a connecting mechanism linking institutional conditions to student outcomes. These conditions shape affiliation, which influences students' navigation of institutional systems, sense of belonging, and persistence-related behaviors. Through this, the framework explains how institutional design is translated into student understanding and action.

Figure 1

Affiliation Framework

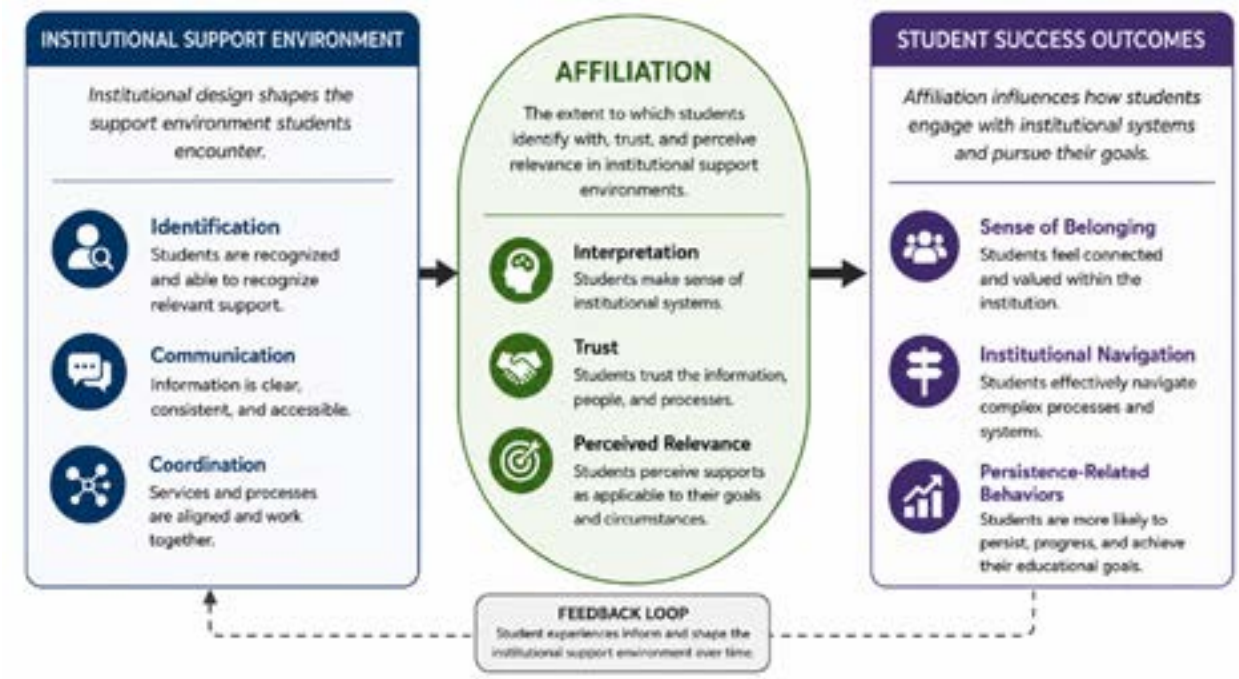


Table 2

Illustrative Dimensions & Indicators of Affiliation

Dimension	Example Indicator
Trust	I trust the guidance provided through the institutional support environment.
Interpretation	I understand how services within the institutional support environment work together.
Relevance	The institutional support environment and its services help me achieve my educational goals.
Navigation	I understand how to access the institutional support environment to receive assistance and guidance
Integration	I perceive the services of the institutional support environment as connected rather than separate.

The indicators presented above should be understood as illustrative expressions of affiliation rather than an exhaustive measurement model. Within the affiliation framework, interpretation, trust, and perceived relevance represent the underlying psychological processes. These processes become evident through students' ability to navigate institutional support environments, recognize connections among institutional services,

and integrate available resources into their academic decision-making.

Institutional Conditions as Antecedents to Affiliation

Consistent with the preceding synthesis of research and practice, three institutional conditions emerged as foundational to students' ability to interpret institutional support environments. First, institutions must identify students and connect them with appropriate support before barriers emerge, reflecting scholarship that emphasizes proactive outreach and relationship-rich educational practice (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Kahu & Nelson, 2017). Second, institutional communication must be timely, understandable, and actionable so that students can accurately interpret expectations and available resources (Kahu & Nelson, 2017; Stephens et al., 2012). Third, institutional processes must be coordinated across organizational boundaries so that students experience coherent, rather than fragmented, institutional support, particularly in complex environments that require interaction with multiple units and offices (Barry et al., 2014; Jones, 2015; Vacchi & Berger, 2014).

Within this framework, affiliation is understood as a product of institutional design rather than solely an individual disposition. Consistent with models that emphasize the role of the educational interface in shaping student outcomes, institutional conditions create the context in which students determine whether systems are coherent, trustworthy, and relevant to their goals (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). When institutional conditions are characterized by clear identification, effective communication, and coordinated processes, they support the development of affiliation by shaping how students interpret and engage institutional systems.

Affiliation and the Development of Belonging

Within the proposed model, affiliation shapes how students come to experience belonging within the institution. While belonging has been widely established as a critical factor in student success, it is often treated as a direct outcome of institutional climate or student characteristics. This model positions belonging as contingent on students' ability to interpret and engage institutional systems in ways that make those environments meaningful.

This distinction is particularly salient for military-affiliated students, who frequently navigate complex and overlapping systems that extend beyond the institution itself. Research indicates that these students may report lower levels of belonging or experience challenges in connecting to traditional campus environ-

ments (Barry et al., 2014). In this context, affiliation represents a critical step in the process: before students can experience belonging, they must first determine whether institutional systems are understandable, relevant, and worthy of trust. Without this interpretive alignment, students are less likely to experience a meaningful sense of belonging within the institution.

Belonging as a Predictor of Persistence-Related Behaviors

A substantial body of research has established sense of belonging as a strong predictor of persistence, engagement, and academic success. Students who perceive themselves as valued and included within the institutional environment are more likely to remain enrolled, participate in academic and co-curricular activities, and achieve positive academic outcomes (Hausmann et al., 2007; Tinto, 1994, 2017). Within the proposed model, belonging represents a key outcome of affiliation and a central contributor to persistence-related behaviors, as a stronger sense of belonging contributes to continued enrollment, academic engagement, and progression toward degree completion.

Influence of Affiliation on Persistence

Beyond shaping belonging, affiliation also influences persistence by increasing the likelihood that students trust institutional guidance and act on it. Research on perceived organizational support suggests that when individuals view systems as reliable, supportive, and aligned with their needs, they are more likely to act on the guidance those systems provide (Kurtessis et al., 2015). Applied to higher education, students who trust institutional processes are more likely to follow academic guidance, complete required processes, and make decisions that support continued enrollment. Consistent with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and perceived organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986), students who interpret institutional systems as reliable and relevant are better positioned to navigate complex academic and administrative processes, particularly where multiple units and offices are involved. In this way, affiliation shapes both perception and action on institutional guidance.

Discussion and Implications for Practice and Research

This article advances affiliation as a conceptual mechanism explaining how institutional support environments are translated into meaningful student action. Rather than emphasizing constructs such as belonging, engagement, mattering, validation, navigational capital, perceived organizational support, insti-

tutional agents, and sensemaking, the framework highlights the importance of institutional design in shaping how students understand and navigate support systems.

Illustrative Examples

Rather than serving as empirical evidence, these scenarios demonstrate how institutional support environments can differ in the extent to which they enable students to interpret, trust, and effectively navigate institutional systems. These scenarios are intended to demonstrate the conceptual distinction between affiliation and related constructs:

- A student veteran successfully activates their VA education benefits through a campus military-affiliated student center, while also encountering a process that requires interaction with multiple additional campus office to obtain course materials as authorized through their benefit. As responsibility shifts between offices, the student becomes uncertain about which office has the authority to resolve the issue or how the various processes connect. While the necessary services are available, the fragmented experiences prevent the student from interpreting the support environment as coherent, trustworthy, and relevant, resulting in a lack of confidence in navigating future institutional processes.
- An incoming traditional-age student actively participates in orientation, attends welcome events, and meets with their academic advisor before the semester begins. Throughout these experiences, the student receives information about tutoring, career services, counseling, and student organizations. Although each resource is introduced effectively, they are presented as individual programs rather than interconnected components of the broader support environment. When the student later encounters academic difficulties during the semester, they are uncertain where to begin seeking assistance or how the various support services relate to each other.
- Before classes begin, an incoming student receives coordinated communications from the university that explain not only the actions they need to complete, but how each process contributes to successful enrollment and academic success. When questions arise, the student is connected to the appropriate office through a clearly defined support pathway, while consistently receiving guidance that reinforces previous communications. Although the required

processes remain complex, the student experiences the support environment as understandable, trustworthy, and connected to their educational goals.

Limitations

Although the proposed framework is grounded through iterative synthesis and professional practice, its relationships have not been empirically tested, remain theoretical, and require validation across institutional contexts and student populations. Additionally, the dimensions and indicators presented are intended to illustrate potential directions for operationalization rather than represent a validated measurement instrument. Future research should examine the construct's psychometric properties, boundary conditions, and applicability across diverse support environments and institutional types.

Implications for Practice

For practitioners and institutional leaders, this model suggests that improving student outcomes requires more than expanding services or increasing access points. Instead, attention must be directed toward how institutional systems are designed, communicated, and coordinated. Efforts to support students—particularly military-affiliated students—often emphasize compliance, processing, or discrete interventions. While necessary, these approaches may fall short when students encounter fragmented systems that require them to independently interpret and connect multiple processes.

Effective practice centers on reducing interpretive burden. This includes strengthening identification processes so that students are recognized and connected to relevant resources early, improving communication to ensure that information is clear, timely, and actionable, and enhancing coordination across institutional units so that students experience a coherent system rather than a series of disconnected interactions. These shifts move practice from a service-delivery model toward a system-design approach, where the goal is not only to provide support, but to ensure that support is understandable, trustworthy, and usable.

Additionally, this model suggests that institutions should evaluate success not solely through utilization metrics (e.g., number of appointments, program participation), but through indicators of system clarity and student trust. Students may engage with services without developing affiliation, and without affiliation, engagement may not translate into sustained progress. As such, institutions should consider how their structures signal relevance and reliability to students, particularly those navigating complex external requirements such as federal education programs.

Implications for Research

This conceptualization of affiliation also extends current research agendas by introducing a construct that captures an underexplored dimension of the student–institution relationship. Future research should examine how affiliation develops across different institutional contexts and student populations, particularly in environments characterized by structural complexity. This includes exploring how variations in institutional design—such as centralized versus decentralized service models, or the alignment between academic and administrative processes—shape students' perceptions of coherence, trust, and relevance.

Further work is also needed to operationalize affiliation in ways that distinguish it from related constructs such as belonging and engagement. Measurement approaches may draw from existing literature on perceived organizational support (Kurtessis et al., 2015), identity-based motivation, and system trust, while adapting items to reflect students' interpretation of institutional environments. Developing valid and reliable measures of affiliation will be critical for testing and refining the proposed model.

In addition, research should examine how affiliation functions across key transition points in the student lifecycle, including onboarding, first-year experience, and major academic or administrative milestones. For military-affiliated students, this may include transitions related to activation, deployment, or changes in education programs, where institutional complexity is heightened and interpretive demands increase. Understanding how affiliation shifts across these moments can provide insight into when and how institutions can most effectively intervene.

Finally, this model invites broader theoretical integration by connecting higher education research with organizational and psychological perspectives on trust, support, and system navigation. By situating affiliation at the intersection of these domains, future research can build a more comprehensive understanding of how institutional environments shape behavior—not only through access or engagement, but through the extent to which students see those environments as coherent systems they can rely on.

Conclusion

As higher education becomes increasingly complex, improving student outcomes requires a shift from expanding services toward designing support environments that students can readily understand and navigate. Ultimately, institutional support is effective not simply because services are available, but because

students experience them as coherent, trustworthy, and relevant to their educational goals.

The affiliation framework proposed in this article offers a new lens for evaluating how support environments influence access, retention, and student success. By positioning affiliation as the interpretive mechanism linking institutional design to student understanding, agency, and persistence-related behaviors, this framework provides a foundation for theory development, empirical investigation, and institutional practice.

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Delivering a First-Year Student Success Course at an Urban University: A Cautionary Tale and Proposed Model

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a descriptive study exploring the impacts of a first-year student success course delivered at a metropolitan university (MU) in the Intermountain West. Tinto's Model of College Student Retention underpinned this research. A pre-post survey design was employed at the beginning and end of the semester when students took the course. When taken in aggregate, the course produced mixed results, with academic integration going down in the post-survey and social integration staying the same. These findings when taken together reveal a significant challenge for MU and universities like it if they are to improve retention and graduation rates. Recommendations for addressing such challenges within a first-year student success course are included.

Keywords: first-year student success course, Tinto's Model, retention challenges

Delivering a First-Year Student Success Course at an Urban University: A Cautionary Tale and Proposed Model

Higher education faces several challenges in the first half of the 21st century. First-time enrollments are declining and achieving and maintaining desired retention and completion rates pose an increasing challenge. Even after sustained, proactive recruiting efforts over the past several decades or more, enrollment demographics continue to reflect significant differences across racial, ethnic, gender, and age groups compared to population statistics. International student enrollment is declining, and institutions face increased costs and declining student support. Students are increasingly sensitive to the burdens of student debt in relation to post-graduation earnings power and thus question the value of attending college (Bransberger, 2018).

Ruch et al. (2023) identified three megatrends significantly impacting college enrollment patterns. First, the traditional undergraduate market is shrinking. Second, the market is becoming more diverse. Third, the market is becoming more segmented. In short, enrolling new students, especially from traditional cohorts, will become more competitive. Even with targeting enrollment from other cohorts (e.g., adults, international students, transfer students, etc.), enrollment growth will be a challenge. Institutions that do not understand the impact of these trends do so at their peril. In previous decades, institutions relied on an ever-increasing number of high school graduates to fuel growth. But that long period is coming to an end. Institutions will have to focus on supporting current students and improving retention and completion rates. This poses a significant challenge going forward since colleges and universities have tried a variety of strategies to improve retention rates during the past decades, yet they remain stubbornly low on many campuses. Thus, retention and completion rates are not new issues but remain critically important now more than ever (Bransberger et al., 2020).

Much, however, has been accomplished in previous decades concerning how to retain students once enrolled. Although most student attrition research to date has tended to focus on internal student characteristics or the impact of environments external to the university, more research is emerging exploring the role of the college or university environment—especially the classroom itself—on student persistence. For example, teaching and learning practices, termed High Impact Practices (HIPs), have been identified that are beneficial to a wide range of undergraduate students. They include first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences (e.g., core courses), learning communities, writing intense experiences, research-based learning,

internships, and capstone courses and projects (Kuh, 2008). Evidence suggests that a student needs to participate in at least two HIPs before there is a positive impact on student success. Findings also support HIPs deterring dropouts (Kilgo et al., 2015).

One popular form of first-year seminar is requiring entering students to complete a student success course. First-year student success courses, also called first-year seminars or freshman success courses, are recommended to be taught in small class settings focused on students' academic interests (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003). The courses are recommended to be academically based and give new students their first taste of college-level critical thinking skills, oral skills, research, and writing (Berry, 2014). The goal of first-year student success courses is to provide guidance, socialization, and access to study groups while helping new students make friends and learn about campus resources. Faculty and staff members who lead these courses become resources for first-year students who need mentorship or advice. There is a body of literature that generally indicates an association between participation in a first-year student success course and a range of positive academic outcomes (Cho & Karp, 2013).

For example, Westrick et al. (2021) in their meta-analysis demonstrated that first-year academic performance is one of the strongest predictors of second-year retention. Schnell and Doetkott (2003) found that students who enrolled in a first-year student success course at a public 4-year university persisted in significantly greater numbers than those who did not.

Although such research may validate the use of programs in particular settings, studies often lack specificity as to what went right as well as pitfalls or cautions (Barefoot, 2004). Additionally, this body of research lacks studies exploring the underlying characteristics of these courses and the university structures surrounding them related to student success or failure. Thus, the focus of this study.

Weisen (2024) argues that institutions share responsibility for reducing achievement and retention gaps and documents that these gaps are especially persistent for first-generation students. Li et al. (2024) examined how equity-group membership and alternative entry pathways influence persistence, emphasizing institutional supports rather than student deficits, and Gardner (2001) called attention to the role that institutional structures, policies, and practices play in affecting the learning and retention of first-year students. However, the research community has yet to focus its lens on important institutional aspects of the first-year student success course experience, such as the selection, training, and rewarding of faculty who teach first-

year students and greater depth and specificity of outcome information to better inform institutions about successes, pitfalls, and effective use of resources regarding the first-year student success course (Barefoot, 2004; Schnell & Doetkott, 2003).

The study reported herein strived to, in part, address these deficits. Utilizing Tinto's Model of College Student Retention and its theoretical base, this study undertook an in-depth analysis of a first-year student success course delivered at a large metropolitan university in the western U.S. Over one fall semester, multiple sections of the course were invited to participate in the research. A number of sections did, and students within those sections who agreed to participate completed a pre-survey at the start of the semester and a post-survey near the end of the semester. Surveys investigated a number of variables including the following primary ones: academic integration, social integration, and fall-to-fall retention rates. Other variables included demographics, employment, career decidedness, interest in participating in supportive counseling, etc. Based on the results, recommendations for adjustments to the course format, curriculum, and instruction are provided that may lead to improved course outcomes in the future. And herein lies the cautionary tale mentioned in the title of this paper. We believe our results reveal that just offering a first-year student success course does not automatically guarantee achieving desired outcomes. Instead our results underscore the importance of launching and sustaining first-year student success courses with common goals, curricula, and instructional outcomes.

Tinto's Model of College Student Departure

Tinto's theory of college student departure has near paradigmatic stature with more than 400 citations (Braxton et al., 2000; Tinto, 1975; 2001). The theory is based on the degree of fit between the individual student and the college environment. As Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) note in their review of Tinto's theory, students come to a particular institution with a range of background traits (e.g., race, secondary school experiences, academic aptitude, and family background). These traits lead to initial commitments, both to the institution attended and to the goal of graduation from college. Together with background traits, these initial commitments then influence not only how well students perform in college, but also how they interact with and subsequently become integrated into the institution's social and academic systems. Tinto (1975) postulated that "academic integration is characterized by structural and normative dimensions. Structural integration involves the meeting of explicit standards of the college or university, whereas normative integration pertains to an individual's identification with the normative structure of the academic system"

(p. 104). “Social integration pertains to the degree of congruency between the individual student and the social system of a college or university. Mechanisms of social integration include informal peer group associations, extracurricular activities, and interactions with faculty and administrators” (Tinto, 1975, p. 107). Social integration is especially important. Ishitani et al. (2024) showed that a stronger sense of belonging reduces the likelihood of students leaving or transferring. Salusky et al. (2022) demonstrated that belonging develops throughout the first year and is central to persistence for first-generation students.

Both Tinto (1975; 2001) in his original theory and Braxton et al. (2002) underscore the important relationship between levels of academic and social integration and students’ commitments to the institution and college graduation. High levels of academic and social integration lead to greater institutional commitment and persistence that result in higher graduation rates (Braxton et al., 2000; Chrysikos et al., 2017).

Some limitations of Tinto’s model include the focus on institutional experience without accounting enough for the influence of family, especially with underrepresented groups (Lopez, 2018). The model has also been accused of suggesting all individuals must follow the correct steps to assimilate into college (Lopez, 2018). An additional limitation in Tinto’s model is the lack of factors measuring specific college student support programs that influence college persistence (e.g., counseling services and student clubs). Nonetheless, scholars have found positive outcomes for academic and social integration associated with underrepresented students’ retention (Lopez, 2018).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore the successes and the weaknesses of a first-year student success course delivered at a metropolitan university. Tinto’s model provided the theoretical basis for measuring course effectiveness. The research questions were (a) Who are these students? (demographics), (b) Are there significant differences pre- to post in academic and social integration after one academic semester? and (c) What are student retention and dismissal rates from the beginning of the fall semester when the course was taken to the following fall semester?

Method

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed involving human participants followed the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments

or comparable ethical standards, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, data storage, and steps taken to minimize coercion. The study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board (IRB). No funding was received and authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. The authors confirm that this is a University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved study, and that appropriate informed consent was obtained.

Sample

A total of 270 students enrolled in multiple sections of a first-year student success course at a metropolitan university in the Rocky Mountain West (total undergraduate enrollment, approximately 15,000 students) were included in the sample. Of these students, 136 fully participated in the study and completed pre- and post-surveys. Of the 136 participants, 99.1% were first-year and 89% were under age 20. The ethnic composition of participants was as follows: 80% White, 3.7% African American, 6.5% Hispanic, 3.7% Asian American, 1.4% Native American, and 4.6% indicating Other. Most participants were female (65%) and 35% were male. Fifty percent were first-generation college students.

The 136 who completed the pre- and post-surveys were very similar to the overall group of 270. Of the overall group of 270 almost all were first-year (99.1%) and under age 20 (82%). The ethnic composition of the overall group was as follows: 83% White, 4.4% African American, 5.1% Hispanic, 3.7% Asian American, 1% Native American, and 5% indicating Other. The overall group was 65% female and 35% male. Forty-three percent were first-generation college students.

Instrumentation

Contents of Pretest/Posttest Survey

The authors developed a 26-item pretest/posttest survey that included demographic information (e.g., ethnic group, age, and gender), as well as questions related to the importance of graduating from college, school of choice, confidence in choice, extracurricular activities, employment, and career decidedness. The survey also included academic and social integration questions based on Tinto's model developed by Terenzini and Pascarella (1980) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1983).

Pascarella and Terenzini's Institutional Integration Scale

The study employed Pascarella and Terenzini's Institutional Integration Scale. Following Tinto's

model, Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) developed an instrument to measure academic integration, social integration, goal commitment, and institutional commitment. Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) reported internal consistency reliabilities (alpha) in their four-factor solution as follows; factor one (academic integration - academic/intellectual development, .72), factor two (academic integration - faculty concern for student academic development, .77), factor three (social integration - peer group relations, .84), and factor four (social integration - informal interactions with faculty, .83). The overall constructs of academic and social integration had internal consistency reliabilities (alpha) of .64 and .46 respectively and were correlated ($r=.36$; $p<.05$) in the overall sample.

The instrument employed in this study included the eight items factorially derived from Pascarella and Terenzini's work. The instrument also included the six non-class contact questions not factor-analyzed by Pascarella and Terenzini. Three of these six items related to academic integration and explored how often students accessed basic information about academic programs, discussed intellectual or course-related matters, and discussed matters related to future careers. The other three of the non-factor analyzed items related to social integration and asked how often students and faculty socialized informally, discussed a campus issue or problem, and received help in resolving a personal problem. Each of these questions was rated on a six-point Likert-type scale, with 0x being no contact of at least 10 minutes per month with faculty and/or other academic professionals; 1x = once; 2x = twice; 3x = three times; 4x = four times; and over 5x = over five contacts. One additional social integration item was added (recommended by Pascarrela & Terenzini, 1983) which asked, "What is your involvement in university extracurricular activities" (1-4 scale: 1 = four or more hours per week, 2 = two to three hours per week, 3 = less than two hours per week, 4 = no involvement).

Procedures

Data collection spanned one fall semester and retention data was collected the following fall semester. At the beginning of the semester, all instructors teaching sections of the course were asked if they were willing to allow staff from the research team to provide a brief presentation to their students concerning the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of participating. Upon receiving the instructor's permission, a time was agreed upon for a research team member to go to the class and explain the study, gather informed consent documentation, and field questions from participants. After the presentation and questions, the survey described above was distributed and took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

On or before the midterm point of the semester, individual summaries were provided to participating students. At this time, researchers briefly met with each class to distribute the individual summaries and discuss in general what the results meant so that individual students could understand their results from the pre-survey. Also at this time, students were offered the option to meet outside of class at a convenient time for them to discuss their results further, and they were offered the opportunity to sign up for counseling services with one of the university's counselor training labs. Research evidence suggests that the utilization of counseling services has a positive influence on college student retention (Coll & Stewart, 2002). Douce & Keeling (2014) found relationships between academic performance, mental health, and class standing (i.e., first-year versus upper-class) with first-year students having more mental health issues than upper-class students.

At the end of the semester, a researcher returned to each participating class and administered the post-survey, followed by a brief discussion about the nature of the variables explored in the study and their importance to students. At the conclusion, an offer was extended for individual participants to meet and discuss the study and any questions they might have. After the semester had ended and all data were analyzed, each instructor was provided a class summary. It was hoped that instructors would utilize the class summary information to revise and optimize their curricula, instruction, and student interactions when they next taught the course.

Instructors were chosen from academic departments and the student services division of the university as part of their duties. There was a half-day orientation/training of the instructors covering the goals and objectives of the course. Tinto's model was not discussed specifically. A sample generic syllabus was provided with plenty of flexibility therein, in other words, the course did not mandate a specific curriculum. First-year students were encouraged to enroll, though not required, and the encouragement was not based on high school performance. For this study, an IRB was obtained from the host institution.

Results

Student Background Information: Who are these students?

A series of questions were asked concerning where the metropolitan university (MU) ranked in the students' choices of institutions to attend, the importance of graduating, employment status, and extracurricular activities. Table 1 summarizes results.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Background Variables: Post-secondary Choices and Pursuits (n=136)

Variable	Pre-Survey					Post Survey				
Important to graduate from college (Mean of 1-5 scale: 1=very important to 5=unsure)	1.27 (.59 s.d.)					1.38 (.67 s.d.)				
School of choice (% in rank: 1-4 or Only Choice Available)	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Only	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Only
	55.6	20.4	6.9	2.8	14.4	57.7	17.5	9.5	3.7	11.6
Confident in choice (Mean of 1-5 scale: 1=very confident to 5=unsure)	1.87 (.98 s.d.)					1.94 (1.05 s.d.)				
Extracurricular activities (% in category: hours spent per week)	≥4	2-3	<2	None		≥4	2-3	<2	None	
	19.5	15.8	35.8	28.8		17.3	16.2	40.3	25.7	
Employed (% in category)	Yes		No			Yes		No		
	49.1		50.9			47.9		52.1		
Hours employed per week (% in category)	1-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	>40	1-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	>40
	19.8	34.0	18.9	19.8	7.5	19.6	36.1	20.6	17.5	6.2

Graduating was of substantial importance to most respondents and no change in this occurred over the semester. Importantly, MU was only the first choice of institution for 56-58% of the respondents on both the pre and post-surveys. This means that nearly half of the respondents would have preferred to attend another institution. Although MU was in an inferior position in the minds of a significant number of respondents, the overall group of respondents was still on average confident of their choice to attend MU and remained so across the two assessments. The number of hours spent in extracurricular activities each week did not change much over the semester, and at the end of the semester, there were still about a quarter of respondents who did not participate in any. This was only a three percentage point decrease from the pre-survey percentage. Thus, MU faces challenges concerning incoming students' perceptions of the university and increasing extracurricular participation. The latter challenge may be the greater of the two since roughly 50% of respondents reported working. Roughly one-third worked 11-20 hours per week, about one-fifth worked 21-30 hours per week, and a little less than a fifth worked 31-40 hours per week. Throughout the semester, 6-8% of students worked more than 40 hours per week.

Are There Significant Differences Pretest to Posttest in Retention Constructs?

Table 2 provides results of paired sample t-tests of retention constructs along with effect sizes for statistically significant findings.

Table 2

Retention Constructs: Paired t-test Significance, Effect Sizes, Means, and Standard Deviations (n=136)

Retention Construct*	Definition (Scale)	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)	**α (Effect Size)**
SI – Peer group relations	Quality of personal relationships and friendships (1=very true to 7=very untrue)	2.82 (1.77)	2.64 (1.73)	.22
SI – Faculty contact (Informal)	Amount of faculty contact to socialize & get help with a problem. (0x per mo. to ≥5x)	.92 (1.00)	.89 (.95)	.75
SI – Faculty interactions (Informal)	Positive non-classroom interactions with faculty. (1=very true to 7=very untrue)	3.93 (1.61)	3.67 (1.64)	.06
AI - Faculty contact (Academic)	Amount of faculty contact for information, discuss course content & career. (0x per mo. to ≥5x)	1.29 (1.11)	1.41 (1.09)	.21
AI – Academic /Intellectual development	Satisfaction with intellectual development & impact of academic experience. (1=very true to 7=very untrue)	2.55 (1.28)	2.81 (1.31)	.02 (.20)
AI – Faculty concern for academic development	Level of faculty interest in students & degree to which faculty are considered outstanding teachers. (1=very true to 7= very untrue)	3.81 (1.59)	4.08 (1.63)	.10
Pedagogy—Preparation & organization	Degree faculty has organized presentations; is prepared for class; uses class time effectively; clearly explains requirements; & has command of subject matter. (1=never to 4=very often)	3.41 (.53)	3.22 (.63)	<.001 (.29)
Pedagogy—Instructional skill	Degree faculty provides clear examples, reviews & summarizes material; interprets abstract ideas & theories; & answers questions. (1=never to 4=very often)	3.21 (.59)	3.10 (.69)	.07
Persistence	Does student plan to return to MU next fall. (1=extremely unlikely to 5=extremely likely)	4.14 (1.17)	3.88 (1.29)	.02 (.20)

Treatment at MU	Asks how fairly student has been treated by MU. (1= very fairly to 5=very unfairly)	1.81 (.89)	1.94 (.92)	.15
Career decidedness	How sure student is about career direction; the strength of desire for pursuing the career; & confidence to perform duties of that career. (1=high to 5=low)	2.11 (.90)	2.11 (.97)	.99

Note. * SI=Social Integration; AI=Academic Integration

Results from Table 2 paint a portrait of the student experience at MU during their initial time as college students. With few exceptions, not much changed over the course of the semester for these students, but a few things did, and when the results are taken in aggregate they provide an interesting snapshot of what it is like to be a beginning student at MU.

No Social Integration (SI) item achieved statistical significance. The quality of positive non-classroom interactions (SI-Informal Interactions with Faculty) improved and approached significance at p=.06, but this was not a robust change and pre and post means remained near the neutral center point of the scale. Insight as to why the means hovered around the neutral point may come from looking at the results from the SI-Faculty Contact item measuring the number of times per month students socialize with faculty. At both survey points, the mean was less than one time per month. It may be that most students are neutral or close to neutral on the quality of their non-classroom interactions because they have so few of them. The other item in this construct, SI-Peer Group Relations, remained unchanged. The mean remained on the positive side of the scale, showing that students felt positive overall about the quality of their personal relationships and friendships.

Results from the academic integration (AI) subscale revealed that students' feelings about their intellectual development and the impact of their academic experiences (AI-Academic/Intellectual Development) deteriorated a statistically significant amount. Although both means remained on the positive side of the scale, at the end of the semester, participants felt less positive about their intellectual development and the impact of their academic experiences. Even though the effect size of this drop was small (.20), students experiencing any decrease in this indicator is problematic since one would hope that after a semester in college students would feel greater satisfaction with their intellectual development and the positive impact their coursework is having on it. Although not statistically significant (p=.10), the deterioration in the mean

of the item AI-Faculty Concern for Academic Development may provide additional insight. The item asked about faculty's interest in students & the degree to which faculty are considered outstanding teachers. The mean moved from 3.81, just under the neutral midpoint of four, to slightly over four at 4.08. This item most likely taps similar feelings to that of Academic/Intellectual Development. And finally, the average number of times per month that students had contact with faculty to acquire information, discuss course content, etc. (AI-Faculty Contact) did not change significantly and remained less than 1.5 times per month.

Based on results from the items exploring student perceptions of the quality of the pedagogy they experienced at MU (i.e., preparation, organization, and instructional skill) their overall perceptions started the semester solidly in positive territory and remained so at the end of the semester with means for the two items holding above three on a four point scale, where four is most positive. These positive results, however, need to be qualified based on the paired sample t test results. After a full semester of instruction, one of the two items measuring this construct, Pedagogy-Preparation & Organization, dropped significantly and the other, Pedagogy-Instructional Skill, was close to a significant drop at p=.07. Although the significant drop resulted in only a small effect size (.29), it is still troubling that students' perceptions of the pedagogy they received crept downward over the course of the semester.

Results revealed a statistically significant drop in the mean on the item asking students about their plans to return to MU the following fall (Persistence). The fall mean was slightly over four on a five point scale, with five being "extremely likely" that the student will return. This is a positive finding, but by semester end, the mean dropped to 3.88 resulting in a small effect size of .20. Similar to the previous discussions of small drops on particular items, the sky does not appear to be falling for MU, but the small drop in Persistence may portend challenges going forward. And finally, items asking about how fairly students were treated by MU (Treatment at MU) and how sure students were of their career direction (Career Decideness) remained unchanged, with both being solidly on the positive sides of their scales on both surveys. These two being both positive and stable is a bright spot in the results.

What Are Retention and Dismissal Rates from Fall of the Experience to the Following Fall Semester?

Upon request, the university's registrar office random selected students from each section to ascertain persistence after an academic year (n=90). Of the 90 records randomly selected from participants by the university registrar's office, 55.6% (50 students) re-enrolled the following fall semester and 44.4% (40 students) did not. Seven of the 40 students who did not continue (17.5%) were dismissed for poor grades.

Sixteen of the 40 who did not continue (40%) left while on academic probation, and 17 (42.5%) left the university with good academic standing.

Discussion

Over the course of a semester, MU students' perceptions of the quality of teaching they received appeared to be positive, although their perceptions of the quality deteriorated from pre- to post-survey. Overall students reported their teachers were organized and skilled in their instruction, but after a full semester of instruction, one of the two items measuring this construct, Pedagogy-Preparation & Organization, dropped significantly and the other, Pedagogy-Instructional Skill, was close to a significant drop. Although the significant drop resulted in only a small effect size, it remains concerning that students did not improve in their perceptions of the teaching they received over the course of the semester.

Beyond the instruction that they received, results revealed that students were not building deep connections with their professors, their peers, or MU as an institution. Ideally, most of the constructs measured would show improvement pre- to post. This, however, was not the case. What can be concluded from these trends is that students were not building strong foundations of academic and social integration during their early months as college students. Instead of growing closer to their fellow students, professors, and MU as an institution, they were perhaps growing away from them or at best remaining at the point where they started the semester. An important finding that underscores this assertion is the small but statistically significant drop in Persistence.

The demographics of the students who participated in this study provide a critically important context for addressing persistence at MU. For example, finding that 50% were 1st generation college students, that for many MU was perhaps a college of convenience, that many were employed and working significant hours per week, and that most had relatively low involvement in extracurricular activities presents a landscape with some steep hills to climb for MU and universities like it if they are to improve retention and graduation rates.

Although the first-year student success course did not prove to be effective at significantly impacting academic and social integration and fall-to-fall retention was not strong, on a positive note, a large percentage of students were interested in supportive counseling (48%). Coll and Stewart (2002) found that in assessing the progress of undergraduate students involved in a counseling early warning intervention, counseling services increased both students' academic and social integration and their confidence in their

ability to progress in college. More research is needed here, but MU might consider piloting a systematic supportive counseling initiative to address some of the challenges outlined in this paper along with additional research exploring factors underlying the weaknesses revealed. Following is a more detailed discussion of this landscape with a focus on the first-year course itself.

Structure of the First-year Student Success Course and Recommendations for Change

For the most part, instructors showed little interest in survey results. Many were kind enough to allow their sections to participate in the survey, but no instructors requested additional information that would help them better align their class to the constructs explored and no instructor contacted the research team about the summative report they received after the semester. Perhaps naively, the research team had thought that instructors would be intrigued by the survey results and would reach out to learn more, but such was not the case. We do not in any way say these things to denigrate or disparage the instructors. Their lack of interest may be understandable given that the orientation they received lacked sufficient depth of training concerning the retention constructs and perhaps even lacked sufficient focus on the overall goal of the course.

To better position MU's and other similar first-year student success courses in the future, we provide two models in Figures 1 and 2 that summarize our recommendations derived from the results of our study. The first model (see Figure 1) focuses on core components institutions need to establish and maintain in order to properly launch and support their courses, and the second model (see Figure 2) focuses on core practices instructors need to follow in order to fully align their curricula and instruction to the goals of the course. We believe the combination of the two models provides a comprehensive framework that will result in first-year student success courses becoming the high-impact experiences that institutions intend them to be.

We also believe these recommendations are especially important for metropolitan and access-oriented institutions, where students are more likely to balance employment, family responsibilities, financial pressures, and lengthy commutes while pursuing their education. These competing demands often increase the likelihood of attrition during the first year, making a well-designed and consistently implemented student success course particularly critical. Institutions serving these populations should for example, as described in Figures 1 and 2, emphasize the use of a common syllabus, careful instructor selection, comprehensive initial and ongoing faculty and staff development, and regular assessment of instructional quality to ensure fi-

delity to the course model. In addition, as described, instructors should intentionally incorporate small-group advising opportunities, meaningful career exploration activities, and pedagogical approaches that acknowledge and accommodate students outside commitments while maintaining high academic expectations. When implemented with consistency and institutional commitment, these practices can transform first-year student success courses into powerful, high-impact interventions that promote student engagement, persistence, and degree completion, particularly among students attending metropolitan and access-oriented institutions.

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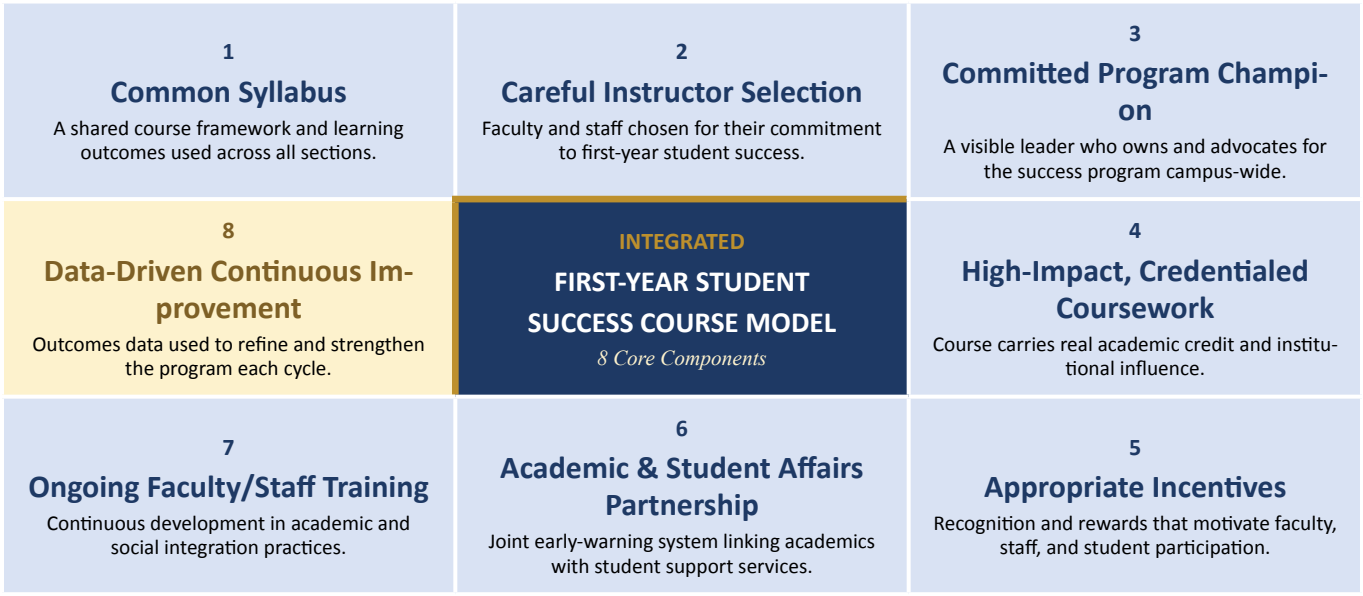
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Figure 1

Institutional Guide for Integrating First-Year Student Success Courses: Eight Core Components for Institutional Success



Component Descriptions

	Component	Description
1	**Common Syllabus**	All sections of the course share a consistent syllabus: common learning outcomes, core assignments, and assessment criteria, ensuring every first-year student receives an equivalent, high-quality experience regardless of section or instructor.
2	**Careful Instructor Selection**	Instructors are deliberately recruited and vetted for their investment in first-year students — not simply assigned. Priority is given to faculty and staff who model strong teaching, mentorship, and cross-campus collaboration.
3	**Committed Program Champion**	A designated leader with visibility and influence — often a senior faculty member or administrator — owns the program, advocates for it at the institutional level, and is directly accountable for its success.
4	**High-Impact, Credentialed Coursework**	The course carries genuine academic weight (credit-bearing, GPA-counted, and tied to degree requirements) so it commands the same institutional respect and 'power' as any other academic course on campus.
5	**Appropriate Incentives**	Meaningful incentives — course release time, stipends, recognition, or professional development credit — are provided to instructors and staff to sustain high-quality engagement over time.
6	**Partnership with Academic & Student Affairs**	The course is jointly owned by Academic Affairs and Student Services, enabling a coordinated early-warning system that flags at-risk students quickly and connects them to the right support resources.
7	**Ongoing Training on Integration**	Instructors and support staff receive continuous professional development in both academic integration (study skills, advising, course navigation) and social integration (belonging, community-building, campus engagement).
8	**Use of Data for Continuous Improvement**	Retention, persistence, and performance data are systematically collected and reviewed each term to identify what is working, target gaps, and refine the model on an ongoing basis.

Figure 2

Faculty Guide for Teaching First-Year Student Success Courses: Eight Core Practices for Instructor Success



Practice Area Descriptions

	Practice Area	Description
1	**Promote Student Initiative & Assertiveness**	Faculty accent and promote students taking the initiative to be assertive in class, creating more academic and social integration through active participation.
2	**Small-Group Advising Sessions**	Conduct small group advising sessions related to students' academic and career goals, giving students focused, personal guidance in a lower-stakes group setting.
3	**Participatory Teaching Styles**	Lean into participatory teaching styles such as discussions and debates rather than lecture-only formats, keeping students actively engaged.
4	**Peer Group Integration**	Increase peer group integration to promote connectedness by encouraging small group projects and other connected activities among students.
5	**Collaborative Learning & Peer Networks**	Develop collaborative learning among peers to help students build networks of peer support, and connect students to broader social communities such as clubs or study groups.
6	**Midterm Academic & Social Integration Evaluations**	Utilize midterm academic and social integration evaluations to identify how students are doing and make adjustments to the course as needed.
7	**Share Results & Revisit the Course**	Share results from the midterm evaluations with students to revisit and repurpose the course, and provide more discussion about what it means to develop academically and socially in collegiate environments.
8	**Career Exploration & Support Services**	Encourage career exploration with visits to counseling and career centers on campus, suggest informational interviews as part of the course, and continue to promote highly accessible counseling and other support services.

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Finding Novel Ways of Responding to Distress on College Campuses: Supporting the Well-Being of Our Students Through Outreach

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Abstract

Mental health distress is steadily rising on college campuses across America. College counseling centers must find novel ways to learn about and respond to student distress. The need for outreach is great, as not all students may present to counseling centers via traditional help seeking avenues. The Interactive Screening Program (ISP) is an online platform where students can anonymously connect with a campus counselor who provides information and support for help-seeking. In the current brief report, we examine the utilization trends of the ISP at a university in the northeastern United States. We discuss trends of distress over time, and groups of students who experience greater distress, as identified through the ISP. We also discuss resulting outreach strategies intended to meet student needs.

Keywords: suicide, distress, retention, Interactive Screening Program

Finding Novel Ways of Responding to Distress on College Campuses:

Supporting the Well-Being of Our Students Through Outreach

Suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in the United States, and 1.4 million Americans attempted suicide in 2019 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). More specifically, suicide is the second leading cause of death for individuals ages 10 to 34 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021), which includes much of the population of students attending college. Mental health concerns clearly contribute to rates of suicide, given that 90% of individuals who died by suicide in 2019 had a diagnosable mental health condition at the time of their death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020, as cited in American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2021). Yet, alarmingly, a study from one university in 2008 revealed that the majority of college students with depression or suicidal ideation are not receiving mental health services (Garlow et al., 2008).

While suicide represents perhaps the most serious risk of mental health distress, there are many other ways that distress impacts the wellbeing of young adults. For those who are pursuing higher education, mental health distress can jeopardize their academic retention in these educational pursuits. Sharp and Theiler (2018) conducted a thorough review of literature spanning 30 years which demonstrated the chronic presence and impact of student psychological distress. These authors shared that psychological distress impacted student attrition and performance, defined as grade outcome and timely completion of academic obligations. Trusty et al. (2025) conducted a longitudinal study that found that factors associated with a higher risk of academic dropout included depression, substance use, and academic distress. Encouragingly, however, students who do utilize university counseling centers' services and report decreased distress are likely to remain at their institution and show a stronger commitment to graduate (Choi, Buskey, & Johnson, 2010; Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH), 2026).

Mental Health Outreach and Retention

Mental health concerns remain foundational to understanding student dropout rates. In a survey conducted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), Gruttadaro and Crudo (2012) found that 64% of students who dropped out of college noted mental health challenges as a cause for leaving. For those considering withdrawing from their bachelor's program within the last six months, 67% reported emotional stress and 56% reported personal mental health reasons as influencing their decision to pause or end their

studies (Gallup, Inc., & Lumina Foundation, 2025). Overall, without treatment, students experiencing mental health disorders are at high risk for lower grade point averages and school dropout (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2008). However, universities can encourage student retention by connecting them to appropriate mental health services.

Expressed challenges exist among connecting students to retention efforts. A notable barrier, as found by Peterson et al.'s (2025) study of 891 students both with and without mental health symptoms, was "embarrassment" (87%) for those seeking mental help support. Ebert et al. (2019) also noted that students who met criteria for major depression or generalized anxiety disorder had the highest odds of reporting embarrassment as a barrier to seeking treatment. Attitudinal reasons were also highlighted as preventing students from seeking necessary mental health care despite their overwhelming understanding of the potential benefits. In Peterson et al.'s (2025) study, 84.9% of participants endorsed "wanting to handle problems on one's own" and 82.8% endorsed "not feeling comfortable sharing feelings with another person". Student access to an anonymous platform that would allow trained counselors to address these attitudinal barriers by offering psychoeducation, normalization, and interpersonal connection could serve as a helpful modality that connects students with appropriate support and therefore potentially improve retention rates.

Assuredly, connecting distressed students with mental health resources is an important way to increase academic retention and support student well-being; and in our roles as campus staff, faculty, and administrators, we can advance novel tools on campus to accomplish the task of reaching those students who might be overlooked by our current outreach efforts.

Interactive Screening Program (ISP)

To address this concerning gap between mental health need and service provision, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention developed what was ultimately named the Interactive Screening Program (ISP). This is a web-based platform that is used to help identify college students with mental health concerns that might put them at increased risk for suicidal behavior (Haas et al., 2008). This program invites students seeking help and support to complete an anonymous mental health screening questionnaire and offers an anonymous dialogue feature that allows students who have completed the online mental health questionnaire to communicate with a counselor. Students then receive a personalized, unique response to their questionnaire by a counselor at their college counseling center. The counselor response provides

information about the counseling center's mental health services and invites the student for further engagement by offering a chance to either contact the counseling center directly to schedule services or to dialogue anonymously with the counselor to gain more information (Haas et al., 2008).

Moutier (2014) emphasized that efforts must be made to eliminate stigma surrounding mental health and address the reality that the majority of individuals who suffer from mental health problems do not actually seek treatment. Thus, the anonymity of the ISP is a helpful way to remove some of the barriers to help-seeking (Moutier, 2014). Authors who conducted another study of the ISP concluded that the ISP is an effective tool for reaching students who might be most at-risk for suicide, but who may not otherwise pursue counseling on their own (Daltry et al., 2019). Further, students can anonymously engage with the ISP online and at any time throughout the week, removing any barriers related to the timing of students' distress or their comfort level with physically going to the counseling center (Daltry, et al., 2019). Simply knowing where to go for mental health support is not enough for college students, as some hold reservations about reaching out or are afraid to admit that they are struggling with their mental health (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2018). Fostering students' own help-seeking behavior represents one strategy for removing barriers to students pursuing mental health services (Salimi et al., 2021) and the ISP is one means by which students can easily, anonymously, and comfortably initiate the process. Moreover, personalized feedback received from the counselor could serve as a building block of hope toward a sense of positive social connectedness and care, which research has clearly identified as a protective factor in reducing suicidal ideation and attempts in individuals aged 15-34 (Wickramaratne, et al., 2022).

Research Questions

1. Did student distress, as measured by PHQ-9 scores through the ISP, increase from 2017 to 2025?
2. Were demographic factors, including race, sexual orientation, gender, first-year status, transfer status, or varsity athlete status, associated with PHQ-9 scores?
3. How might ISP utilization inform campus mental health outreach and retention strategies?

Methods

Participants

This IRB-approved, human subjects research study was conducted at a university in the northeastern

United States. A total of 2413 students, age 18 and older, participated in this current study by completing an online questionnaire as part of the ISP from Fall semester 2017 through Spring semester 2025.

Of the 2413 students who participated in the ISP 76.7% identified as women, 19.8% identified as men, 1.9% identified as nonbinary, and .6% identified as transgender. 74.9% of students identified as White, 9.3% identified as Black, 5.2% identified as Native American, 3.7% identified as Latino, and 3.7% identified as Asian/Pacific Islander. In terms of sexual identity of student participants, 67.7 % identified as heterosexual, 12.1% as bisexual, 4.4 % as gay/lesbian, 3.5% as questioning, 2.7% as asexual, 1.9% as queer, and 1.5% as panromantic. Lastly, in terms of academic status, 27.4% were first-year students, 24% sophomores, 22.3% juniors, 17.2% seniors, 7.4% seniors plus, and 1.7% post baccalaureate students.

Measures

The Interactive Screening Program (ISP). The ISP is designed to reach college students who have significant barriers to accessing available mental health services. The ISP is a safe and secure platform that allows individuals to anonymously connect with a campus counselor who provides information and support for help-seeking. The specific goals of this program are to identify, engage, and refer to treatment individuals with serious depression or other endorsed distress that conveys risk for suicide. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) licenses this program to individual colleges or universities, allowing each school to utilize their own customized, secure website where the *Stress & Depression Questionnaire* exists. This website also supports all exchanges between students who complete the questionnaire and the counselors who respond to the students' questionnaires. Staff from AFSP are assigned to individually support each school with any services to help manage and maintain the website.

The *Stress & Depression Questionnaire* includes the PHQ-9, which is a validated 9-item standardized depression screening scale that includes questions about suicidal ideation and behavior (Kroenke et al., 2001). The questionnaire also asks about anger, anxiety, substance abuse, and eating disorder symptoms. The entire questionnaire comprises 35 items and takes less than 10 minutes to complete.

Procedure

Participants were invited to participate in several ways. A link to this university's customized ISP webpage was posted on the counseling center's website, so students who visited the counseling center's

website had the option to click on this link. Given the interactive nature of this platform, the link was taken off the counseling center's website during academic breaks when staff were not available to respond and dialogue with participants. The link for the ISP questionnaire was also included in various university outreach efforts, as university faculty and staff made students aware of this program among other resources for receiving support on campus. Once students clicked on the link, they arrived at the customized welcome page for the university's unique ISP website. The welcome page provided an explanation of the program and instructed students how to create their own ID and password if they chose to proceed with completing the online *Stress & Depression Questionnaire*. Due to the anonymous nature of this website and how the website is set up, written consent was not possible to obtain from those participating in this online assessment. Furthermore, it would be impossible for a student to utilize ISP and not consent to having the information utilized in research (because it is impossible to have a consent process and anonymity). To ensure the safety of participants who chose to complete the questionnaire, the welcome page stated that the program is voluntary and anonymous. The welcome page also informed students that this service is not meant to provide crisis intervention, and a list of emergency resources students can use in the event of a mental health crisis were listed on the page as well. Students were informed that no follow-up services would be provided to them unless they specifically requested them.

Upon completion of the questionnaire, the ISP categorizes each questionnaire into one of four tiers of distress based on how certain items are answered. Tier 1A indicates the highest level of distress, with tiers 1B, 2 and 3 following, which represents decreasing severity of distress as measured by questionnaires. Whenever a questionnaire is submitted by a student, the counselors who manage the ISP receive an email notification, and a designated counselor responds with a written assessment. This assessment is templated (based on the tier level), but the counselor adds details that are tailored to that individual based on what is reflected in their responses. Questionnaires classified as Tier 1A and 1B are urged in the templated portion of the response to contact the counselor directly to be scheduled for an initial appointment with the counseling center. In addition to being provided with some personalized feedback about their self-reported distress, the counselor's written assessment also includes general information about the university's counseling center and instructions for how to pursue further mental health services.

The assessment also invites students to reply to the designated counselor by way of an optional dialogue feature in the ISP. This allows students to ask questions and gain more information about counseling

services directly from the counselor. The goal of the assessment is to convey genuine interest and concern for the student and their expressed distress, to emphasize the availability of support, and to encourage continued engagement with a counselor. When the counselor sends this assessment to the student, the student is notified via the email address they provided when they signed up, although the ISP computer system encrypts the email so that the counselors managing the ISP are unable to see students' contact information. The student is provided with a link in this email notification to log back onto the ISP, view the assessment, and dialogue with the designated counselor if desired.

Two additional email reminders are sent to the student in the weeks following the submission of the questionnaire if they have not yet viewed their assessment. The second and final reminder (sent 30 days after the counselor sends the assessment) contains a link to an *Update Questionnaire* and is intended for students who have not yet had contact with the designated counselor. Students are asked in this brief questionnaire how they are doing and are invited to provide any reasons for why they have not yet reached out.

On the ISP webpage where the counselor's assessment is posted for the student, there is a dialogue button that allows students to easily send a message to the counselor if they wish. There is no limit to the number of dialogue messages that can be exchanged between the student and the counselor, but ultimately, students who have endorsed distress are encouraged to connect with formal counseling services through the counseling center, as the dialogues themselves are not intended to be "therapy" but rather a starting point of connection. All counseling appointments that students in this study scheduled through ISP were optional, and students were able to remain completely anonymous to the counselors. Students utilizing ISP services were not forced or coerced to come to the university's counseling center for services.

Results

This study measured student distress (as represented by PHQ-9 score) across time and investigated other demographic factors that may have been associated with increased distress. Researchers were interested in substantiating their lived experience of working with an ever-increasing higher level of distress in students over time. They were also interested in identifying demographic variables that may help to identify communities of students who may be at a higher risk of distress.

See Table 1 to see regression results. An ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was fitted with the PHQ 9 total score as the dependent variable. The predictors included the six demographic variables and the

time variable Period, where Period is operationalized as a sequential index of academic terms, coded from 1 (Fall semester 2017) through Spring semester 2025 and entered as a linear predictor in the model.

The regression coefficients (B) represent the expected change in PHQ-9 score associated with a one-unit change in a predictor variable while holding all other variables constant. For dichotomous variables, the coefficient represents the average difference in PHQ-9 score between the reference group and the comparison group.

The coefficient for Period (B = 0.07, p = .012) indicates that for each successive academic term included in the study, PHQ-9 scores increased by approximately 0.07 points on average. Across the study period, this pattern suggests a gradual increase in reported distress among students utilizing the ISP. See Figure 1.

For race, students identifying as non-White reported PHQ-9 scores that were, on average, 0.87 points higher than White students after controlling for the other variables in the model (B = 0.87, p = .001).

Sexual orientation showed the largest effect in the model. Students identifying as a sexual minority reported PHQ-9 scores that were, on average, 2.04 points higher than heterosexual students (B = 2.04, p < .001), controlling for all other predictors.

The remaining predictors were not statistically significant, indicating no reliable differences in PHQ-9 scores based on class standing, gender identity, varsity athlete status, or transfer student status after accounting for the other variables in the model. Table 1 includes all results.

Table 1

Linear Regression Predicting Score

Predictor	Coeff	SE	t	p
Intercept	12.73	0.41	31.08	< .001
Period	0.07	0.03	2.53	.012
MClass (Not first year)	0.02	0.26	0.07	.948
MRace (Non-white)	0.87	0.26	3.37	.001
MSorient (Not heterosexual)	2.04	0.24	8.47	< .001
MGender (Not a man/DNI)	-0.23	0.28	-0.83	.409
Varsity (Yes)	-0.86	0.60	-1.43	.153
Transfer (Yes)	0.37	0.27	1.36	.175

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error. N = 2,381 (32 observations excluded due to missing data). R^2 = .044, adjusted R^2 = .041, F(7, 2373) = 15.68, p < .001.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze trends in distress among college students who engaged with an anonymous mental health screening platform on our campus from Fall semester 2017 through Spring semester 2025. We hypothesized that student distress, as represented by PHQ-9 score, would increase over time, which appears to be true and is consistent with trends seen across the country (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2023).

Marginalized Identities

Additionally, we hypothesized that students whose identities included those who have been marginalized in society would report greater distress. Authors would like to stress that this hypothesis represents the harms done by marginalization, and not a greater risk of pathology in these communities. We were surprised to find that of these factors, only sexual orientation and race were found to be significantly associated with higher report of distress. That is, students with identities other than heterosexual or with identities other than White reported statistically significant higher levels of distress. Variables that did not appear to be significantly associated with higher risk of distress included gender identity, year in school, transfer student status, and student athlete status.

College mental health services are effective resources to address student psychological distress (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2023). Given what we know about rising distress among college students, and the ways in which psychological distress can negatively impact student retention, it is imperative that college counseling centers and other campus partners strive to continue to find novel ways to identify and connect with students in distress. The ISP is one such resource. The anonymity and online access of the ISP provide novel opportunities to break through potential barriers to help seeking and to simulate a "warm hand off" between the platform dialogue and counseling center services. Furthermore, given the flexibility that is possible in how the ISP is marketed and promoted, it is possible, and potentially beneficial, to take efforts to increase access and awareness to the ISP in particular student groups and around campus. For example, given the significant findings regarding higher risks of distress in non-heterosexual students and in non-White students, it could be useful to market the ISP to campus partners including offices and student groups serving the LGBTQIA+ student community, or offices and student groups that support students of different racial identities.

Implications for Student Success and Retention

Given what this research study reveals about increasing psychological distress among students and the impact of distress on student retention, the ISP can be better utilized as a "warm hand-off" tool to support students on college campuses. Counseling center staff who connect and collaborate with other student support services (student success programs, tutoring services, academic advising) can proactively disseminate the ISP link and instructions so that students who are showing signs of being at risk of withdrawing from the university have the opportunity to have their psychological distress assessed and replied to by a mental health professional on campus who they may otherwise have not reached out to for help. Similarly, counseling center staff can be more intentional with disseminating the ISP information to offices on campus who support students of marginalized identities who, data shows, are more at risk for high distress and thus higher risk for retention issues. Any targeted efforts to allow more students the opportunity to complete the ISP represents a retention-oriented mental health outreach.

Ethical Considerations

This human subjects research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university where the research was conducted. Due to the anonymous nature of this website and how the website is set up, written consent was not possible to obtain from those participating in this online assessment. Furthermore, it would be impossible for a student to utilize ISP and not consent to having the information utilized in research (because it is impossible to have a consent process and anonymity). The welcome page of the ISP clearly informs potential participants that their participation is voluntary and anonymous. The only personal data entered (for the purpose of receiving notifications that a counselor has responded to the questionnaire, or that a counselor has responded to a dialogue) is a preferred email address. However, that email address is not seen or able to be accessed by the counselors using ISP. The web platform encrypts that information, and the emails are sent automatically to participants based on counselors' responses. Each ISP user is differentiated by a user number that they are assigned by the web platform. The welcome page for the ISP clearly informs participants that this platform does not provide crisis intervention services and is not a 24/7 support service. Contact information for crisis intervention services are listed on the welcome page for participants who might be in crisis. Due to the anonymity of the participants throughout their use of the ISP, the mental health professionals who read and respond to participants are under no legal or ethical

obligations to provide crisis intervention to a participant who is expressing that they are in imminent crisis. In this case, when a counselor responds, they reiterate the available crisis resources, but unless a participant's identifying information is known, there is no feasible, direct intervention that can take place.

Limitations

One potential limitation of the current study is that, given the anonymous nature of the ISP platform, no information could be gathered regarding participant academic retention or engagement with mental health services. Student anonymity may serve to decrease barriers to engagement for ambivalent students; however, it also prevents the ISP counselors from tracking all potential outcomes of an ISP encounter, including student follow up with campus mental health services and academic retention.

Student accessibility of the ISP platform could also serve as a limitation for this study. ISP is only accessible online on the Counseling Center's homepage and is inaccessible during academic breaks and during the summer. The changing accessibility might limit students who are in need during breaks or summer months, as well as students who might have difficulty finding the webpage or do not have adequate privacy to engage with the program. Additionally, it is not clear whether ISP meets current ADA compliance requirements, which could make it challenging for students with disabilities to utilize the service.

Future Research

Future research could be focused on further exploring the intersectionality of student identity. That is, in this analysis, all demographic variables were examined independently regarding their relationship to higher levels of distress; however, as we all know, individuals are comprised with a number of different aspects of identity, and it may be helpful to study data with this intersectionality represented by analyzing interactions. It would also be worthwhile to find strategies to directly measure student academic retention alongside measures of psychological distress as well as potential help seeking and/or engagement in mental health services on campus. Additionally, we noticed that in the current sample studied, almost 90% of students who reported thoughts of suicide in the past two weeks were not receiving therapy services. Further, 83% of those same students were not taking any psychotropic medication. Thus, we are interested in further examining the ISP's utility in bridging the gap between students reporting distress and connecting them to appropriate services. Additionally, given our interest in understanding the potential for increased distress in marginalized student communities, we made comparisons between privileged identities (e.g. heterosexual, Caucasian) and all other groups made vulnerable to and disadvantaged by harmful systems. It may be helpful in the future to compare all subgroups to one another.

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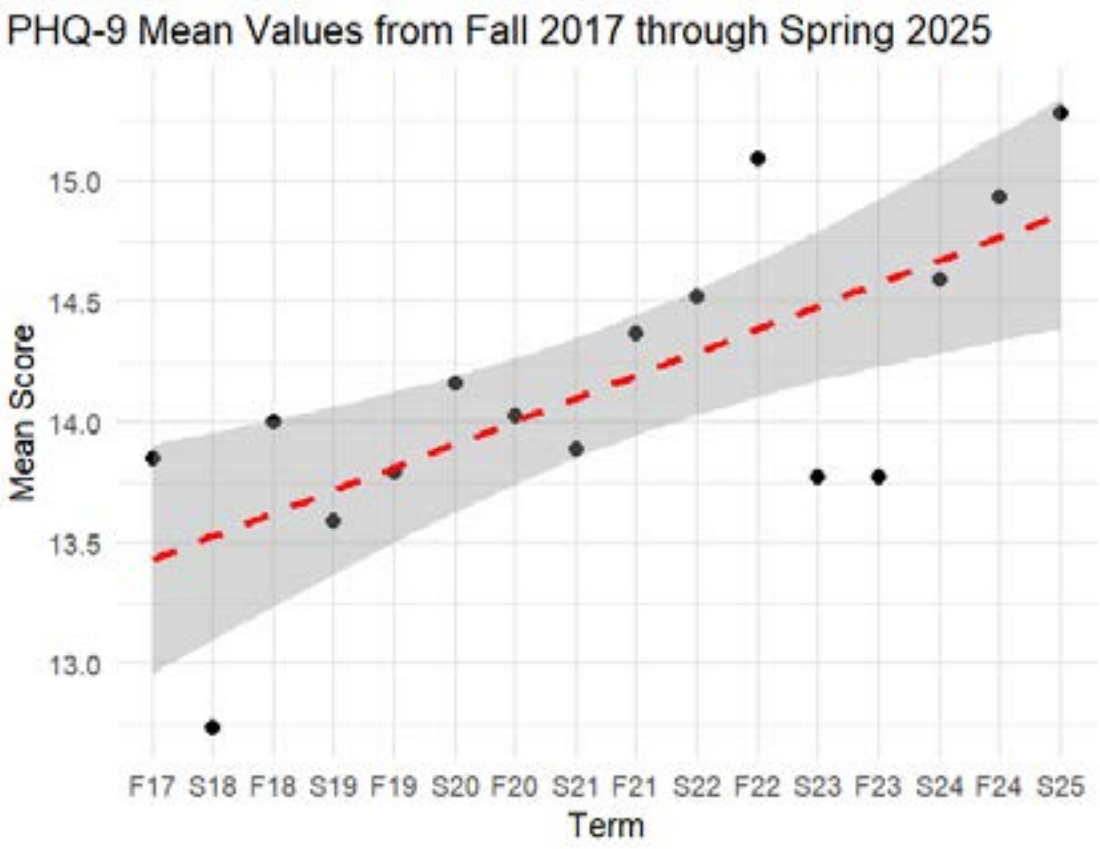
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Figure 1


PHQ-9 Mean Values from Fall 2017 through Spring 2025
Mean Score
15.0
14.5
14.0
13.5
13.0
F17 S18 F18 S19 F19 S20 F20 S21 F21 S22 F22 S23 F23 S24 F24 S25
Term

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Students' Sense of Belonging at a Regional Public-Serving University: Faculty, Resources, Campus Climate, Social Landscape, and Identity

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Abstract

College students' sense of belonging can significantly impact their engagement with campus, retention, and overall student success. This qualitative study explores how undergraduate students at a primarily commuter, fouryear, regional public-serving university (RPU) experience academic and social belonging. Studentled focus groups were conducted, including targeted groups of Latinx students, international students, and students registered with Disability Resources for Students (DRS). Four themes emerged across all groups that students report impact their sense of belonging and success: campus climate, faculty and classroom interactions, campus resources and support staff, and the social landscape. Identityspecific nuances highlight how belonging is shaped by representation, cultural and linguistic barriers, financial pressures, and accessibility needs. These findings underscore the central role of faculty in students' sense of belonging, the importance of clear and accessible resources, and the need for communitybuilding opportunities that reflect the realities of diverse student populations.

Keywords: sense of belonging; college student success; faculty-student interactions; commuter students; campus climate; student support services

Students' Sense of Belonging at a Regional Public-Serving University: Faculty, Resources, Campus Climate, Social Landscape, and Identity

College students' sense of belonging has been widely studied. A sense of belonging is often identified as a human need, and college students' sense of belonging in their institution has deep impacts on their success in higher education. For example, Gopalan & Brady (2020) found that having a sense of belonging impacts students' academic performance, is related to students' persistence through higher education, and supports students' mental health.

In this study, we sought to understand what belonging meant from the students' perspective at the University of Washington Bothell (UWB), a four-year, regional public-serving university (RPU). At the time of this study, the undergraduate student body was nearly 6000, with 40% of incoming students first in their immediate families to earn a four-year degree, 23% of incoming students were eligible for federal Pell Grants, 90% of students commuted to campus, and over 40% of the incoming first-year class were seeking STEM degrees. Equitable access to and participation in all UWB programs is a core value. While we have some quantitative measures of belonging through local climate surveys and our implementation of the National Survey of Student Engagement (2021), we wanted to do a deeper investigation into the factors that promoted or hindered our students' sense of belonging in this context.

Varied Measures of and Experiences with Sense of Belonging

Dost & Mazzoli Smith (2023) reviewed over a thousand papers in their meta-analysis of the research on higher education students' sense of belonging. Dost & Mazzoli Smith identified belonging as impacting both academic performance and students' wellbeing as common themes across the research. They indicate that social capital, relationships within the campus community, and identities are all deeply intertwined with students' sense of belonging.

Although belonging is widely studied, definitions and measures of this term vary across studies. For example, some studies rely on a single survey item (e.g. "I feel that I am part of [SCHOOL]" (Gopalan & Brady, 2020), while others have used more nuanced and multi-pronged definitions such differentiating between a*cademic belonging*, students' perception that they are adequately prepared and challenged in academic settings, and *social belonging*, students' perception that they are welcome and engaged in a school's community (Lawrie et al., 2025). Others add additional components such as *psychological* belonging (Suh

& Owens, 2021) and *professional* belonging (Corcoran et al., 2025) to their sense of belonging frameworks. Dost & Mazzoli Smith (2023) emphasize that sense of belonging has not been "adequately conceptualized" and is "temporal and context sensitive" (p. 822).

Further, the feelings and understandings of sense of belonging are not consistent across all groups. For example, first-generation college students and Latinx students had statistically significant lower measures of sense of belonging (Gopalan & Brady, 2020); transfer students had lower levels of belonging validation experiences than students who entered as first-year students (Holland Zahner & Harper, 2022); and upper-class and first-year students have notably different understandings of belonging from each other (Suh & Owens, 2021). Factors impacting belonging also vary across groups. For example, faculty mentors and social communities deeply impact belonging for Latinx college students (Holloway-Friesen, 2022); attention to universal design for learning experiences and flexibility in campus resources were key to the sense of belonging for students with a disability (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2025); and faculty-student relationships are critically important for commuting students to feel like they belong on campus (Whitten, et al., 2017).

Recognizing that belonging is vital to student success yet varies in how it is defined, measured, and experienced across groups, this study centers students' voices to deepen our understanding of what belonging means to them, how it intersects with their diverse lived experiences and backgrounds, and how belonging impacts their success in college.

Research Questions

Specifically, our research questions were: (1) How do students at a primarily commuter RPU describe belonging? (2) What institutional factors support or hinder students' sense of belonging and student success? and (3) How do Latinx students, international students, and students registered with our Disability Resources for Students (DRS) office experience belonging?

Methods

Design

To capture responses from students attending the university, we ran student-led focus groups that included a questionnaire for each participant to write down answers as they participated. The questions were adapted from those developed by the Student Voices Initiative (2024). The questionnaire included prompts

about impressions of UWB, academic and social belonging ratings, experiences that helped or hindered belonging, recommendations for improvement, and advice for other students.

Facilitators

Three female-identifying, senior undergraduate researchers facilitated the focus groups. One of the undergraduate researchers majored in psychology and had a documented disability, another was a first-generation Latinx communications major, and the third undergraduate researcher was an international student with a double major in policy and global studies.

Focus Group Structure

Focus groups were led by one undergraduate researcher who asked the questions while the other two took notes and kept track of time. Each focus group was sixty minutes long. Six groups were held in person, and two groups were hosted via Zoom. The sessions were not recorded. Participants were given time to answer the questions on the questionnaire before discussion. The facilitator followed a script which encouraged the participants to engage in the conversation.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants for the focus groups were identified using multiple methods of outreach, such as distributing flyers, social media posts, email campaigns, student club outreach, and working with specific offices on campus to send out invitations. In addition to all-campus recruitment, we also focused some recruitment with three populations: Latinx students, international students, and students registered with Disability Resources for Students (DRS). The identities of the undergraduate student researchers motivated us to choose these specific populations. On the advertisements and outreach emails, a QR code and link were included for each participant to use to sign up for a designated focus group time slot.

There were eight focus groups. Three of these groups were made up of UWB students who responded to the general advertising, three groups were organized with students from the Latinx club, one group included students from outreach through International Student Services (ISS), and the final group included students from outreach through DRS. A total of 41 students participated.

Ethical Considerations

This research design was approved by the institutional review board. Each participant received a

$25 gift card as compensation for their time. The gift card was provided as a modest, non-coercive token of appreciation and was not contingent on participation length or completion. At the beginning of each focus group, students were provided a written statement describing the purpose of the research and how their data would be used. Students provided written informed consent prior to participating. The statement emphasized that participation was voluntary and that all feedback would be kept confidential. Participants were informed that they could leave at any point during the session and could decline to answer any question they found uncomfortable.

Because focus groups involved identity-specific groups and student facilitators, ground rules were reviewed at the outset emphasizing respect, privacy, and the expectation that participants not share others' comments outside the session. Student facilitators received training on minimizing power dynamics, including using neutral prompts and avoiding evaluative language, and they followed a standardized script to ensure consistency and reduce social risk.

All notes and worksheets were stored in a locked file cabinet. Online coding tools were password-protected and required university login credentials. Each participant's data was entered using a randomly generated identification number to maintain confidentiality during coding.

Data Sources, Coding, and Analysis

Data included written responses to the questionnaires and detailed facilitator notes. The research team consisted of five members: one faculty researcher, one staff member from the office of institutional research, and three senior undergraduate researchers. Undergraduate researchers entered the worksheet data, which was then checked by another team member for accuracy.

The research team conducted thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns and cross-checking themes across groups. Facilitators first brainstormed themes they observed across focus groups, which were then combined with themes suggested by the SVI protocol to create a preliminary coding framework. Questionnaire data were coded using the SVI protocol to support theme development.

Each comment from the notes and worksheets was independently coded by the undergraduate researchers according to this framework. A second undergraduate researcher confirmed the coding, and the faculty or staff researcher spot-checked entries to ensure consistency. Disagreements in coding were dis-

cussed during team meetings until consensus was reached. Themes were finalized based on both frequency counts generated by the coding tool and team deliberation about conceptual coherence.

Results

The first four questions asked students to use three words to describe UWB generally, students, classes, and instructors. The top words for each of these are provided in Table 1 below. Overall, the responses were positive and descriptive of our small, diverse, campus community.

Table 1

Top Words Used to Describe UWB (# of students reporting this)

Overall	Small (20), Diverse (7), Friendly (7), Community (6)
Classes	Interesting (8), Small (7), Engaging (7), Challenging (5), Diverse (5)
Students	Friendly (16), Diverse (10), Kind (10)
Instructors	Helpful (9), Friendly (8), Caring (8), Strict (6), Understanding (6)

The next two questions asked students to rate their sense of both social and academic belonging at UWB on a scale from 1 to 6 with 1 being "I do not feel I belong at UWB" and 6 being "I definitely feel I belong at UWB." The mean for academic belonging was 4.92, and the mean for social belonging was 4.28. As seen in Figure 1 below, students were more likely to feel a sense of *academic* belonging as no students rated that below a 3. However, the sense of *social* belonging was more spread out across ratings.

Figure 1

Students' Ratings of Level of Academic and Social Belonging

The remaining questions asked about what helped or hindered their belonging. These questions included more detailed probing on institutional structures and their own behaviors which may have affected their sense of social and academic belonging. Below are themes that emerged from these questions during the focus groups. The themes that emerged across all groups are discussed first. Within each theme, we articulate items that both supported and hindered students' sense of belonging. Finally, themes from the three targeted populations are provided.

Themes Across All Groups

After identifying themes from the eight focus groups, we were able to classify them into four categories: overall campus climate, faculty and classroom interactions, campus resources and support staff, and social landscape. A summary of the things that support or hinder belonging for each of these categories can be found in Table 2, with more discussion and example comments provided in the sections below.

Table 2

Themes and Relationship to Belonging

Theme	Supports Belonging	Hinders Belonging
Campus Climate	Clear commitment to diversity; Small campus; Small classes; On campus employment.	Primarily commuter campus; Small, quiet campus; Many students are introverted and keep to themselves; Hard to make friends; Few spaces on campus to stay and connect with others.
Faculty and Classroom Interactions	Kind, understanding, and supportive faculty; Instructors who know names and see students as people; Courses that push students to think; Small classes; Passionate, engaging, interactive, and interesting faculty; Faculty who support both social and academic community, help students identify resources, and are responsive.	Courses that are too relaxed or not challenging; Courses that are too strict; Instructors who are discouraging when material is tough, not responsive to requests, and/or disorganized; Material that is not relevant.
Campus Resources and Support Services	A variety of resources available; Resources are helpful when accessed and are free/low-cost.	Some resources are hard to find, especially for first-generation students; Communication about resources can be confusing and/or overwhelming; Some staff are discouraging or gatekeeping; Many faculty don't know about campus resources
Social Landscape	Lots of events; Events are well-organized; Clubs provide ways to connect, especially those that relate to an identity or professional goal; Faculty notifying students about events	Lack of support for introverts; Timing/structure of events make it hard to participate; Too many communications make it hard to know what to pay attention to; Not knowing about events

Theme 1: Campus Climate

Students noted the importance of the campus climate on their sense of belonging. A clear campus

commitment to diversity provided them a greater sense of belonging. They also appreciated the small campus and class sizes because this supported a feeling of community. One student noted that they "like the community feel of the small class sizes, I'm not just a number."

On the other hand, the primarily commuter school aspect of UWB made it hard for students to connect with others as most students just come to class and then leave, rarely staying for other activities. One student noted "because I do not live on campus, it is hard to get to know people or meet them outside of class." If they wanted to stay, students indicated that there were not clear spaces for them to connect with others. One student noted that our campus "feels like a ghost town due to its small size and lack of liveliness," and another student recommended "Consider setting up a shared space for art supplies, music practice rooms etc. to bring students together."

Strikingly, many participants also noted that many of the students were introverted. Several had chosen the UWB campus because it was smaller than our sister flagship campus, and they felt it would be less overwhelming. However, these same students often kept to themselves which made it hard to meet new people or develop relationships. One student noted "I feel like I would have to go out of my way to meet people and have that social aspect," and another student commented that "Once you like do talk to people, you realize that everyone's thinking the same thing like - oh my god no one is social!"

Theme 2: Faculty and Classroom Interactions

The experience in the classroom and with faculty deeply impacts students' sense of belonging. Participants remarked on how important relationship with their classmates and professors significantly helped their sense of belonging, both socially and academically. Because of the small class sizes, professors were able to have deeper connections with students. As one student said "the professors care a lot more about their students and are willing to go out of their way to help them. The small classroom size allows us to feel comfortable asking questions and creating relationships with our professor." Another student emphasized the impact of their relationships with faculty by saying, "At times when I feel unsure of myself, especially when unsure about my future career, my professors have been helpful with guiding me to new directions and exploring different options." Classes where instructors are invested in the learning of their students increase academic belonging since the students feel comfortable asking for support when they need it.

On the other hand, a negative classroom experience can hinder belonging. Students reported strug-

gles with both ends of a spectrum of course experiences. If the course was too relaxed and not challenging, students reported feeling like the material was being dumbed down because they weren't good enough to be in college. However, if a course was too strict or if students felt discouraged when being presented with tough material, students reported feeling they weren't prepared and were intimidated to ask questions. One student noted "Some of the teachers are pretty difficult and it is hard to feel like you belong when you aren't understanding your classes!" Additionally, faculty who were disorganized and/or not responsive to students' needs also stifled feelings of belonging. One student reported:

> I had a professor once that completely did not care that I was hospitalized and couldn't make it to class. He would ignore my emails asking for help on the midterm then proceeded to fail me because I didn't use class notes. I feel like this experience has made me feel like I don't belong academically.

Theme 3: Campus Resources and Support Staff

Students' sense of belonging was impacted by campus resources and support staff. Students come from varied backgrounds and have a wide range of needs and struggles. Access to resources (e.g. tutoring, academic advising, legal services, financial aid, counseling services, career services, etc.) helped students feel like they belong and that they have the support to help them succeed. As described by one student, "Academically, I am constantly reminded that I have a lot of resources available to me to help me succeed, especially the tutoring." Another student described "I previously struggled to convert to a student visa and couldn't afford the lawyer fees. The legal services were professional and quick in helping me with the visa process, and the cost was so low it was almost free." Another student noted "my advisor helped me understand new goals to set for myself. I was able to plan out new classes I knew I would excel in and I felt like I belonged here." This wide range of support services is important for a diverse student body to succeed, and those resources need to be prepared and available.

However, a lack of student resources or limited knowledge about those services reduces students' feelings of belonging. When a student does not have the resources needed to stay in school, their feelings of engagement and sense of belonging decreases. This is indicated in one student's experience where they faced:

> barriers (hoops) we need to jump over as people of color. Not being accommodating to special needs or outside factors. Not providing resources or tools, we need to look for them, and it can be hard to

> locate. Not knowing where to begin or look, as a first-gen student.

Another student noted:

> You have to put in a lot of effort yourself… like the tutoring center and the Counseling Center… feel like they're both like really wise, but they're very out of the way, and they don't really advertise much

and another student added:

> sometimes there aren't clear hours to various services on campus and it's kind of hard to predict … one of the times that I came, they were like, Oh, we're closed because someone's doing like a blood drive. And I'm like, great.

This may reflect the limited resources and staffing often found on smaller campuses.

Theme 4: Social Landscape

Strong connections and positive social relationships are essential for developing a sense of belonging. Yet, social interaction needs can vary from student to student. Across all focus groups, respondents found that the easygoing campus culture with friendly students and professors increased feelings of belonging by creating an open environment for social connections. It was also important that there was a wide variety of events and that the events were well organized. One student commented "Socially, there are lots of events going on and they all seem very welcoming. Knowing that UWB puts effort into the social aspect of students helps me feel like I belong more." Students noted that being part of clubs related to a career interest or one of their identities supported their belonging. Another student noted "as an electrical engineer, IEEE has been a great club to join that makes me feel like I belong." Students also noted the importance of faculty pointing to key events and co-curricular activities. When faculty took the time to point these out, the students felt the faculty cared about them beyond the classroom, and the students also felt more like they belonged when they attended those events.

However, several things came up around social activities that hindered a sense of belonging. Respondents reported an overall confusion around events including a plethora of communications about activities which made it hard to know what to pay attention to. They also reported often not knowing about an event in time to participate or that events were not at convenient times. One student commented "So I kind of like

oh, I guess this is happening today. Yeah, well, like half the time I'm just walking out of class and really confused about an event … what's going on?" Respondents often felt like they did not know how to engage. Many of our respondents reported being introverts and feeling like they are not part of a particular group. One participant lamented:

> one thing I wish I had done was I wish I was more involved in clubs and like events on campus … What really kind of prevented me from doing these things was … I feel like not that many people like me go to the event.

Themes Across Latinx Groups

We hosted three focus groups with members of our Latinx student club. Their average self-rating of social belonging was lower than the overall average while their rating of academic belonging was about the same as the overall average for all students. In addition to the themes above, Latinx students described the impacts of attending a Predominantly White Institution and systemic barriers that impacted their sense of belonging. Latinx focus groups noted a lack of representation among UWB faculty, staff, and fellow students. Out of 334 professors at UWB, only 21 identify as Latinx. Only 3 out of 27 professional advisors identified as Latinx. Students reported that having professors, staff, and mentors who share their cultural background serves as a source of encouragement and support. One student noted that their "professor in the intro to Latin studies [course] have encouraged [them] to compare myself to my own experience no others." Another notable example was the impact of the faculty advisor for the club, a Latinx professor who provided guidance during office hours and offered personal support beyond academic advice. Students expressed that her support gave them a clear sense of direction and purpose in their academic pursuits. The absence of role models was linked to feelings of marginalization and a perceived lack of support for Latinx students' college journeys. This absence also compounded students' perceptions of invisibility and exclusion within the institution. One student noted "In regard to representation, there isn't a whole lot of Latino leaders or events that cater towards Latinos. I am a very social person and like to connect with others and there aren't a bunch of opportunities." Another student explicitly described UWB as a "*white school*," reflecting the perception that White and Asian students dominate the campus's social and academic environments. While this student acknowledged receiving adequate attention and support from most faculty members, the visual and demographic reality of the campus led her to feel isolated.

Latinx students also identified several systemic barriers that hinder Latinx students' sense of belonging and academic success including language differences, cultural misalignment, and financial challenges. Many Latinx students in the focus groups are also first-generation college students who navigate the complexities of higher education without family guidance. Their dual responsibilities of supporting their families and excelling in academic pursuits create significant stress. Financial pressures often require Latinx students to work part-time jobs, limiting their ability to engage in campus activities. One student said that "stress over making money to pay off for quarter [means] less time to hang out with friends."

Further, some students reported that the lack of religious spaces or opportunities for spiritual practice on campus contributed to their feelings of isolation. One student commented "Latino communities are incredibly social so I wish I knew more about opportunities because I would have been there," while another stated "I need to look for my community." Students suggested a dedicated space for Latinx students could serve as an anchor for them, offering a safe space for socialization, academic support, and cultural celebration.

Themes from ISS Student Group

The focus group recruited through the university's ISS office provided context for understanding international students' experiences. On average, participants reported lower social belonging than the overall sample, while their academic belonging ratings were comparable to those of other students. In addition to themes identified across all groups, international students described several factors that uniquely shaped their sense of belonging.

English language barriers were a challenge. One student explained that "language barriers make my studies more challenging and make it difficult to form deep friendships with my classmates," while another noted that "language barriers and lack of information prevents me from doing these things." These comments highlight how linguistic hurdles can affect both academic engagement and opportunities for meaningful connection.

Participants also described difficulties in building community on campus. As one student shared, "I just feel like nobody understands or can relate with me." Another pointed to structural constraints, observing that there are "limited offerings for on-campus employment and fewer opportunities for networking," which further restricted their ability to integrate.

Cultural differences shaped students' classroom experiences as well. One participant remarked, "Here professors expect students to have already read the material before coming to class, while colleges in my home country teach the syllabus to you in class." Another added, "My classes usually have more group work than what I have experienced before." These reflections underscore how differing academic norms and expectations can influence international students' sense of belonging within the institution.

Themes from DRS Student Group

The focus group recruited through the DRS office provided valuable insight into the experiences of students registered with DRS. On average, participants reported lower levels social belonging compared with the overall sample. Their levels of academic belonging were about the same. Notably, this group demonstrated particularly high engagement during the discussion, offering rich accounts of both supports and challenges.

Students emphasized that small class sizes, supportive faculty, and accessible student services were central to fostering their sense of belonging. One participant highlighted the role of cohort programs, noting that such initiatives not only provide academic support but also "allow us to link up with one another." At the same time, participants described the multiple responsibilities of work, family, and the ongoing process of navigating their accommodations as significant challenges. Limited course offerings and modalities further constrained their ability to access and fully engage in coursework.

Despite these barriers, this group consistently offered encouraging advice to peers. Students urged others to "just be yourself" and reassured them "not to worry and be themselves because they are definitely not alone." These affirmations reflect a collective effort to foster resilience and community among students registered with DRS.

Discussion

This study highlights several key insights about belonging at a primarily commuter RPU: First, faculty matter. Faculty interactions shape both academic and social belonging. This is particularly important on a primarily commuter campus where students' primary interaction with the institution is in the classroom. Faculty can foster students' sense of belonging by creating inclusive learning spaces, building relationships with students, and sharing resources and co-curricular opportunities with students.

Second, student resources and staff matter. Clear, accessible resources are essential for supporting diverse student needs. Students need to feel supported and have their basic needs met to feel a sense of belonging. Institutions can work at creating inclusive support resources and spaces, providing timely and free resources, and ensuring the support available is clear and easy to find.

Third, a sense of belonging varies across groups. The students on our campus are looking for community but not in the same way as students in other institutions such as flagship research universities. Institutions need to pay attention to their students' needs and design engagement opportunities that reflect the variety of student populations they serve such as introverted, neurodiverse, parenting, first-generation, Latinx, international, and commuter students. Identity-specific barriers such as lack of representation or cultural spaces require intentional institutional attention. Institutions need to recognize these diverse needs and support students in building community and accessing resources and events.

Conclusion

This study highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of student belonging. Students' own definitions of belonging extended beyond academic and social dimensions. They frequently described belonging in terms of factors directly tied to their overall success and wellbeing, including financial stress, outofschool commitments, and perceptions of how their identities were recognized within the campus community. These findings suggest that belonging is not only an outcome of success but also a condition shaped by broader structural and personal circumstances. This nuance builds on the current research that sees belonging as only an influencer for student success.

By focusing on a RPU with a primarily commuter student body, this research contributes to the understanding of commuter students' sense of belonging. This population is often overlooked in prior studies. Across all groups, students reported higher levels of academic belonging than social belonging which may be an indication of the commuter student experience. Commuter students report prioritizing an institution for academic opportunities over social opportunities. This study illustrates that what happens in the classroom, the primary point of contact for commuter students, deeply influences their sense of belonging. It is in these spaces that students meet peers, form connections, and experience the academic culture of the institution.

This study also expands knowledge of the sense of belonging for Latinx, students registered with

DRS, and international students. Each of these groups reported similar averages for academic belonging but consistently lower averages for social belonging compared with the overall student population. This nuanced difference suggests that identity may influence social belonging more strongly than academic belonging, a distinction not often emphasized in previous research.

As seen in other studies, faculty and staff relationships surfaced as important factors influencing belonging. However, our findings also highlight the realities of students' lived experiences. Time spent on campus, representation, cultural and linguistic barriers, financial pressures, and accessibility needs all play a critical role in shaping belonging for students. For commuter campuses, supportive faculty practices, intentional and accessible student resources, and attention to diverse student needs are essential to fostering both belonging and student success.

Students' descriptions of belonging were deeply interwoven with the supports and barriers that affect their college success. By addressing these interconnected factors, institutions can strengthen both students' sense of belonging and their academic success.

Future Research

Several avenues for future research emerge from this study. First, further exploration of classroom experiences is warranted to better understand what students expect in these spaces and how such expectations shape their sense of belonging and academic success. Future studies should also consider focusing on additional identity groups, including genderspecific cohorts, working students, firstgeneration students, racial or ethnic identity groups, and those pursuing specific degree pathways.

Similarly, parallel research with faculty would be valuable. Investigating how faculty understand student belonging and how those understandings are reflected in curriculum and pedagogy could highlight areas of disconnect between faculty intentions and student experiences. Identifying these gaps may inform professional development and institutional strategies aimed at aligning faculty practices with student needs.

Finally, the development of a survey instrument or similar tool informed by these qualitative findings could capture a broader range of student voices across campus and be used at other institutions. Such an instrument would allow for more systematic measurement and provide a foundation for longitudinal tracking of belonging and success.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the focus group sessions were not recorded. The absence of a full session transcript may limit the completeness and precision of the qualitative data. Although participants provided written responses to each prompt and facilitators took detailed notes, the lack of verbatim recordings means that conversational nuances, emergent ideas, and potentially meaningful interactions may not have been fully captured.

Second, the research was conducted at a single institution, which constrains the generalizability of the results. The institutional context may differ from those of other colleges and universities. As a result, the findings may not reflect the experiences of students in broader or more diverse educational settings.

Finally, the sample size (41 students) was relatively small. Participation in the study was voluntary and based on students' responses to advertising and outreach efforts. This introduces the possibility of self-selection bias, as students who opted to participate may differ systematically from those who did not. Consequently, the perspectives represented in the data may not fully capture the range of experiences present in the wider student population.

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How Does the Literature Conceptualise the Value of the Foundation Year within Higher Education Universities in England and Wales?

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Abstract

The foundation year forms part of the current higher education offer within many universities in England and Wales and was developed as a pathway to encourage wider participation. The foundation year is defined as ‘an additional year of study at the beginning of a higher education course (Department of Education, 2023). This article investigates the discussion contained in the literature to the extent of the value that the foundation year offers to students. The aim is to highlight the main values associated with the foundation year and this will be done through a systematic analysis of the literature around the perceived value of the foundation year. The main values extracted from the literature revolve around the notion of capital and learning and the article concludes that the perceived value of the foundation year varies depending on the lens and that real caution should be taken if we just focus on one value as being core.

Keywords: value, capital, Non-Traditional Learners, deficit, habitus, widening participation and social justice.

How Does the Literature Conceptualise the Value of the Foundation Year within Higher Education Universities in England and Wales?

When we talk about the value of something it is often hard to know what the parameters are and how different people view value. Within education it depends on the persons position within the process or organisation, and this will impact what they deem value to mean. When it comes to the value of the foundation year within universities in England and Wales this is equally hard to measure as is it to build the confidence and academic skills of students to study further or is it the economic value and the need to see a final product in the sense that these learners achieve a degree.

Kromydas (2017) envisioned 2 different values of higher education, one being instrumental such as by gaining a qualification and having higher earning potential and secondly being intrinsic which is based around social, cultural and emancipatory aspects. Clifford (2018) emphasises the difficultly in establishing value as she believes learners find it difficult to assess the true value of a course whilst they are studying it. This is because many of the benefits are unclear to the learner at the time and they also don't consider its future value as all the parameters to measuring value are not yet visible to them such as career progression and future earnings.

Sanders and Daly (2013) do express concern that higher education is now accessed by more students who may not be adequately prepared for study at this level and this in turn can impact on student retention and the individual students experience due to a lack of preparedness and these are often perceived as aspects of value within education. However, they did acknowledge that these alternative routes appealed to a range of learners who may not traditionally enter higher education as either they didn't achieve the required institutional grades for direct entry, they are mature learners returning to study or learners who require a specific skill for their future degree pathway and without these options they would have little or no chance of undertaking a degree. Therefore, these options could be viewed as a means of 'closing the gap' and Dodgson & Whitham (2004) believed foundation year courses appealed to 'non-traditional' students such as mature, first generation, part-time and those entering via vocational routes, whilst Peasgood (2003) emphasised the appeal of foundation years to low academic achievers. The dilemma here is, can this foundation year pathway help transform ineligible applicants into successful undergraduates.

Peck and Hussain (2024) form a strong argument within their research that the sole reason why the

foundation year exists is to address issues of social justice, so to challenge the status quo within higher education through equitable distribution. This suggests learners entering the foundation year are less confidence, lack certainty and their entitlement is notably different, so they therefore face disadvantage from traditional higher education structures and its culture as they try to navigate their way through university life (Reay et al, 2005).

Foundation year courses are therefore thought to help broaden access and participation particularly for underrepresented groups, so their increased availability and popularity is driven by egalitarian motivations. This in turn has led to increased competition amongst higher institutions as they introduce and expand their own foundation year offer to help generate additional revenue (Austen et al 2021). This appears another example of neoliberal ideas filtering into higher education as it allows students who have faced previous adversity entering education through non-traditional and new routes. Therefore, understanding its value to different stakeholders as well as learners appears a pertinent point and this is the focus of the article.

Exploring and examining the notion of value within the available literature appears to focus on notions of money, capital, habitus, building of academic skills, closing the deficit position and transitioning through higher education by building identity. The article has therefore been divided into 3 key areas that of value for money, value of capital and value of learning as these encapsulate all the notions above.

Review Method

This article adopts a narrative literature review to explore how the existing literature conceptualises the value of foundation years within higher education in England and Wales. A narrative approach was selected because the purpose of the review was to synthesise and critically examine conceptual understandings of value, rather than systematically evaluate intervention effectiveness or quantify outcomes (Grant & Booth, 2009).

The review focused primarily on literature published between 2015 and 2025 in recognition of the rapidly evolving policy landscape surrounding widening participation and foundation year provision. Earlier seminal works were also included where they provided important theoretical or policy context, particularly in relation to widening participation, student transition, and Bourdieu's concepts of *capital* and *habitus*. Given differences between national higher education systems, the review focused specifically on literature relating to foundation year provision within universities in England and Wales.

Literature was identified through searches of academic databases and Google Scholar. Initial searches centred on the terms *foundation year* and *value*, before expanding iteratively to include *widening participation*, *transition*, *capital*, *habitus* and *higher education* as these concepts emerged repeatedly within the literature. The search identified a core body of literature directly addressing foundation years, supported by additional literature relating to widening participation, student transition and educational inequality that provided broader theoretical and policy context.

Sources were selected according to their relevance to the review question and their contribution to understanding how value is conceptualised by different stakeholders. Studies were included where they explicitly addressed foundation year provision, widening participation, student transition or the conceptualisation of value within higher education. Following iterative reading and comparison of the literature, recurring conceptual patterns were identified and organised into three overarching themes: value for money, value of capital and value of learning. These themes provide the analytical structure for the discussion presented in this article.

As a narrative review, the intention is not to provide an exhaustive systematic review of all published literature. However, the article offers a critical synthesis of the principal debates that currently shape understandings of the value of foundation years within higher education in England and Wales.

Value for Money

The first emerging theme from the literature revolves around the notion of value for money. The notion that value is assessed in purely a transactional way does somewhat limit the scope to how we view and define value within education, however this narrow notion of value has gained some traction within the marketisation of higher education (Furedi, 2010 & O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). This notion of value does appear to be supported by regulatory legislation in this area, as The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 appears to focus on monetary value as the act looks to improve 'economy, efficiency and effectiveness within the higher education sector'.

A survey by the Higher Education Policy Institute (2017) reported that only 35% of students felt their university course offered good value for money against the backdrop that most undergraduate students leave university with substantial debt (Coughlan, 2017). This fixation on monetary value does however ignore some of the other positive values that higher education brings to the wider society and somewhat narrows the way we judge value. For instance, it ignores the wider benefits that higher education brings to

individual lives that is non-monetary and this can only be detrimental to people's general views of higher education within modern society when its value is measured in monetary ways. Apple (2001) states the marketisation of higher education is also problematic as associated discourses such as performativity encourages both self-interest and entrepreneurial values being established in educational institutions as they look to make money at the expense of other higher education institutions.

This narrower nation of value for money has led to the Department of Education (2019) and the Welsh Government (2016) deeming those doing courses that incorporate a foundation year as not offering 'value for money' and this general notion of seeing learners as consumers is again problematic as it's often hard to define what the actual product is within learning. Philip Augar's (2019) review of post-18 education funding went as far as concluding that foundation level courses where 'poor value for money' and should have their funding withdrawn. The main justification for this is that they are seen as a more costly alternative to access and foundation degrees often offered in colleges as foundation level courses often carry the maximum tuition fees, unlike the alternatives offered in further education institutions. Even though these calls for withdrawing funding for foundation level courses where not adopted by the government, performance measurements have since been brought in by the Office for Students meaning universities could be penalised if they do not meet certain targets around retention, progression and employment. This notion obviously causes growing concerns within the sector as the removing of this funding in the future could adversely impact upon access routes to higher education for disadvantaged groups.

Clifford (2022) challenged the whole notion of value for money as to whether this was a primary concern by foundation level learners, as in her research it was barely mentioned by the students involved. Conversely, as Clifford (2022) points out a large proportion of learners didn't initially apply for the foundation year so are in fact being asked to fund an additional year, but they didn't feel that this additional financial burden was a key issue unlike the view taken by policymakers. She concluded that monetary issues are not a primary concern for learners, and they view value in a different context such as the growth in self-confidence, self-awareness and resilience. For many learners because of their current grades or personal circumstances the foundation year offers them their only realistic opportunity into university (Walker and Zhu, 2013). Hinton-Smith (2012) does point out that learners from non-traditional backgrounds who undertake this route into higher education appear to be more debt-averse and this could be down to either a general lack of knowledge and communication or just a general acceptance of the costs that are associated with higher education.

This notion of monetary value does appear imperative to the government and has led to recent changes within the sector such as a cap on tuition fees for the foundation year and greater regulation via the office for students but it is recognised from the wider literature that this notion of monetary value is not necessarily a key factor for the learners undertaking these foundation years as they look to develop themselves and their identity and this is where the value is. The development of the notion of capital appears to be what is valued and demanded from the foundation year learners, and this will be explored in the next section.

Value of Capital

There is clear statistical evidence that non-traditional students are increasing in numbers within higher education as institutions increase their own foundation provision to help increase their financial capital unfortunately there appears little strategic planning from these institutions on how to meet the specific needs of the learners, they attract (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). This approach has led to much criticism as it can be deemed as a 'tokenistic' approach by higher education institutions to address the widening participation agenda by increasing the numbers of previously under-represented and non-traditional groups (Hinton-Smith, 2012).

Marshall (2016) felt that non-traditional learners were already at a disadvantage as they often lacked cultural capital. Indicating that these learners must also learn the cultural skills associated with universities such as the language and traditions of academia in additional to the standard academic skills required. These learners often work harder to succeed and to gain recognition and acceptance within the institution from both academic staff and fellow learners. Where students come from families who have a good understanding of the demands of university they can effectively support and encourage their close relations by passing on their own knowledge and experiences (Groves & O'Shea, 2019). Therefore, being a first-generation student can put them at a capital deficit, and it is recognised that higher education is not a level playing field as the more capital you have the more advantages you initially receive (Bourdieu, 1991). Bourdieu (1991) pointed out that students from more privileged and traditional backgrounds had been socialised in the norms and expectations of education, so found it easier to navigate the educational system including higher education as they already have the knowledge and communication styles that are valued.

Children who have parents who have attended university are likely to have gained some capital before coming to university as their parents will share their own knowledge about university education and

its customs (Bourdieu, 2011). However, Green (2013) criticises Bourdieu concepts as he felt that capital and habitus are determined purely by education structures and every individual student has very little agency here so must adapt to the institutions culture and processes quickly in-order to survive. This argument by Green appears logical as no two universities will have the exact same structure and parents who have been to university may have been to a different university than the one their child has chosen so there is only so much capital they can bestow upon their children in advance.

Foundation year students can initially lack academic confidence because of their habitus being derived from previous unsuccessful or negative educational experiences but with habitus being a fluid concept it can change as they start to interact in their higher education environment (James et al, 2015). Foundation year learners can habitually lack social capital when entering higher education as they often lack mutual support, reciprocal relationships, co-operation and trust (Putnam, 2000). The research conducted by James et al (2015) asserts that widening participation students can easily shift this habitus as they become accomplished independent learners and grow in confidence within their academic field. Higher education habitus can therefore be developed through learning new cultural skills, social skills and dispositions, so the need to support foundation year students is critical as they progress through their course, and learner identities are not fixed but socially constructed by others so can change quickly within an educational setting (Lawler, 2014). The hope is that by the end of the foundation year these learners view their identity differently by moving from a deficit position of lacking (Gibson et al, 2019) to one of optimism and confidence for future degree studies. Gibson et al (2019) referred to this as a student-centred perspective with which they grew in self-belief towards their ability to navigate the challenges found within the university environment.

This notion was seen in Webber's (2023) research as one of her subjects clearly had a change of habitus and disposition on how she thought about herself. She moved from a deficit self-view to a positive self-perspective as she developed capital through academic skills development and understanding the university processes. This research by Webber (2023) appears to be in line with an aspect of an earlier study by Sanders and Daly (2013) that stated foundation year students initially felt a lower status as they didn't feel like proper students, but as they received a good level of challenge from their studies this aided them in changing their own habitus and status as they became 'academically able'. Webber's (2023) studies contend that foundation year students get the opportunity to develop a unique change in their habitus as they build a new academic identity around self-belief, self-achievement, self-confidence and self-awareness and this rais-

es their own expectations as to what is possible (Raey 2004). This helps to show a clear distinction between foundation year students and traditional entry students as foundation year learners have started to acquire cultural capital through increased confidence and competence prior to starting the degree element of the course. Webber (2023) claims that foundation year learners are at an advantage as they have had extra time at university to allow them to experience university life, both socially and academically which helps them overcome certain perceived barriers and this is of great value to them.

Foundation year students can also lack economical capital those constraining them in being fully involved in university life, but a more significant concern here is the sense of them feeling like they are in an alien environment as that they don't think they fit as these places are traditionally perceived as middle to upper-class environments (Reay et al 2009). With foundation year courses becoming an increasing means by which working class students enter higher education this can be problematic due to multiple and mutually reinforcing obstacles found in universities such as linguistic, behaviour and how you present yourself, this can lead to a negative perception that they could be rejected by people within the institution and learners from different backgrounds to themselves (Hale, 2020).

Borgonovi (2012) believed good attendance at university did help to increase a person's cultural capital and increase the general acceptance and understanding of those from varied backgrounds and cultures. This further helps the learner to develop 'self' and gain a genuine sense of authenticity and 'becoming' (Barnett, 2007) and Sanders and Daly (2013) believed that this sense of student identity develops throughout the learner's studies and there is a clear 'will' 'motivation' and 'belief' for foundation learners to learn and become higher education students (Barnett, 2007). This encourages them to feel a sense of their own agency (Ellery & Baxen, 2015) and furthermore those who invest their time completing and attending the course are likely to feel invested in the experience helping them to overcome any initial fragility when it comes to their identity (Sanders & Daly, 2013). Tinto (2017) believed that a student's motivation to persist and succeed is also strongly influenced by their individual goals, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, perceptions of value and the relevance of the curriculum to them, so these factors shouldn't be ignored as to their significance.

The growth of academic capital helps build a more positive view of 'self' whilst a person's level of self-esteem can help to improve their academic skills so these two appear intrinsically linked together (Kahu et al, 2022). The initial foundation year before learners start the degree can therefore be a good opportunity

to acclimatise students to the etiquette, processes, procedures and norms associated with higher education learning and this helps to bridge the capital gap as students forge connections within their institution in practical, academic and social terms (Putnam, 2000). This again appears to be backed up by Saunders and Daly's (2013) study as by the end of the first year of the degree there was no difference in the average grades of foundation year learners compared to traditional entry route students. Putnam (2000) used the concept of bonding capital to help explain how foundation year learners develop 'self' during their initial year as they saw other students on the foundation year as 'their group' and this connection to students from similar backgrounds and situations to themselves helped them to participate in university life and helped bond them as a group.

Within Law & Sheen's (2024) study, students felt a sense of superiority because of their foundation year experience compared to those who just entered via the undergraduate route but there was still a sense of stigma when trying to form an identity as an undergraduate student. Briggs et al (2012) argues that non-traditional students are essential to university success, and this can be seen as navigational capital as these students have benefitted from advanced knowledge around culture and practices of higher education (O'Sullivan et al, 2019). This adds further weight to the argument that foundation programmes are effective with regards to meeting the widening participation agenda as they produce students capable of achieving a good final degree. From Hale's (2020) research around practitioner's views on the advantage of the foundation year there was a consensus that these students were 'leaps and bounds' ahead and had not just 'caught up' but had gained significant advantage over direct entry peers at the start of the undergraduate degree. Some of the reasoning behind this was that they were more likely to access additional support if they were experiencing difficulties and they understood how everything worked such as getting around the campus and understanding the university systems. They were also more prepared academically through the academic skills they had developed such as around referencing and presenting assessed work.

The capital gained from the foundation year appears linked to the individual level of student transformation and students clearly define 'value' in many ways including qualitative ones such as building personal networks and developing leadership skills (Weatherton & Schussler, 2021). These foundation students are positioned differently compared to traditional students in the sense of their increased academic confidence, scholarly dispositions and networking and these themes are associated with the wider argument of social justice (Peck & Hussain, 2024). As Hale (2020) established in her study the foundation year can

help to address issues of social justice as it provides opportunities and access for people who wouldn't otherwise enter higher education. The foundation year can therefore be seen as important means of promoting the social justice agenda within higher education by providing entry routes for the less privileged even when faced with institutional indifference (Hale 2020). Sanders et al (2016) highlights the importance that individual university lecturers and the institution can play in finding ways of instilling a sense of belonging in these types of learners as these learners progress through their studies. Scanlon et al (2007) suggests that if key teaching staff appear inaccessible to students it is difficult for students to develop the social capital and institutional habitus needed to succeed. The selection of teaching staff and personal tutors to deliver on the foundation year is therefore key and their continued involvement with foundation learners as they progress through the early stages of the degree shouldn't be underestimated.

Thomas (2002, p 430) saw institutional habitus as 'a set of dispositions created and shaped by the interaction between objective structures and personal histories.' Pitman and Vidovitch (2013) sees this capital as both tangible and intangible which does allow some agents within the field to dominate others and students who don't develop institutional habitus quickly become demotivated and are hard to retain. Gale & Parker (2014) contend that developing cultural, social and academic capital is crucial for students to develop institutional habitus and a sense of belonging. Institutional habitus is therefore important to establish and develop as it is seen as a constantly evolving process allowing students to overcome the challenges of university by helping them to become more resilient and build their own individual identity (Thomas, 2002; Leese, 2010; & Pitman & Vidovitch 2013).

The value of capital development appears important to foundation learners in helping them grow and succeed within higher education and in meeting the social justice agenda. It is likely to be something they can't measure or appreciate at the true as this value is often something established later when the learner reflects back on their educational journey. For learners the greatest value appears to be the value of learning and building learning relationships which is easier to measure and can be seen in real time, and this will be explored in the final section.

Value of Learning

If learners arrive at university unprepared for higher education learning this has ramifications on attendance, attainment and progression. Universities do therefore have a moral duty to guard against these ad-

verse effects and support learners through their studies (Havergal, 2021). One of the main ways universities can apply this moral duty through the foundation year is to prepare and equip learners with the necessary skills and knowledge for them to perform as undergraduate learners, so this notion needs to be at the heart of the curriculum for this level of study.

This notion is often reflected in the initial foundation year by having a practical based academic skills unit incorporated into the programme. As Huber et al (2021) stated 'learning by doing' can have particularly strong results as opposed to simply being told how to do something. This is often reflected in the foundation year as creative learning pedagogies around methods and practice are put in place to facilitate and encourage learning. Smaller group teaching which is often associated with foundation courses also helps create an environment for learning where peer support is nurtured and facilitated as attention is given to every learner (Walton 1997). This permits learners to feel more comfortable and grow in confidence as well as building close relationships with other foundation learners. This appears to be backed by Law & Sheens (2024) study as students felt a clear sense of community within the foundation year due to the smaller cohort sizes and this facilitated the development of good internal support networks as students knew each other and could approach each other for help and guidance. These networks often continue when they start undergraduate study as they would continue to group together and support each other.

Wilcox et al (2005) within their research recognised the development of social relationships at university as being highly beneficial and an important source of emotional support when faced with stressful situations and recognised that the inability to socially integrate with peers impacts on retention and achievement. This means universities need to consider how they can build or enhance peer networks particularly when foundation year learners progress onto undergraduate studies. Berger et al (2012, p7) defined retention as 'the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission through graduation'. Wilcox et al (2005) recognise several factors that shape the way institutions address retention issues, and these include the students themselves, the campus / learning space, the educator's role, current socioeconomic conditions and policies and interventions at a local level. All these factors need to be considered by the institution when looking to support, navigate and guide foundation year learners and they all need to be considered within the initial course planning stage.

Tierney and Slack (2005) recognised the difficulty foundation year learners faced by having to

balance outside life pressures, meaning undertaking a university course often brought additional anxieties, they also recognised that good guidance and support networks can ease this pressure and help to retain learners. McFarlane (2016) emphasised the importance of clear guidance and support from a designated personal tutor at foundation year level in enhancing their educational experience. A recognised advantage of the foundation year route compared to other university courses is the level of support made available for learners with additional learning needs and older learners who often require additional assistance to succeed (Marshall, 2016 & Mallman & Lee, 2017).

From Clifford's (2022) study, foundation year learners clearly recognised the value of this level of support and how additional needs are supported to allow learners to become degree ready. Mallman & Lee (2017) identified that this additional support can come from a range of sources such as student peer groups, the personal tutor and people outside the organisation such as life partners and friends who have a transient connection to higher education. Lagrosen et al (2004) felt the subject expertise of lecturers along with their individual ability to understand the needs and support foundation year students require within the classroom was a clear benefit and of great value to the institution as this ultimately leads to increased retention. Therefore, the structure and rationale of any foundation year needs to challenge the deficit framework associated with such students as they can be deemed to lack prior achievement and knowledge (Dampier et al, 2019). In terms of higher education this means the curriculum should be centred around developing both essential academic skills and addressing discipline-specific content as this is deemed necessary to succeed at undergraduate level. There is an expectation for all higher education students to function with a considerable level of independence, self-reliance and autonomy so it is all too easy to blame the student when they do fail, instead of casting a more critical lens on the educational system and structures in place. (Sarsar, 2008).

Sanders and Daly (2013) felt the main aim of foundation year courses was to prepare the students for their degree by equipping them with essential skills such as building confidence and giving them a taste of higher education. According to O'Sullivan et al (2019) study they found that students on a foundation year pathway felt their academic skills, confidence and ability had increased by the end of year. Sanders and Daly (2013) recognised from their student survey feedback and progression data that foundation students who entered undergraduate study were at least on par with the rest of the cohort. Hence, one of the main values seen from the foundation year is the ability to provide students with opportunities to learn how to learn, therefore becoming self-directed and independent learners who can manage and control their learning (Hub-

bard, 1994). Hubbard (1994) argues that students entering higher education are not yet independent learners so need to be trained on how to develop these skills such as how to find materials or documents linked to their lectures and wider studies. When they do start to become independent learners Hubbard (1994) posits their motivation towards learning increases. The recurrent problem here is that foundation year students start in a traditional position of deficit where they purely depend on their lectures and lecturers to learn as they currently have a limited understanding of the notion of independent learning in terms of their own role within the learning journey and the associated value of being independent (Sam et al, 2012) and this is what the foundation year needs to address from the onset.

Conclusion

It appears from the literature that the notion of value is interpreted differently by different stakeholders. For example, policymakers tend to prioritise "value for money," viewing foundation years as measurable mechanisms to reduce historic attainment gaps and improve retention among non-traditional learners, this is reflected in the regulatory role of the Office for Students. Universities, meanwhile, expand their foundation provision to increase undergraduate recruitment and revenue, reflecting neoliberal market pressures and, at times, a tokenistic commitment to widening participation.

For actual learners, value is more personal and developmental. Students place more emphasis on increasing confidence, resilience, academic skills and preparedness for degree-level study rather than value for money. Many foundation learners feel at an advantage when progressing to undergraduate study because they better understand university systems and expectations so recognise the foundation year as critical to successful transition and progression.

The literature identifies three dominant themes of value: value for money; development of individual capital and the value of learning. The concept of capital draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1991), highlighting the importance of social, cultural and academic capital in supporting student success. Of these themes, learners strongly identify with the intrinsic value of learning and personal growth above all. This appears in direct conflict with universities who see the value of the foundation year as a platform to increase student numbers and cashflow in a hyper competitive market. This therefore presents challenges around the future direction of foundation years, and debate still surrounds whether widening participation pathways are best delivered in universities or further education colleges. While some argue colleges are better suited to

support non-traditional learners, foundation years in universities have expanded significantly, suggesting the perceived prestige of university study remains influential.

This article highlights the need to move beyond narrow economic measures of value to include the value of wellbeing, identity formation and long-term outcomes. For foundation years to offer real value they should prioritise capital-building, academic skill development, confidence and belonging and institutions should embed mentoring, smaller cohort models, inclusive pedagogy and early intervention strategies to achieve this. Finally, foundation years within universities should position themselves as spaces for transition, empowerment and social justice rather than solely working within the value constraints of recruitment or revenue-generation.

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“May I Sit Here?”: An Examination of Anti-Blackness and Othering of Black Campus Stakeholders in a Post-DEI World

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Abstract

"May I sit here*?*" It is generally a common courtesy that a stranger would extend to another stranger in a room, on a train, on a bus, or at a table. It is the stranger's way of acknowledging that someone preceded them in the space and an ask for the ability to also be seated. It is not aggressive or presumptive, and it displays in most cases a quiet humility. When Black people enter higher education institutions [PWIs specifically] it is with the hope of acceptance and the wish to be welcomed. This article explores the experiences of eight Black campus stakeholders who share similar and different identities that often leave them asking "May I sit here?" and being told that their earned "seat" is no longer accessible or welcomed in the room because of anti-DEI initiatives. Applying a *BlackCrit* (Dumas & ross, 2016) lens to the experiences of the campus stakeholders in this article allows for the opportunity to critically assess the impact that this new abnormal has on their lives.

Keywords: BlackCrit, higher education, anti-Blackness, PWIs, campus stakeholders

"May I Sit Here?" An Examination of Anti-Blackness and Othering of Black Campus Stakeholders in a Post-DEI World

Purpose and Research Question

The intention of the study that produced this article was to shine a light on the way that institutions perform diversity without having any real intention to create systemic change. Majority white institutions of higher learning benefit (See: Derrick Bell and *interest convergence*) from having Black faculty and staff on their payroll and Black students enrolled at their institutions but do not do enough to retain, sustain, and support them. The study explored what this lived experience feels like from the perspective of the Black stakeholders who are most impacted by it.

The research question that guided this manuscript was: How do Black campus stakeholders make sense of anti-Blackness and othering in a post-DEI world?

Historical Exclusion at PWIs

In his text, *A History of American Higher Education (2004, 2011, 2019),* Dr. John R. Thelin makes it a point to say the quiet part out loud. Thelin (2019) acknowledges through his historical re-telling of the time periods that shaped American higher education that higher learning was solely created for white cis-gender men. Higher education as an American concept focused solely on the centering of white men and could not conceive of the idea that those whom they enslaved, stole land from, and those they later married would ever share this sacred space with them (Thelin, 2019). White southerners were also so afraid of their children returning home with Northern [anti-slavery] ideals that they built institutions in the South with the expressed intention of upholding anti-Black ideologies (Thelin, 2019). Higher education's insistence on being white and male was not just an issue in 2023 or 2026; it was the intention from the beginning.

One such college, Mary Sharp College, located in Winchester, Tennessee, was instrumental in educating white women college students on the ideas of southern pride and pious living (Gage-Reifsteck, 2022). Patriarchy and this specific period did not allow for southern white women to have an expansive outlook on gender or anti-slavery politics. Keeping their daughters in the south was to make certain that they remained committed to evangelical southern Christianity (Gage-Reifsteck, 2022). Northern liberal ideals, an outsider perspective, as stated by Gage-Reifsteck (pg. 32), would contend with and bump against these southern

institutions. White women's role, as the womb of white supremacy was to never break their allegiance to white supremacists' ideologies.

Since higher education was created during a time when white people did not have to conceptualize a world where the Black people they enslaved would be free; its framework is deeply anti-Black. For those same patriarchal centered values that makes higher education anti-Black it is also deeply anti-woman. Higher education and more pointedly academia forces Black people and women to [see also: Black and woman or femme] shapeshift themselves into unknown versions of themselves so they might have a seat (Engram, 2025). Engram (2025) argues that the overworking of themselves to be considered worthy of the space that they take in higher education is in many cases a death sentence. The mere idea that you belong in a space with or without the acceptance and permission of whiteness and white people is a destination that not many non-whites will ever arrive to. It requires you to think of yourself in ways that may or may not be deemed acceptable by the higher education in-group and you must make peace with that. This next section discusses the selected theoretical framework BlackCrit as conceptualized by Dumas & ross (2016).

BlackCrit as a Measure of Understanding Anti-Blackness

BlackCrit [Black Critical Theory], like various critical theories, is used to address discrimination aimed squarely at folks marginalized because of their identities, in this instance, Blackness. Born from critical race theory (CRT) and the work of early thinker and legal scholar, Derrick Bell and many others, CRT is used to help us explicitly understand how Black people experience discrimination within the law. However, BlackCrit picks up exactly where CRT left off, and that is directly analyzing the role of anti-Blackness in education and the daily lived experiences of Black folks (Dumas & ross, 2016). Dumas & ross (2016) are intentional about naming the specificity of anti-Blackness within education and how Black bodies become marginalized, disregarded, and disdained in schools and other spaces of education.

Anti-Blackness is a normal everyday occurrence much like racism as posited by both Bell (1985) and Engram (2023), and appears in every facet of life. Particularly in academic spaces where Black people are larger in number within the student body but fewer in number in terms of faculty and staff. Anti-Blackness like white supremacy is systemic and widespread and shows up in various forms that far exceed the use of the n-word. According to Engram (2023,2025), anti-Blackness is visible in the absence of proper nutrition and access to nutrient rich foods, internet deserts, public transportation or lack thereof, struggling and failing

schools, over policing and surveilance, and *pushout* (Morris, 2016) via the school-to-prison pipeline. Anti-Blackness is also present within implicit and explicit bias in terms of *fatphobia, xenophobia, transphobia, homophobia, texturism, and colorism* (Engram, 2023/2025). It is without a doubt one of the most violent acts of terror that approaches, invades, and cements itself anywhere Black people are present.

BlackCrit is intentional about fully employing the counterstories of Black experiences of cultural and structural racisms (Dumas & ross, 2016). This theory is intentional about providing for us language that richly captures how anti-Blackness constructs Black subjects, and positions them in and against policy, law, and civic-everyday life (Dumas & ross, 2016). This is precisely what Black folks experience within instances of othering and exclusion while at PWIs in any stakeholder role (faculty, staff, and student). This is evidenced by the attack on higher education and the shuttering of academic programs like Black/African American Studies. Institutions that barely supported Black Studies were quick to offer them up as programs recommended for discontinuance. At the time of this article, the following institutions have ended, or are planning to, end their Black Studies/African American Studies programs:

-University of Louisville (Allen, 2026).

-East Carolina University (JBHE, 2025).

-Kennessaw State University (Suggs, 2025).

In addition to the canceling of these programs, the consolidation of others, and the renaming of departments and programs, the anti-Black attack has been relentless and impacts the lives of real people. People who have always been pushed into the margins due to their racialized status are now being othered in their campus stakeholder roles without remorse. There is much consenus among the cited scholars in this work that chattel slavery continues to have longterm consequences on American life and on America as a whole (Warren, Coles, & Jenkins, 2026). Warren et al., (2026) state the following:

> Such revelation renders Black suffering a permanent condition of American schooling. And despite waves of structural change in America toward racial justice [Civil Rights Act; Voting Rights Act], there is a modern day research imperative that scholars continue pursuing novel research approaches that probe the enigma of Black (in)humanity and Black (de)humanization.

Anti-Blackness is entrenched into the social construct that is America and is thus the American way. This

understanding provides us both the clarity of interpreting the lived experiences of Black campus stakeholders and the directions for how to disrupt the embedded white supremacist influence. This next section reviews the origins of DEI, the stance against it, and their impact on white college campuses.

Anti-DEI Rhetoric and the [white] College Campus

DEI was not coined by Black scholars. It was largely instituted by well-intentioned white folks like Lewis Brown Griggs who coined the terms "*diversity*" and "*equity*" in the early 80s (Hays-Thomas, 2017). It was an attempt to play nice with their racist colleaugues by asking them to allow non-white people into educational and professional spaces. It is also why their version of DEI in may ways is performative and that is because it does not actually require of white people to give up anything. Disruptive DEI on the other hand is the intentional disruption of white-centering and calls upon all of us to be mindful of how we engage and whom we invite into the space (Engram, 2023). It implores us to ask the hard questions when hiring faculty, admitting students, or accepting invitations to be seated at certain tables. I have a hard and fast rule to not ever accept an invitation to an all male-panel, where the intended audience is not all males. I will request that the organizer find a woman of color to join me before I officially accept.

The attack on DEI and the false belief that people of color who are included in any space being because of affirmative action is laughable. Black people and people of color are all largely taught to be twice as good (Engram, 2025) and that core value alone drives most of those it is assigned to, to be far better than great. Average is not sufficient and that unneccessary burden plagues even the best of us while our white colleaugues' mediocrity is uplifted, centered, and revered. Campus climate surveys are administered year after year and then the data from the findings is largely hidden because of the responses of non-white campus stakeholders. Racialized instances are common on PWI campuses (Briscoe, 2022), and are often swept under the rug as to not raise red flags about the institutions poor efforts to combat anti-Black, anti-immigrant, and anti-woman sentiments.

One of the greatest pushes to move college campuses away from their DEI efforts was so white males could feel welcomed again (Hopke, 2022). I fail to see when and where they were ever excluded. The hypocrisy of whiteness and white maleness is that it intentionally excludes everyone else who is then forced to find and create their own spaces. At which point, white men then complain about being excluded from the spaces they forced into existence because of their beliefs, values, and ideological foolishness. Forced inte-

gration in the 60s and 70s post the *Brown v. Board* decision did not produce a healthy, multicultural climate at PWIs (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022). Black students and students of color recollect dealing with the harm of white students and faculty then and now (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022). Even when PWIs host and promote events that suggest their efforts at inclusion are meaningful, hostility remains normative (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022).

The anti-DEI push amid a second Trump term made it abundantly clear how deeply embedded this ideology is on white college campuses. Trump quite literally made it socially acceptable for HEIs to be unapologetically white supremacists. Black students, faculty, and staff are underrepresented at institutions that are historically and/or predominately white, which results in Black hypervisibility (Elise & Walkington, 2024). Narratives arising out of these institutions constantly demean Black intellect and intentionally devalue contributions from Black campus stakeholders accompanied by anti-Black aggressions which serve to create hostile campus environments (Elise & Walkington, 2024). Offices and Black counterspaces [Black student union, Black faculty and staff associations, and Black Male/Female Initiatives] are now non-existent or being sued out of existence from white supremacists' groups like SFFA.

As university administrators cower under the perceived threat of the Trump administration, they are also sending a very loud message to their Black campus stakeholders, you are not welcomed. The lack of support and *"*allyship*"* is why scholars like me feel deeply that we have moved beyond it. This current period proves that all of the discussion about the racial reckoning of 2020 was all performative. Much of the equity work that HEIs committed to in 2020 has fallen flat. When critical scholars called much of what we saw occurring post-2020 performative (Engram & Mayer, 2023) we were called unsatisfied or told *"*it's a start*"* as a way of quelling what we felt. As if our understanding of history was not sufficient enough to understand what follows a time of feel-good changes that are only surface level, yet not codified. This next section focuses on how adminstrations within HEIs can either help or hinder inclusion initiatives.

Administration as a Help or Hindrance to Inclusion

Higher education institutions [HEIs] are uniquely positioned to transform society. Wherever academia goes and how academia solves societal problems largely impacts the direction of human social and intellectual mobility. This is precisely why the Trump administration has focused its efforts on attacking HEIs accused of being progressive. The Trump administration prefers an uneducated and docile underclass

full of non-whites. It is also why the capitulation of HEIs and namely PWIs is so insidious. HEIs are presented with the opportunity to shapeshift society into productive, meaningful, and morally righteous people and they are failing to do so in this season. The deinstitutionalization of DEI and *affirmative action* has worsened the campus climate and it's not white people who are negatively impacted on the front end(Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022).

Under the threats of this current administration PWIs have begun removing their commitments to DEI although many did not have these commitments prior to 2020 (Engram & Mayer,2023; Engram, 2023; Engram, 2024). The Trump administration exposed many PWIs who were never actually committed to DEI in the first place as many of them mounted no resistance to the anti-Black, anti-woman, and xenophobic rhetoric of his administration. Faculty, staff, and students are being told that it is not in the institution's best interests to publicly support them right now as they do not want to end up on the radar of this administration (Binkley, 2025). However, what the institution is also saying in their refusal to stand up is that they *also* support his rhetoric. My own institution told us during a faculty senate meeting that it was removing its DEI commitments from the website but also allowed a Turning Point USA interest meeting to occur on campus that same semester.

Turning Point USA is a right-wing organization created by now-deceased, Charlie Kirk. It is an organization that intentionally spewed hate-centered rhetoric aimed at those most marginalized on college campuses using religious sycophant talking points. How can any institution consider itself a safe space for marginalized campus stakeholders if they allow hate speech to run rampant under the guise of free speech? Telling white men that you cannot target already othered campus stakeholders does not infringe on their ability to exist in the space as white men it does however preclude them from terrorizing others for simply not being a cishet white male. The university administration has far more authority in these matters than they like to admit. White male students, white administrators, and white faculty alike have through their white demography shaped the lacking diversity, racial climate, and all the racial issues that we still face today (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022). We do ourselves no favors by waxing poetic about this historic and contemporary truth.

HEIs operate as sites of disenfranchisement for campus stakeholders of color who suffer intense affective experiences—of misery, rejection, and isolation reflecting of their colleges' structure (Bonilla-Silva

& Peoples, 2022). The overrepresentation of white faculty, staff, and administration further creates an environment that feels less welcoming (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022). In many cases, majority white faculty, staff, and administrations are not making intentional strides to diversify their campuses because they benefit from anti-Blackness. The absence of non-white people further feeds into their comfort and allows for white supremacist ideologies to become normalized. No space that is majority white can be considered anti-racist because the intentional overwhelmingly white space has no reason to consider the needs of others which is inherently racist.

Rodgers & Liera (2023) critique the racial capitalism employed by HEIs in their attempt to create the vision of diversity without the required commitment which ultimately leaves Black campus stakeholders feeling exploited. Administrators at HEIs, and specifically at PWIs, owe their non-white campus stakeholders authentic and unwavering support regardless of who is the leader of the free world. Commitments to including non-white people into HEIs must not be contingent upon white people being in a good mood to accept Blackness. Administrative neglect regarding issues that impact Black campus stakeholders is how HEIs continue to perpetuate anti-Black racism and white supremacy through various organizational practices and structures (Diamond & Gomez, 2023). The disruption of these practices is the direct responsibility of HEI administrators and that action must be intentional as well as direct in order eradicate anti-Blackness on campus. This next section addresses how through the application of the qualitative method of IPA (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014) the Black lived experience operates as a tool for practice [*praxis*] for eliminating anti-Blackness on white campuses.

Black Lived Experience as *Praxis* for Eliminating Anti-Blackness at PWIs

As a qualitative researcher, I care more about the lived experience of the participants rather than whether their experience is generalized. I would go further to argue that the assumption that for an experience to matter it must be generalizable is anti-Black and antithetical to liberatory scholarship. To best situate the textual narratives of the participants in the study that guides this article, I employed an *interpretative phenomenological analysis*, which focuses on how individuals make sense of their experiences (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014). This approach allows participants to be actively engaged in *sense-making,* interpreting the objects, events, and people in their lives (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014). To examine this process, IPA draws upon the fundamental principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014).

Edmund Husserl developed phenomenology as an eidetic method because it is concerned with attending to the way things appear to individuals in their experience (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014). In short, it aims at identifying the essential components of phenomena or experiences which make them unique or distinguishable from others (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014). Phenomenology studies therefore focus on how people talk about and perceive objects and events, rather than describing phenomena according to a predetermined categorical system, scientific, or conceptual criteria (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014). Martin Heidegger, a follower of Husserl furthered developed his [Husserl] thought into existential philosophy and hermeneutics (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014). Heidegger was most concerned with the ontological question of existence itself (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014).

Hermeneutics which means to interpret or to make clear requires that one needs to comprehend the mindset of a person and their language which mediates one's experience of the world, in order to translate their message (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014). Which means that [we] IPA researchers attempt to understand what it feels like to stand in the shoes of our participants, while recognizing that this is not completely possible, and, through interpretative activity, make meaning comprehensible by translating it (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014). The IPA study is a dynamic process with the active role of the researcher who influences the extent to which they gain access to the participant's experience and how, through interpretative activity, they make sense of the participant's personal world, which is called *double hermeneutic* or *double interpretation* (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014).

The third theoretical orientation which IPA relies upon is idiography (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014). This refers to an in-depth analysis of single cases and examining individual perspectives of research participants in their own unique contexts (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014). The most fundamental principle behind the idiographic approach is to explore every single case, before producing any general statements (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014). IPA relies on idiography, which means that researchers focus on the particular rather than the universal (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014). If the researcher wants to study a group of individuals, they move between important themes generated in the analysis and exemplifies them with individual [textual] narratives, comparing and contrasting them (Smith & Pietkiewicz, 2014).

Methods

Call for Participants

In August of 2024, I received study approval from Fairleigh Dickinson University's Institutional Review Board which allowed me to begin my formal recruitment for this study. Once the study was approved, I posted my recruitment flyer on social media [LinkedIn, X (formerly known as *Twitter),* and Facebook.

Data Collection

IPA as the selected methodology of this study focuses on the richness of the data. As such, it is suggested that studies range between 4-10 participants ((Noon & Hallam, 2018; Tindall, Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009). This study yielded eight eligible participants although I was permitted to begin the study with just five. All eight of the participants followed the instructions as outlined on the call for participants recruitment flyer and e-mailed me at my Fairleigh Dickinson University e-mail address. Once the participants e-mailed me to express their interest, they were e-mailed the informed consent form. The criteria for eligibility were clearly outlined on the recruitment flyer and stated the following:

-Identify as Black or African American.

-Campus stakeholder (faculty, staff, or student).

-Currently enrolled at or employed by a PWI prior to Fall 2023.

-Baseline understanding of the term and application of *anti-Blackness.*

-Baseline understanding of the term *performative diversity.*

All eight of the participants met the criteria and were invited to schedule a one-on-one interview. The interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes and ranged from 45-60 minutes per participant.

In accordance with IPA methodology and *BlackCrit* as a theoretical framework the participants were asked the following 16 questions:

1. Please tell me your campus stakeholder role.
2. In your own words. Please define the term *performative diversity.*
3. What knowledge do you have regarding the Supreme Court case *SFFA v. Harvard and SFFA v. UNC?*

4. What is your understanding of affirmative action?
5. What does it mean to work twice as hard?
6. Are you familiar with Edward Bloom? If so, what have you heard about him?
7. What has your institution changed since the murder of George Floyd in 2020?
8. Has your institution renamed any academic buildings since 2020?
9. What DEI initiatives does your institution offer? And who are the people most invested in and featured in those initiatives?
10. Has your institution disbanded DEI initiatives? How did they go about it?
11. Has your institution terminated the employees who worked in DEI or reduced the staff who look like and support you?
12. What is the campus climate like since the overturning of affirmative action?
13. Do you feel like you have seen an uptick of racialized experiences?
14. Have you or your colleagues participated in any of the anti-Genocide protests?
15. If so, were any of your colleagues or friends punished for it?
16. What in your opinion should PWIs be doing if they want to appear intentional about justice for their non-white campus stakeholders?

Data Analysis

After reviewing the transcripts of all eight participants while listening to the recordings twice. I was able to clarify all of the transcribed narratives to make certain that they were aligned. No member checking was conducted as that is not required for IPA so that the transcripts remained as authentic as intended during the interview. I used an open annotated coding method as prescribed by IPA to ensure that the distinctive voices of the participants were able to emerge from their testimonies (Noon & Hallam, 2018;Tindall, Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009).

Theme Development

Once the transcripts were read, re-read, and annotated I returned to the transcript as prescribed by IPA to document the emergent themes (Noon & Hallam, 2018;Tindall, Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009).

Trustworthiness

I conducted my own reflexivity exercise which helped me to interrogate how my own thoughts, perceptions, and experiences might impact the study. This approach helped me to make certain that I approached each interview with a blank slate and no pre-conceived notions of what each of the participants might say. I allowed their stories to be the focal point before I began my interpretation of the data.

Positionality

As the researcher, I also share similarities with the eight participants in this study. I am a tenure-track faculty member at a PWI with an HSI designation. I am the only Black tenure-track faculty member in the school of education. I have experienced anti-Blackness at PWIs in my current role and in previous stakeholder roles (*staff, student, and faculty).* Those experiences helped me to understand and empathize with the participants as well as interpret what they might not have been able to convey. However, it in no way biased my study. I am also a member of FDU's Institutional Review Board, so I am intimately familiar with the intricacies of submitting a human-subjects study and having that study approved.

Participants

The participants outlined in this article each participated in a nation-wide call for participants in the Fall of 2024. In the wake of the overturn of affirmative action in 2023, as the researcher and critical race scholar, I was interested in knowing how Black campus stakeholders [*faculty, staff, and students*] were beginning to *make sense* of the way anti-Blackness embedded in race neutrality or colorblind foolery would shape their campus stakeholder experience. I believe through their experiences, my own, and countless others, we can begin to have actual conversations about the harm of anti-Blackness within higher education and begin working towards eliminating it. If HEIs and specifically PWIs sincerely intend to retain Black campus stakeholders on their campuses the recruiters, hiring managers, department chairs, and administrators must be mindful of how their support or lack thereof is received.

Each of the participants agreed to one 60-minute virtual interview with me which was recorded via Zoom and transcribed via Zoom. I also used the mobile application *rev.com* as a backup in the event that the Zoom transcript malfunctioned or did not transcribe as needed. The response from across the country was surprisingly overwhelming with the selected participants hailing from the Northeast, West, Southwest,

Midwest, and the South. I believe it was important to have different perspectives from Black people living in various parts of the country and in varying stakeholder roles. Although each of the participants within the study identified as Black, I would be remiss not to mention that Blackness is not monolithic, and differences and outliers absolutely exist. Table 1 is representative of the participants within this overarching study who are discussed herein this article. Table 2 focuses on the participants responses to the following themes that emerged *performative diversity; post-Affirmative Action; campus life post-George Floyd's murder.*

Table 1

Participants	***Racialized Identity***	***Gender Identity***	***Stakeholder Role***
Elle	Black	Female	Staff
Xavier	Black	Male	Administrator/Part-time faculty
Bruce Wayne	Black	Male	Part-time faculty
Christopher	Black/Afro-Indigenous	Male	Part-time faculty/Staff
E. Brady	Black	Female	Administrator/Faculty
Devan	Black	Female	Administrator/Faculty
Malcom	Black	Male	Doctoral Student
Ruby	Black	Female	Doctoral Student

Participants

Elle- Elle works as a senior director at Columbia University.

Xavier- Xavier works as a director at Point Loma Nazarene University.

Bruce Wayne- Bruce Wayne works as an administrator in K12 education and as a part-time faculty member at Drexel University.

Christopher- Christoper is faculty at Southern New Hampshire University.

Ruby- Ruby is a doctoral student at Texas A&M University.

E. Brady- E. Brady works as a senior DEI director and professor at the Medical College of Wisconsin.

Devan- Devan is a department chair and professor at Tuskegee University.

Malcolm- Malcom is a doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh.

Findings

Table 2

Participants	*Can you define performative diversity?*	*Have you noticed significant changes on your campus in the wake of the overturn of Affirmative Action?*	*Did your institution make significant changes in the aftermath of the lynching of George Floyd?*
Elle	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Xavier	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**
Bruce Wayne	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**
Christopher	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
E. Brady	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Devan	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Malcolm	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Ruby	**Yes**	**Yes**	**No**

Performative Diversity and the PWI (Lacking Support)

Performative Diversity can take shape within HEIs, and it can also take shape in places separate from institutions of higher learning like corporations, including athletic associations, and professional organizations that are connected to and separate from higher education *writ large*. It might be as small as posting black out squares on social media to recognize the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, or Ahmaud Arbery. To a statement of commitment to listening, learning, and growing while having an administrative cabinet completely full of white people (Engram & Mayer, 2023). It might also look like recruiting Black faculty, staff, and students to your institution without considering long term what their needs might be personally and professionally. White people might not have the *pattern recognition* to see the harm in their decisions or perhaps they are obtuse to the harm that they perpetuate in their decision making. However, Black people will always recognize the patterns. As argued by Jackson (2025), *racial capitalism* refers to the process by which capitalist economies have always been structured by and dependent upon exploitation and the racial hierarchies of Black labour.

Pattern recognition allows for Black people to almost immediately recognize when they have been tokenized in their recruitment at PWIs. The first tall tale sign upon your arrival at the institution is the recognition that you are the only person who looks like you within the space. When there are no individuals who look like you or identify in similar ways to you that substantially decreases the likelihood of finding mentors

that can support you through your journey (Engram, 2025). It also eliminates the possibility of building your own community and systems of support which decreases the likelihood of retaining you long term. If true disruptive diversity is the goal, then PWIs must consider what the needs of their non-white employees might be. When I was recruited by Michigan State University, the search chair for my role volunteered to take me around Lansing along with her husband. She was also intentional about connecting me with the Black faculty and staff association president, Black Greek Lettered Organization (BGLO) members, and treated me to dinner and social events. Although she was a white woman it was her intentional efforts to at least introduce me to community that made the difference in our connection.

When I interviewed the participants about their understanding of *performative diversity* and if they could define it all eight of them affirmed their awareness of it. In particular, each of them defined how it showed up in their stakeholder role and at their current or previous institutions. Each able to name the way that their institutions performance of the individual aspects of DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) was not always authentic. Here's what four of the participants had to say about this theme:

Elle states, "we each need different things to perform our roles at our institutions and having an institution that hires you but does not consider your different cultural needs makes it difficult to do your job well*."* Elle was speaking to the difference that cultural support and community have at PWIs and how It can help in sustaining the stakeholder.

Xavier indicated his own interpretation of the term by saying, "when I think about performative diversity, I think about actions taken by the university that promote ideas of diversity and equity but do not add substantive progress to create change." Xavier speaks to a point that I have observed during my own experience working at PWIs. PWIs will hire us and make our hire a news story but they do not adequately support us when we need it. This could include research support, professional development support, or advocating for and supporting us when anti-Blackness inevitably rears its head.

Ruby answered the question by stating that, "I would say it's when an entity, organization, or company says they care about having diversity. They can say that through e-mail, through a statement, maybe through an event, but when you look at the numbers, the demographics of who's actually present in the room, there is none (diversity)." Through Ruby's observation she directly highlights the performative nature of institutional statements in their various forms and how they do not meet the moment. HEIs tout them-

selves as being diverse, some win awards for it, but the absence of their commitment is directly felt by those pushed into the margins as the *othered*.

Bruce Wayne, who teaches math at Drexel University in Philadelphia addressed the question from his lens as a part-time faculty member. Bruce Wayne states, "every once in a while, I will receive Black students who are graduates of the Philadelphia school district, and they arrive in my course which is an entry level math course, and they are not ready. For the students who are struggling there are no real support structures for them." Bruce Wayne is directly speaking about students who might require additional support like tutors to assist them in their successful matriculation into college course work. His stance highlights the assumptions that are made regarding students' preparedness and the role of the institution in being pro-active in creating supportive structures which in his opinion are severely lacking.

Changes to (white) Institutions post-Affirmative Action Being Overturned

Higher education has absolutely shifted in the wake of *SFFA v. Harvard and SFFA v. UNC.* Which was the exact intention of *SFFA's* lead architect, Eward Blum. Blum who is a staunch proponent of sowing divisiveness between communities of color (Hinger, 2018) in his effort to dismantle diversity programs and civil rights protections. Blum, who is white, lost a congressional election in Texas in the early 90s and has since waged war against African American and Latino/a/x voters believing that Texas' redistricting benefited these groups (Hinger, 2018). In 2016, Blum lost his bid at dismantling affirmative action via race conscious admissions in *Fisher v. University of Texas* and believed it was because he needed Asian plaintiffs to push his cause forward (Hinger, 2018).

Blum strategized and formed Students for Fair Admissions (*SFFA*) as the vehicle to file litigation (Hinger, 2018). Through this group which consists of himself, Abigail Fisher, and her father Richard Fisher, they recruited Asian students and filed his challenge against Harvard and UNC *but* with a twist (Hinger, 2018). The twist? That the consideration of race discriminates against Asian Americans (Hinger, 2018). As Drs. Oiyan Poon and Janelle Wong (2025) report in the aftermath of *SFFA,* Asian students got played. They write that based upon numbers for the first year after the Supreme Court ruling, it is clear that the myths about affirmative action were untrue (Poon & Wong, 2025). Ending the consideration of race in admissions processes has not provided the jump in enrollments that Blum and *SFFA* promised Asian students (Poon & Wong, 2025).

When the participants were asked about how their institutions have shifted in the aftermath of the death nail to affirmative action. All eight of the participants indicated seeing the shifts on their campuses. Here is what four of the participants had to say about it:

Elle states, "affirmative action was intended to level the playing field for people who are typically excluded in both work and school. A lot of the structures that are currently in place were created for white people, privileged white people at that. My institution no longer has to pretend to care about non-white or privileged students and it shows." Elle's stakeholder role allows her to engage with students from different backgrounds which gives her a birds-eye view into their lived experiences. Recognizing that her institution, much like the others, no longer has to put forth any additional efforts was disappointing.

Devan explains,

> as a woman I have benefited from affirmative action. If you look at the make up of the Supreme Court, there are individuals who also benefited from affirmative action. Blocking people from having opportunities does not make sense to me. The way that institutions have backed away from affirming Black students takes me back to George Wallace standing in front of the schoolhouse doors. The shifts have been significant, and it is what caused me to leave my role and return to an HBCU.

Devan is not the only faculty member, administrator, staff member, or student who chose to leave her stakeholder role at a PWI to return to an HBCU. In fact, HBCUs have seen a sharp increase in their student enrollment since the Supreme Court's ruling and the Trump administration's attack on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (Snelling, 2026). Morehouse, North Carolina A&T, Jackson State University, Albany State University, Alabama A&M University, and countless other HBCUs have experienced enrollment booms and Black enrollment at the Ivy's has declined (Snelling, 2026). Which was their plan all along.

E. Brady indicated that, "there were all these conversations about having 'difficult discussions,' but when it became time to have them, they were not prepared to address it. Lots of faculty members shy away from it and try to diffuse the conversation and that is not the right approach." E. Brady points to a very defining point of contention whenever anti-Blackness is present and requires addressing the conversations are often short lived, rebranded, or cut off because of white discomfort. Preventing conversations from taking place does not ease the tension around the actions that required the conversation to begin. HEIs are doing their Black campus stakeholders a huge disservice by wishing conflict away rather than intentionally addressing it.

Ruby mentioned feeling like an alien in the extraterrestrial sense. Ruby states, "there's something wrong here [at her PWI]. It's like you're an alien, and I often say how uncomfortable it is to try to explain to people my lived experiences. Primarily because it's not legitimate in their eyes, I guess." The feeling of being alone or *othered* at a PWI is common for Black campus stakeholders. There are not always support systems, structures, or outlets present to assist Black campus stakeholders with coping with the never-ending anti-Blackness which is occurring around them without being seen as a complainer or someone who is making an issue out of something they see is unimportant.

Performative Changes post-George Floyd's Lynching

Higher education and 2020 brought about changes that seemed to be intentional, inclusive, and an opportunity to finally move the conversation around anti-Blackness forward. The period following George Floyd's lynching seemed to be a time where white people on campuses and in broader American life for the first time saw how Black (in)humanity is perpetuated. Many of us were asked to participate on taskforces aimed at diversifying campus initiatives, updating syllabi, revamping campus programs, and bringing the broader campus community together *to heal*. However, much like President Andrew Johnson during America's *Reconstruction* who felt like Black people had received enough and it was unfair that white people were not also benefiting. The question almost always draws back to *what about white people?*

This is evidenced by the time that immediately followed 2020 when aggrieved white male students began to make headlines citing that they were being excluded from higher education and other opportunities. The demographic of Americans who have made it their life's work generation-by-generation to exclude anyone not white, cisgender, and male, are being recentered because of their alleged othering. They are alleged to have been shut out of jobs over the last decade in academia, Hollywood, and in the media due to those industries pursuit of diversity (Pettit, 2025). A society that is rooted in white cisheteropatriarchy is a society that has never decentered white men, so this narrative is ridiculous. However, like all things that center white feelings it grew legs and is now walking. Five years ago, we had black squares on social media, Juneteenth ice cream, institutional "commitments", removing of statues, and the renaming of streets.

Six years removed from the lynching of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and countless others we no longer have equity commitments, race conscious admissions, or expansive Black Studies departments, but sure let's center white men—AGAIN. When asked about how their institutions

approached, making significant changes in the wake of Floyd's murder, initiatives that are now all but dismantled, only six of the participants attested to seeing questionable changes, four of the participants had this to say:

Xavier immediately named his institutions' efforts as performative. Xavier states, "I have seen their social media posts and the campus newspaper highlighting Black alumni and things of that nature. But to me, it was performative, because I know what the real experiences of those Black students are and were." Xavier then points to something that only higher education scholars would care about when aiming to paint a picture regarding institutional commitments.

Xavier posited,

In doing some research for a course I stumbled upon the differential data for Black graduation rates. For my institution, of all of the four-year colleges and universities in California, my employer has the highest disparity of Black graduation rates. It is not even close. It is like 30-40 points higher than any other institution and our retention rates for Black students are awful.

Xavier who is from the city that his institution is located in points to the disparity of Black students at an institution that was audacious enough to post alum on their social media in the wake of George Floyd's murder. While internally not making any legitimate strides to retain or graduate these Black student campus stakeholders.

Christopher who is a part-time faculty member states that his institution does well at completing the "checklist". He is referring to the checklist of activities that an HEI might perform to be perceived as equitable, diverse, and inclusive. Christoper states, "my institution has done well with the 'checklist.' We have faculty and staff of color, and we offer cultural awareness courses that were not designed by us. The issue is that those courses also do not have our input." Christopher describes being excluded as an expert regarding content that speaks to his and others' identities being taught in courses. Christopher decided to be proactive and meet with his administrators about the course design. He stated that he later that the *one* person who identifies the same as him [racially] was included in the course designs but was not tasked with providing substantial input.

E. Brady shared an example of a viral video regarding a white female student who recently broke up

with a biracial athlete. After the breakup, the white female student took to social media to discuss wanting to re-enslave Black people. The video caused a stir on campus and there were protests for three-straight-days. E. Brady was approached by her supervisor who is a non-Black woman of color. The supervisor wanted to issue a statement in support of the Black students. E. Brady states, "my supervisor who is a woman of color wanted me to write a statement in support of the Black students on behalf of our department. Because I am the only Black person in the department, she felt that I should be the one to write it."

E. Brady wrote the statement but then she immediately thought about how other Black faculty campus stakeholders might have been impacted by the anti-Black viral video. E. Brady states that she then pushed back to highlight that the student could have been in any of the Black faculty members' classes and that they should also be considered. Her supervisor was only concerned with ending the protest and the performance of Black support. E. Brady provided a few other examples of how Black faculty campus stakeholders were forced to experience anti-Blackness in their classrooms while the university positioned itself to be supportive publicly while being privately silent and dismissive.

Malcolm who was an undergraduate student during the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. He states that he held student government roles while an undergraduate student at Mizzou which positioned him to engage with upper-level university administration. Malcolm named that there were a lot of conversations about what it meant to be living during this time [the alleged racial reckoning]. Malcolm states, "we were placed on a lot of working committees. I remember being in front of a lot of committees and meeting state appointed members of the board of curators. I was discussing the realities of systemic racism, and I was told by a Black man that systemic racism was not real." What this comment by the Black man in conversation with Malcolm points to about anti-Blackness is that you do not have to be white to uphold anti-Black ideologies or white supremacy.

The four participants narratives presented in this theme highlight that although they are in different parts of the country anti-Black ideologies are present everywhere. The anti-Blackness that each of the stakeholders highlighted while also sharing how their institutions performed support in the wake of George Floyd's lynching is reminiscent of how that performativity also showed up all over the country. For once, we were having the conversation about the effects of lynching Black men and Black people and we were simultaneously being undermined, encouraged or forced to move on, and finally and per usual dismissed.

The bold stories of the participants, each different, share various similarities that drive the point home about the pervasiveness of anti-Black othering that exists on white college campuses. If white men allege to being dismissed, ignored, and pushed out of leadership roles, then who is responsible for the continued perpetration of anti-Blackness on white college campuses? For this answer, let us turn to the data.

CUPA-HR found in a 2016 study that 86% of university administrators were white (Seltzer, 2017). Even with incremental gains over the last decade the overwhelming majority of institutional administrators advocating for, engaging in, and upholding institutional anti-Blackness are white people, and namely white men, for clarity.

Each of the themes presented above in Table 2 speaks to how harmful performative diversity is and how it leads to burnout and the exodus of Black campus stakeholders. Being a Black campus stakeholder in a PWI setting that does not actively work to improve its relationship with non-white community members will almost always create a cycle of harm that leaves students, faculty, and staff feeling unsupported during any nationwide or global crisis; and excluded from the community overall. Our institutions are much richer in value when they create a space that is welcoming to all seeking to elevate their lives while also not aligning in ways that further harm the othered. We are marching down a dangerous path currently where universities are shifting away from being spaces that welcome the intentional diversity of their campus stakeholders to attempt to appease the current administrations thirst for mediocre whiteness as the primary focus of higher education.

Contribution to BlackCrit Scholarship and Knowledge

This piece helps to contribute to the growing scholarship that extends Dumas & ross' BlackCrit (2016). This work situates our understanding of anti-Blackness as praxis for Black interaction with whiteness in the street and on white college campuses. As a society, we have not done a systemic overhaul aimed at uprooting anti-Blackness. As such, HEIs continue to exploit Black time, talent, and treasure and excuses anti-Blackness as a one-off rather than an institutional variant that embeds itself into every American college regardless of its presentation. America has always hated Blackness and Black people, and the Trump administration has given HEIs a pass to do what they were designed to do, uphold whiteness. This scholarship and scholarship similar to it aims to help us reimagine higher education and its possibilities. But first we must address anti-Blackness as the problem that it is. This work also provides clear guidance for HEI administra-

tors, SA Pros, faculty affairs, remaining DEI offices, and anyone who cares about Black stakeholder retention efforts.

Ethical Considerations

As indicated previously, the data used in this manuscript was from a Fall 2024 Fairleigh Dickinson University IRB approved study titled, *The Performance of Diversity and the Soul of Black Folks.* All eight of the participants received informed consent documents prior to their scheduled 60-minute one-on-one interviews. The participants each selected their own pseudonyms and intentionally named their HEIs. As is custom for participation in human subjects research the participants were made aware of any potential risks. A note regarding this study is that it was approved as a minimal risk study via an expedited IRB review. As the researcher, all data is secured via FDU's OneDrive system and password protected and only I, as the researcher, outside of FDU, have access to the drive.

Limitations and Future Research

As is typical when conducting studies which use certain methodologies limitations will exist. The IPA approach taken for this study focuses on *sense-making* of the lived experience of Black campus stakeholders who are enrolled or employed at a PWI. This means that the work, although extremely necessary, is not generalizable. This is not negative, as it leaves room for researchers to replicate this study and use a critical quantitative or critical mixed-methods approach.

Conclusion

HEIs are only as good as the people who convene within. If higher education is to continue to be the beacon of intellectualism at the highest level, then it requires all of us to be resistors. We must actively resist the bad actors who wish to take us back to a time where women, non-white persons, immigrants, and LGBTQ+ individuals existed only in the margins and were not seen as major players in higher ed's story. The seat is only worth being sat in if the support that accompanies it is genuine, welcoming, supportive, and capable of recognizing why change is both inevitable and necessary.

As Tatum (2025) offers, anti-DEI legislation has taken hold and is rapidly proliferating in some parts of the country. We must ask the question as offered by Tatum (2025), "Is this part of a predictable pattern of pushback against changing social norms?" I would argue that it is. All of this is in part because we dared

to elect a Black president in 2008 and the rest of this is what happens when white supremacy does not face consequences. America never dealing with the problem of the Confederates post the Civil War and Reconstruction are largely where this country missed an opportunity to eradicate white supremacy. The opportunity to have a truly liberated country that chose to be centered in being socially and morally just. HEIs are at a crossroads and its up to those *seated* in decision making roles to decide to say *yes* when asked, "may I sit here?"

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Academic and Career Planning Success: A Study of Social Supports & Barriers Experienced by Black Women

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined student success in academic and career planning (ACP) among young Black women using the Social Cognitive Career Theory Career Self-Management model to explore how social supports and barriers shape ACP and outcomes. Concepts of intersectionality and community cultural wealth were applied for a more culturally responsive conceptual framework. Eight community leaders were interviewed to provide the perspectives of local social agents. Subsequently, eight young Black women (ages 19–24) completed semi-structured interviews, sharing their ACP successes and challenges. Findings revealed that social agents, adaptive career behaviors, and career-related learning experiences positively contributed to ACP. Additionally, social supports varied in access, availability, and quality, while barriers were identified as social, familial, psychological, and financial. These findings provide postsecondary administrators and faculty with a contextualized understanding of ACP while highlighting implications that address the academic and career success outcomes of Black women.

Keywords: academic success, student success, career planning, Social Cognitive Career Theory, adaptive career behaviors

Academic and Career Planning Success: A Study of Social Supports & Barriers Experienced by Black Women

For decades, Black women have struggled to be seen, heard, and supported as they pursue academic and career success (Commodore et al., 2018; Porter, 2022). These struggles include being misunderstood, misrepresented, underrepresented, and ignored. Their journey from career planning to degree completion is often not reflective of student success in terms of accessible social supports and mitigated social barriers. Further research is needed to identify culturally relevant and inclusive approaches to ensure the academic and career success of Black women is because of their postsecondary education experience, not despite it.

This qualitative study examined how Black women in West Texas experience academic and career planning (ACP) while contributing to a limited body of literature that uses Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) to explore this phenomenon. Guided by the SCCT Career Self-Management (CSM) model, we explored how eight Black women navigated ACP within the context of social supports and barriers. The findings offer insight for higher education professionals seeking to support postsecondary success among Black women with keen attention to factors impacting college and career planning and decision-making. These findings answered three research questions identifying: (a) social supports that affect ACP; (b) barriers that affect ACP; and (c) adaptive career behaviors that ACP encompasses.

Academic and Career Planning

As explained by Fouad & Kantamneni (2020) and Lent et al. (1994), education and career development are closely intertwined and often examined together to understand the behaviors that guide planning and decision-making. In this study, participants engaged in ACP through career exploration, goal clarification, and strategic planning to achieve educational and occupational outcomes (see Greenhaus & Kopelman). ACP was also demonstrated through adaptive career behaviors and career-related learning experiences. It is important to note that earlier project materials used by the research team employed the term career and education planning (CEP) (Hough et al., 2025); however, the authors treat CEP and ACP as the same underlying construct.

Social Cognitive Career Theory & Career Self-Management Model

SCCT offers an inclusive framework that emphasizes the interaction between personal, behavioral,

and environmental factors in career development (Lent et al., 1994). This framework is relevant to examining the experiences of marginalized populations, as it accounts for contextual influences (e.g., social supports and barriers), and understanding how individuals navigate ACP within complex social contexts (Bounds, 2017; Dickinson et al., 2017; Flores et al., 2017; Gushue et al., 2006). Furthermore, Lent & Brown's (2013) SCCT CSM model promotes adaptive career behaviors (e.g., goal setting, planning, decision-making, and adapting to change) pertinent to student success. This model was useful for identifying the processes by which participants responded to evolving circumstances affecting their ACP.

Despite being used to examine career development across diverse populations, few studies have applied the SCCT CSM model to ACP among Black adolescent and emerging adult women. Additionally, applying an intersectionality lens may deepen the interpretation of ACP experiences shaped by ethnicity, gender, and systemic inequities (Collins, 2015; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Kim et al., 2022; Spates et al., 2020).

Intersectionality, Community Cultural Wealth, and Culturally Responsiveness

To better interpret ACP among young black women, the CSM model was expanded through culturally responsive frameworks. Applying an intersectional lens clarifies how the overlapping marginalized identities of the participants uniquely contribute to the contextual influences they experienced. Simultaneously, integrating community cultural wealth concepts shifts the focus from a deficit-based emphasis on barriers to a strengths-based, culturally responsive understanding of assets, particularly familial, social, and navigational forms of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). This approach highlights how diverse regions and communities leverage cultural capital to navigate career trajectories. Blending these frameworks allows the researchers to evaluate how social supports, or the absence of them, influence career trajectories, ultimately informing more equitable academic and career planning and development. Community cultural wealth is most relevant to this study in terms of familial capital, social capital, and navigational capital. These three forms of cultural capital are instrumental in exploring how relationships, community supports, and adaptive career behaviors helped participants navigate the structural hurdles outlined in SCCT.

Countering Environmental Barriers through Familial Capital

SCCT often operationalizes a lack of dominant-culture financial or academic lineage as a significant contextual barrier to career development. Familial capital re-centers this dynamic by recognizing the deep

well of emotional support, cultural history, and resilience passed down through kin networks. This asset buffers individuals against systemic isolation, transforming what deficit-based models label as a lack of resources into a profound psychological foundation of persistence (Lewis et al., 2025).

Amplifying Supports through Social Capital

While SCCT notes the importance of contextual supports like institutional mentorship, marginalized populations frequently encounter a lack of access to traditional corporate or academic networks. Social capital highlights the powerful peer networks, community leaders, and grassroots organizations that individuals cultivate. These culturally organic support systems provide the vital informational resources, encouragement, and community reassurance necessary to sustain high career self-efficacy (Banuelos, & Jang-Tucci, 2026).

Overcoming Systemic Hurdles through Navigational Capital

SCCT identifies hostile institutional climates and discriminatory practices as direct barriers to choice goals and actions. Navigational capital serves as the strategic asset required to maneuver through these unsupportive, historically exclusionary spaces (Marroquin-Flores et al., 2024). It captures the unique skills, inner agency, and survival strategies that marginalized individuals use to sustain academic and career momentum despite encountering systemic roadblocks.

Barriers

In this study, barriers refer to the challenges and constraints that impede ACP and decision-making. For Black women, this may manifest as mental health challenges that stem from having dually marginalized identities, gendered racism, stereotypes, and stigmas (Byrd & Porter, 2022); Campbell & Mowbray, 2016; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Spates et al., 2020). Exploring barriers in concert with social supports is essential to examining ACP as experienced by young Black women.

Social Supports

Social Agents

Social supports include programs, opportunities, and people who positively contributed to participants' ACP experiences. Social agents are the social supports who positively influenced academic and career

development (see Hardie, 2015; Holland, 2017). They are educators, mentors, family, and peers with the power to influence the self-efficacy, expectations, planning, and decision-making of young adults (see Flores et al., 2017; Hardie, 2015; Holland, 2017; Jemini-Gashi et al., 2019).

Mentors

Mentorship is an influential form of social support within emerging adults' networks. Mentors provide guidance, encouragement, and access to opportunities that shape academic, career, and psychosocial development (Stan, 2021; Venegas-Muggli et al., 2023). These social agents help young people interpret challenges, build self-efficacy, and envision future selves by offering emotional support and instrumental resources (Apriceno et al., 2020; Chelberg & Bosman, 2020). For Black women who may lack familial or institutional support, mentorship can serve as a compensatory mechanism, broadening social capital, brokering access, and fostering belonging within educational and career pathways.

Social Capital

ACP support is especially crucial for students with constraints such as limited social networks and career or education resources (Hardie, 2015; Holland, 2017). Social agents can be instrumental in providing valuable ACP support by helping young people navigate barriers while extending their social capital as they guide students in expanding their social network, fortifying connections, and understanding support available through contacts (Forret, 2006; Greenbank, 2009; Seibert, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). As social supports, social agents are integral to equipping students to successfully navigate barriers and maximize social capital in ACP and decision-making.

Methods

Research Design

This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to collect data across two phases. Phase One included community leaders selected for their roles as social agents within the Black community in West Texas. They completed virtual interviews focused on ACP social supports and challenges. Phase Two included young Black women who were recruited to participate in virtual interviews conducted through Zoom. They answered questions about career-related learning experiences, academic and career planning, available supports, challenges encountered, and resources used. Each interview lasted approximately 30

minutes during Phase One and 60 minutes during Phase Two. The interviews were recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim by a trained undergraduate research assistant who verified transcript accuracy.

Participants

Study participants were recruited using purposive sampling through outreach involving community organizations, participants, university contacts, and social media. Sixteen individuals participated —eight community leaders during Phase One (see Table 1) and eight young Black women during Phase Two (see Table 2). In Phase One, six individuals presented as female and two as male. The eight participants in Phase Two self-identified as female, Black, and between the ages of 19 and 24.

Ethical Considerations & Data Protection

All participants provided informed consent in accordance with institutional review board guidelines, and pseudonyms were used in all transcripts, tables, and reporting. Direct identifiers, such as specific institutional names, workplaces, and neighborhoods, were either removed or replaced with generic descriptors (e.g., institution type, regional geographic reference) to protect participants' identities while preserving analytic meaning. Audio recordings were used to verify the accuracy of interview transcripts and then deleted once transcription checks were completed. Transcripts, consent documents, and other study records were stored on password-protected drives, and files linking pseudonyms to participants were maintained separately and securely.

Because the study involved a small group of young Black women from West Texas, the authors anticipated the possibility of deductive disclosure. To mitigate this risk, participant profiles presented in tables and text were slightly aggregated (e.g., broad occupational categories instead of specific job titles) and described using generic institutional types rather than specific names. These strategies were implemented to balance the need for rich descriptions with the ethical obligation to safeguard confidentiality and data protection.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive, in vivo, process, and focused coding across two coding cycles (Saldaña, 2021). Transcripts were manually coded in Microsoft Excel and organized into themes using the

aforementioned coding methods to identify key themes for interpretation and discussion. Throughout analysis, the principal investigator refined the codebook with codes emerging from the data. Credibility was enhanced during this process through reflexive journaling and triangulation of findings across the study groups (i.e., Phase One: community leaders; Phase Two: young Black women).

Trustworthiness

The principal investigator maintained a structured audit trail throughout the study to support research rigor (i.e., dependability and confirmability). This process included a researcher journal documenting analytic reflections and key decisions, a codebook that recorded evolving codes and definitions, and detailed field notes capturing contextual information from interviews and community interactions. The researcher journal also served as a reflexive log, documenting how the researcher's positionality and evolving understandings informed analytic decisions over time. Decision notes were used to track changes in sampling, coding, and theme development, providing a transparent record of how the analysis progressed from raw data to the final set of ACP themes.

Furthermore, to enhance trustworthiness, the principal investigator conducted member reflection with three Phase One participants following the initial analysis. Approximately three years after the initial interviews, these participants reviewed and discussed the five themes from the study, drawing on their continued professional and community engagement. Their feedback resonated with the authors' interpretations, provided additional contextual perspectives, and reinforced the practical relevance of the study's implications for families, academic institutions, and community organizations.

Findings

The study findings directly addressed the three research questions examining social supports that shape ACP, barriers that disrupt ACP, and adaptive career behaviors participants used to navigate ACP decisions. These findings indicated that ACP was shaped by the interaction of career exploration and decision-making learning experiences (Hough et al., 2025), contextual influences (i.e., social supports and barriers), and personal factors. Across both phases, three major themes emerged: (a) Social supports vary in access, availability, visibility, and quality; (b) ACP barriers are social, psychological, familial, and financial; and (c) Adaptive career behaviors help facilitate ACP outcomes.

Social Supports Vary in Access, Availability, Visibility, and Quality

The social supports theme outlines how different categories of social support are accessed, perceived, and utilized by participants to affect their planning, providing an evaluation of the landscape, availability, and quality of social supports that influence ACP. Additionally, social supports, including mentors, were reflected in participants' descriptions of practical and emotional assistance from family members, peers, and community or workplace contacts who offered encouragement, helped interpret options, and provided exposure to careers through advice, referrals, and feedback.

Organizations & Programs

Across both phases, participants identified organizations that provided ACP support; however, a notable disconnect emerged between the social supports identified by community leaders and those recognized by young women. Many Phase Two participants did not identify organizations described in Phase One interviews, suggesting that lack of awareness, not just availability, served as a barrier to ACP engagement.

In addition to awareness, availability, and access, social supports varied substantially in capacity and consistency. Some programs offered high-quality resources but served a limited number of participants due to staffing or funding constraints. Others imposed eligibility criteria, such as income thresholds, that restricted access.

Mentorship

When supports were available, mentorship, whether formal or informal, was described as a key mechanism. However, uneven access to high-quality mentors resulted in some young women having a consistent mentor, while others relied primarily on self-driven info-seeking and informal advice from peers or family members with limited career-specific knowledge (see Table 3). Participants who mentioned mentors were most likely to describe mentorship when it was embedded in settings they already frequented (school, work, faith/community spaces), whereas "formal" mentoring programs were less often named, even when community leaders viewed them as central resources.

Family

Each Phase Two participant identified at least one family member as a source of support. Several participants described their parents as encouraging and financially supportive. India and Nicole described the

guidance they received during career conversations with their mothers. Gabriella and Nicole indicated that their parents were able to help reduce college-related financial challenges. Kendra, Nicole, and Oleta's parents registered them to participate in pre-college summer programs, increasing their exposure to career and academic opportunities.

Non-parent family members were also discussed. In addition to her father, Lanette mentioned her grandmother as highly influential, and Mia explained how her brothers were able to provide guidance based on their college experiences. Families provided encouragement, financial assistance, and, in some cases, exposure to opportunities such as precollege programs. However, the level and type of support varied based on family knowledge and resources.

Non-Familial Social Agents

Teachers, counselors, and academic advisors were also frequently cited as influential social supports. Participants described receiving guidance related to academic planning, career exploration, and transitions between educational institutions. In several cases, educators also acted as advocates, connecting students to opportunities and resources. Lanette described her experience with a former teacher who provided support and encouragement during her academic journey as she anxiously prepared for her student teaching assignment:

> She was like, oh, you're gonna have [teacher's name]. It's gonna be fine. You're gonna be fine. You're gonna get through it, and because you have such a wonderful teacher and I know you can do this. And just to have her supporting me through that. She got me through a lot, especially with student teaching now.

As seen in this statement, participants described receiving guidance related to academic planning, career exploration, and transitions between educational institutions. In several cases, educators also acted as advocates, connecting students to opportunities and resources.

ACP Barriers are Social, Psychological, Familial, and Financial

The multifaceted social, psychological, familial, and financial challenges that disrupt student planning pathways were revealed in the second theme, which addressed social barriers affecting ACP. This theme uncovered the distinct internal and external constraints that challenge participants' academic and career planning pathways.

Social Barriers

Mentorship played a critical role in providing guidance, encouragement, and access to networks. However, participants emphasized that these relationships were often difficult to establish. Some participants proactively sought mentors through informal channels, including social media, highlighting gaps in structured mentorship opportunities. For example, Lanette sought a mentor to help her improve her academic performance:

> When I was looking for a mentor, I was having a really hard time in school with math and history. I had to take the same math class, like, three times. So, I figured maybe I could find someone who can help me through these things because I did have a friend, but she graduated before I did. So, I just got on [social media], and I was scrolling, and I saw the page. And, I was like, well, maybe I could find someone on here to help me. So, basically, I just made a post, and I was like, hey, I'm so and so, and I'm whatever, however old I was, and I was like, I would really like to have a mentor. I'm in school and I'm getting my teaching degree and I put, like, I'm an educator, an elementary education major, so I would like someone that has taught elementary before because it's totally different from middle school and high school. And she was, I think, the first person to comment.

Lanette demonstrated strong adaptive career behaviors in securing a mentor. However, this issue is a considerable barrier, in general, given the value assigned to having role models and mentors (Cropps & Esters, 2018; Harris et al., 2020; Hurd et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2019).

Psychological Barriers

In addition to challenges with access to quality mentorship opportunities, Phase Two participants also described psychological barriers as impacting their success in ACP, including anxiety, depression, self-doubt, and discouragement (see Table 3). Despite these challenges, many demonstrated persistence by developing coping strategies and continuing to pursue their goals. When present, supportive relationships, particularly encouragement and accountability from trusted adults, were described as buffering these challenges by helping participants reframe setbacks, sustain motivation, and make next-step plans.

Familial Barriers

Family dynamics functioned as both supports and constraints. Several participants noted that their

families provided emotional encouragement but lacked the knowledge needed to guide them through ACP. For example, Mia described gaps in relevant or current college and career information, despite both parents having a doctorate degree, indicating this issue was not limited to first-generation students. These findings highlighted how limited access to informed guidance and resources can impede ACP, even if familial support is present.

Financial Barriers

Furthermore, limited financial means challenged several of the participants, as reported in Table 3. Financial considerations impacted various ACP decisions, including academic major selection (Lanette), enrollment delay (Mia), level of attendance (e.g., full-time versus part-time) (India), school choice (Nicole), and school completion (Patrice). Despite these financial concerns, as well as social, psychological, and familial barriers, participants found ways to continue with productive planning and decision-making. These young women successfully engaged in adaptive career behaviors to overcome various barriers and optimize social supports.

Adaptive Career Behaviors Help Facilitate ACP Outcomes

This third theme highlights adaptive career behaviors and tactical maneuvers identified in the participants' planning process. There were several clear examples of adaptive career behaviors in Phase Two data. For example, Oleta changed her college plans from attending her dream school because she wanted an on-campus experience not offered at her first-choice institution due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Lanette was set to attend her first-choice college until she learned there were no housing options. She quickly adjusted her plans, delayed her start by one semester, and attended a different university. Her plans were disrupted again when she had a baby during her first year leading to a semester break. After returning to school, she re-evaluated and revised her academic plan of study with guidance from university advisors and faculty.

Gabriella completed her associate degree with thoughts of continuing nursing school, but postponed her education plans due to concerns about participating in clinicals during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of our interview, she had reconsidered nursing school and applied to a few programs.

Nicole entered college focusing on research, but her plans changed as she transitioned to gradu-

ate school. She was exposed to a professional from a dual doctoral degree program and realized that path provided the variety and flexibility she wanted in a degree. She planned to continue her doctoral studies and apply to an additional doctoral program for a dual degree.

Both Kendra and Mia began their postsecondary studies at a community college. Kendra transferred to an out-of-state university. She attended the university online and received more support and options in her area of academic interest. Mia completed her associate's degree and planned to begin her bachelor's degree in the fall. After speaking with her academic advisor, she decided to take additional community college courses, postponing enrollment at the four-year institution to the spring to begin with more course credits.

Through their decisions and willingness to pivot as they received new information and encountered varying factors, they proved their keen ability to simultaneously engage in adaptive career behaviors and productive academic and career planning. Their persistence and adaptability also emphasized the role of navigational capital in academic and career planning.

Discussion

This study highlights ACP as dynamic and iterative, requiring individuals to repeatedly reassess goals and strategies in response to barriers, disruptions, and uncertainty while revealing a critical gap between the existence of social supports and accessibility. Although the community leaders in Phase One identified numerous resources, these supports were not consistently recognized or utilized by Phase Two participants. This discrepancy suggests that awareness and navigation, not just existence, are central to equitable ACP outcomes. Consistent with prior research, social agents played a significant role in shaping ACP. However, the uneven distribution of social capital limited access to high-quality guidance and support. Mentorship emerged as both highly valuable and insufficiently available.

Revisiting SCCT Through the Experiences of Young Black Women

The findings of this study confirm, extend, and complicate the SCCT CSM model when evaluated through the lived experiences of young Black women. The data confirm the foundational CSM assertion that contextual factors (supports and barriers) directly interact with adaptive career behaviors to shape choices. Participants systematically utilized adaptive strategies such as altering enrollment timelines or re-evaluating academic tracks to progress toward educational and occupational goals despite pervasive obstacles. Fur-

thermore, this study extends SCCT by showing that social supports are not merely passive environmental variables. Instead, they operate as culturally situated forms of capital. When institutional social capital was unavailable, participants actively leveraged familial capital (i.e., parental encouragement, grandmother/sibling advice) and navigational capital to persist, translating relational networks into tactical career planning tools.

Finally, the findings complicate traditional SCCT by revealing that the mere "existence" of an environmental support does not equal its accessibility. Traditional models often treat structural supports as binary inputs (present or absent). This study demonstrates a visibility disconnect: resources celebrated by community leaders were not always invisible to the students, suggesting that awareness and navigation should be treated as mediating conditions in career self-management.

Core Contributions of this Study

To advance scholarship and equity in the field, this study offers three explicit contributions to Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and career theory, student success literature, and career development practice. First, this study contributes a culturally responsive extension to SCCT by integrating intersectionality and community cultural wealth, demonstrating that for dually marginalized populations, adaptive behaviors are not just responses to standard career shifts but are vital mechanisms for resisting and navigating systemic inequities.

Second, this study contributes to student success scholarship by shifting the diagnostic lens away from deficit-based student shortcomings. Instead, it highlights structural visibility and distribution gaps, proving that institutional communication siloes and unevenly distributed social capital are primary drivers of inequitable outcomes. Finally, this study contributes a multi-tiered framework for postsecondary practitioners, demonstrating that effective ACP cannot operate in structural isolation. It offers actionable, multi-point intervention considerations to transform passive campus resources into highly visible, culturally responsive networks.

Implications

These findings have several implications for postsecondary institutions where faculty and administrators are central to student success. Career services staff, academic advisors, student success practitioners,

faculty members, and institutional leaders can draw on the findings of this study to strengthen how students engage in career-related learning experiences, as well as how they access information, opportunities, and social supports that inform academic and career planning. For example, postsecondary professionals can (a) normalize career exploration early and often (e.g., first-year experience, advising); (b) help students identify, navigate, and evaluate major-to-career pathways and experiential learning opportunities; (c) facilitate social network development and optimization; and (d) help students understand and access financial resources and institutional processes that affect persistence and ACP and decision-making.

Recognizing the value of having role models and mentors, and the consequences of limited access to these relationships, faculty and administrators can use these findings to support student connections to people who can provide guidance, advocacy, and career-relevant information. Faculty, staff, alumni networks, local employers, and community partners can support relationship-building through mentoring initiatives, peer-to-peer programs, and structured networking opportunities. However, ACP planning is rarely the responsibility of a single office. A campus-wide approach is necessary to address the barriers and inequities identified in this study through visible, culturally responsive, and relational ACP social supports while ensuring students receive consistent messaging, equitable access to opportunities, and coordinated support (Hallet et al., 2023). This requires aligning efforts across career services, advising, academic departments, student success programs, multicultural affairs, residence life, and community and employer partners so students encounter multiple entry points to career conversations, preparation, and exploration.

Academic Advising Units

Regarding targeting resource visibility and navigation, advisors must transition from passive, student-initiated systems to proactive, milestone-based outreach (Saiyad & Mahajan, 2023). This structural shift directly mitigates the resource visibility gap, ensuring that vital academic major-to-career pathways and experiential learning tools are illuminated before students miss critical decision points. Furthermore, to address buffering psychological barriers, when students face sudden life disruptions such as credit gaps, forced delays, or major shifts advisors must provide explicit reassurance alongside tangible step-by-step academic plan revisions. This direct support serves as a necessary buffer against academic anxiety, self-doubt, and momentum loss.

Career Services Departments

To address combatting uneven social capital, rather than operating under the assumption that all students possess accessible baseline professional networks, career services must actively engineer social network development and optimization. Integrating career courses, tailored networking skill-development opportunities, and employer-in-residence programming helps level the playing field for students with limited systemic networks. Additionally, for elevating representation, career services must intentionally connect young Black women with female role models and professional alumni of color. Providing highly visible representation allows students to confidently navigate perceived career fit, build self-efficacy, and demystify elite professional environments.

Mentoring & Affinity Initiatives

In rectifying lack of mentor availability, institutions must build structured, multi-tiered mentoring initiatives to bridge the vast equity gap between students who enjoy stable, high-quality guidance and those left entirely to self-driven information-seeking. These initiatives must combine formal mentoring networks with avenues for naturally occurring, informal guidance. To achieve this while embedding support into daily spaces, maximizing visibility, and breaking down navigation friction, affinity-based mentoring and networking programs must be embedded directly into environments students already frequent such as student organizations, specialized campus hubs, and residence halls.

Financial Aid & Literacy Offices

For alleviating financial and psychological stress, because limited financial means directly dictate critical ACP choices (e.g., major selection, full-time versus part-time enrollment, and school delays), financial aid offices must provide highly visible, early financial literacy training. This ensures students can confidently navigate complex institutional funding processes. Along with this, providing proactive safeguards requires that financial aid units should deploy proactive early-alert tools to identify students facing immediate funding disruptions, pairing financial solutions with emotional accountability to prevent anxiety-driven enrollment pauses or structural completion delays.

Academic Departments & Faculty

In normalizing career integration early, faculty could purposefully build career exploration and ca-

reer-related learning experiences directly into core course curricula and first-year seminars. This transforms the classroom into a universal entry point, ensuring career guidance reaches students who lack external social capital. At the same time, cultivating faculty advocacy means that as influential non-familial social agents, faculty must look beyond strict grading matrices and serve as active advocates. Providing explicit reassurance and encouragement during difficult academic transitions functions as a powerful protective factor against student isolation and discouragement.

Student Success & Multicultural Affairs Units

To succeed at dismantling institutional siloes, student success practitioners and multicultural affairs leaders must align their efforts to market affinity-based supports, mental health counseling, and student success resources as a unified, accessible framework rather than a series of fragmented offerings. Finally, for strengthening culturally responsive assets, these units must move away from deficit-based student assessments and instead design programming that respects and leverages students' existing cultural wealth. Cultivating connections with family networks and community partners helps students confidently translate their personal relational capital into sources of long-term career self-management.

Mentorship programs, networking skill-development opportunities, access to Black female role models, and an institution-wide commitment to facilitating career conversations, preparation, and exploration can enhance the ACP experiences and outcomes of young Black women during postsecondary education. On college campuses, these strategies may be implemented through first-year seminars, living-learning communities, career courses, affinity-based mentoring, alumni engagement, employer-in-residence programming, and partnerships with community organizations (McDaniel & Van Jura, 2022; Reddy et al., 2025).

Recommendations For Future Research

This small sample size, limited geographic scope, and lack of educational diversity restrict population generalizability, though the findings remain valuable for understanding ACP experiences of young Black women in other contexts. Several findings, including limited access to role models, mentors, social capital, and career-related conversations, align with prior research and are conceptually generalizable (Barron, 2019; Flores et al., 2021; Hardie, 2015). These gaps underscore the importance of mentorship as a critical mechanism for career growth, as mentors can serve as social agents who expand career knowledge, networks, and decision-making support. Furthermore, inequities in access to mentorship can differentially

constrain career knowledge, opportunity structures, and perceived fit.

Future research should replicate this study across diverse marginalized populations and regions, using a collective case study design to better identify ACP strategies that can be standardized or adapted to meet community-specific needs. Understanding how social supports and the absence of them influence career trajectories can inform more equitable academic and career planning and development. Additionally, applying intersectionality and community cultural wealth frameworks may deepen the interpretation of ACP experiences shaped by ethnicity, gender, and systemic inequities (Collins, 2015; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Yosso, 2005; Kim et al., 2022; Spates et al., 2020). These frameworks highlight how forms of cultural capital, such as familial capital and social capital, evidenced in this study, can be strengthened through mentorship access and strategic student success initiatives to support navigation, persistence, long-term career development and degree attainment.

Conclusion

This study advances career research by showing how barriers, adaptive career behaviors, and unequal access to social supports influence academic and career planning among young Black women. The findings underscore the importance of addressing not only structural barriers but also gaps in awareness and navigation that limit engagement with available resources. These findings highlight concepts pertinent to seminal research that have largely centered on White, middle-class adults. This study supports a broader investigation of marginalized communities and calls on administrators, educators, career services providers, academic advisors, and all other postsecondary professionals committed to equitable student success to expand access to information, mentorship, and meaningful ACP experiences.

Approaches that prioritize equity and inclusivity are essential to ensuring all young people can engage in informed and adaptive academic and career planning. Priorities for colleges and universities, especially academic advising, first-generation support programs, and career centers, could involve designing equitable mentoring networks, employer partnerships, and culturally responsive career development supports that improve persistence, major-to-career alignment, and post-graduation outcomes. Ultimately, inclusive ACP benefits not only young Black women but all students and contributes to healthier communities, a stronger workforce, and a more equitable economy.

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Table 1

Phase One Participants

Pseudonym	Community Role
Andrea	Nonprofit leader
Briana	City government personnel
Christina	City government personnel
Danielle	Religious leader
Evelyn	State government personnel
Frank	Secondary school administrator
Heath	Postsecondary school administrator
Jocelyn	Nonprofit leader

Note. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities.

Table 2

Phase Two Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Education	Employment
Gabriella	24	Earned an associate's degree in child development and science; applying to nursing programs.	Non-profit youth organization staff
India	20	Completed an associate's degree; planning to enroll in a licensed vocational nurse program before pursuing her registered nurse certification to become a travel nurse.	Managerial position in the food service industry
Kendra	20	Transferred from a community college to attend an out-of-state public university online in pursuit of a bachelor's degree in chemistry.	Childcare facility staff
Lanette	24	Completing a bachelor's degree at a public university	Three-year teaching contract beginning senior year
Mia	19	Earned an associate's degree in psychology then registered for additional community college courses in preparation for enrollment at a private university.	n/a
Nicole	22	Graduated from a highly selective private university with a bachelor's degree in a science discipline. Currently, attending a selective public university for graduate studies.	n/a
Oleta	20	Attending an out-of-state, private, historically Black college or university (HBCU) with plans to matriculate into law school after completing her undergraduate degree.	n/a
Patrice	23	Completed several courses at a public university but had to stop out due to financial challenges.	Remote customer support

Note. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities. N/A indicates information not available.

Table 3

Academic and Career Planning Barriers

Participant	Phase	Barrier	Evidence
Kendra	2	Social	If you didn't have money or you wasn't popular, they [school personnel] didn't mentor you. So, like, sometimes they either mentor, like, the really bad kids or the kids that got money and they know they got money, and so, the people in the middle we're stuck. So, we don't have really good mentors and then also good role models. Definitely being in our community, I only had my mother and her father's side...
Andrea	1	Social	If they don't get them [mentors] in school and they don't get them through like the [deidentified organization] …they don't have any and then it's sad.
Frank	1	Social	Mentorship is something that I think is really big and not a lot of females are out there with a willingness to mentor our female students.
Heath	1	Social	We can avoid a whole lot of bumps and bruises if there are people who have already been there and done that, and so, I don't want to sound redundant, but the mentorship piece is so key.
Briana	1	Limited Awareness of Information or Social Supports	When you just don't know and you're not connected with someone who can give you that information, that can be a big barrier. 'How do you start this process? Where do I go from here? How do I apply for college? What steps do I take?' They don't know how to start the process, and that's a barrier.
Danielle	1	Limited Awareness of Information or Social Supports	Yeah, there are resources that are available. But sometimes I think they don't know how to get to the resources and to know what is available.

Christina	1	Limited Awareness of Information or Social Supports	Sad to say that if their family or someone in their household, or their circle does not have that information or encourage them to – to seek out this information or share it themselves… then they don't know.
Nicole	2	Limited Awareness of Information or Social Supports	I think just general lack of knowledge was a big thing. And I think I did overcome a lot of that by just learning to be very resourceful and trying to find things myself and Googling a lot.
Gabriella	2	Psychological	So, it's just it has to do with being-, training your mind, and just sticking to your goals. And, just sometimes, it seems overbearing, and it seems like you get a little doubtful at times.
Lanette	2	Psychological	There was a lot of, 'well, she's not gonna go back. She had a baby.' And as a young single mom, I had to overcome that and those, like, negative words because I knew that school was something that I did want to do, and I didn't want having a child to affect me in that. And, I guess it was more of a mental and emotional overcoming of that.
Lanette	2	Financial	I really don't have the funds for medical school, but teaching sounds pretty legit.
India	2	Financial	...mostly just the financial stress. Working full-time and going to school full-time is super hard because I have to work homework into my schedule.
Mia	2	Financial	Everything is going up except for our pay, so I'm just trying to figure it out because I do pay phone bills. I do pay the car insurance.

Nicole	2	Financial	...at one point, I was like, I don't know if I should go to [highly selective university]. I don't know if I can afford it for this long and thankfully it ended up working out.
Patrice	2	Financial	I would say a barrier right now is finances. That's the main barrier.

Note: Social barriers, e.g., lack of mentorship; Psychological barriers, e.g, discouragement, doubt.

Author Biographies

Dr. Twyla Hough is a passionate educator, researcher, and the co-founder of College Consulting & Career Coaching, LLC. She holds a Ph.D. from Texas Tech University and is a Certified Career Services Provider (CCSP) committed to helping students and families navigate education and career pathways and opportunities with purpose.

Christy Rogers is the Graduate Program Director and an Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Sciences at Texas Tech University. Dr. Rogers received the 2026 Society for Research on Adolescence Mentorship Award, which reflects their values of identifying/implementing social factors that promote healthy adolescent and emerging adult development.

Dr. Aubrey McKenzie Jones is an Assistant Professor, FCCLA Advisor, and Director of the Center for Economic Education at Stephen F. Austin State University. Her career spans government, non-profits, and higher education. Dr. Jones's research focuses on rural community health, championing financial literacy, mentorship, career readiness, and overall family well-being.

Cynthia Miller, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Family and Consumer Sciences Education at Texas Tech University. Her research focuses on career development and planning, work-based learning, workforce readiness, and employer–education partnerships. Her work emphasizes strengthening educational experiences that prepare students for meaningful career and workforce pathways.

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A Pilot Study of Virtual Summer Undergraduate Research Programs for First- and Second-Year Underrepresented Students

Sophia S. Mun

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Abstract

This pilot study evaluated the feasibility and preliminary effectiveness of a Virtual Summer Undergraduate Research Program (V-SURP) designed for first- and second-year underrepresented students. The program uniquely integrated artificial intelligence tools, including AI-assisted literature searching and research applications, preparing students with essential technological skills for contemporary research environments. Five participants (all Hispanic female students, 80% first-generation, 100% commuters) completed the virtual program. Outcomes were assessed using the Undergraduate Research Student Self-Assessment (URSSA), which evaluated research competencies across four domains. Academic preparedness, mentor relationship quality, participant retention at 6- and 12-month follow-up, and qualitative feedback were also examined. Participants demonstrated substantial perceived gains across all URSSA domains, with mean scores ranging from 4.05 to 4.27 on a 5-point scale. Retention outcomes were promising, with 100% enrolled at six months and 80% continuing at twelve months. Qualitative feedback revealed high program satisfaction, particularly valuing research skill development, AI tool training, and peer learning opportunities.

Keywords: virtual, undergraduate research, lowerclassmen, underrepresented, pilot

A Pilot Study of Virtual Summer Undergraduate Research Programs for First- and Second-Year Underrepresented Students

Undergraduate research experiences (UREs) represent a high-impact educational practice with well-documented benefits for college students (Trogden et al., 2023; Blessinger & Hensel, 2020). Studies consistently demonstrate that participation in research activities enhances student engagement, academic performance, retention rates, and aspirations for graduate education (Galvez et al., 2024; Salmani et al., 2023). Research experiences provide students with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge to practical problems, develop critical thinking skills, and form meaningful mentoring relationships with faculty members (Bruthers et al., 2021; Preuss et al., 2022; Kutty & Guzdial, 2020). These experiences have also been shown to be particularly valuable for building academic confidence and fostering a sense of belonging within academic disciplines (Johnson & Knox, 2022).

Despite the recognized benefits, there remains a significant disparity in access to undergraduate research opportunities. Current undergraduate research programs predominantly target upperclassmen, particularly juniors and seniors who have completed foundational coursework in their disciplines (White et al., 2025). Freshmen and sophomores, who could benefit significantly from early exposure to research, often find themselves excluded from such experiences (Amelung & Helmke, 2025; Goodwin et al., 2024). This approach, while pragmatic from an instructional standpoint, creates a critical gap in students' academic development during their early college years. This gap is especially pronounced for students from underrepresented backgrounds, including first-generation college students, ethnic minorities, and those from lower socioeconomic circumstances (Longmire-Avital, 2018). These students often face multiple barriers to research participation, including financial constraints, limited awareness of opportunities, insufficient academic preparation, and competing work obligations (Pearson et al., 2022). Consequently, those who stand to benefit most from early research engagement are the least likely to access it.

To address these gaps, the present pilot study evaluates a Virtual Summer Undergraduate Research Program (V-SURP) designed for underrepresented first- and second-year college students. Specifically, the study examines the feasibility and potential effectiveness of a virtual research experience in promoting research engagement and skill development among students who are traditionally underrepresented in undergraduate research. Following a review of the literature on undergraduate research experiences (UREs), AI

literacy, and virtual research training, the present study reports findings from a mixed-methods evaluation of student outcomes and discusses implications for broadening participation in undergraduate research.

Benefits of Early Research Exposure

Findings of the positive impact of UREs on student outcomes have been consistently replicated across various disciplines and institutional contexts. While undergraduate research has traditionally focused on upperclassmen, emerging evidence suggests that engaging students in research during their early college years offers particular benefits. Rodrigo-Peiris et al. (2018) demonstrated that a low-intensity, hybrid research experience for first-year students yielded positive outcomes and showed potential for large-scale application. Their findings indicated that early exposure to research could help students develop fundamental skills and clarify career interests before entering advanced coursework. Stanford et al. (2015) found that early undergraduate research experiences led to similar learning gains for students across disciplines, challenging the notion that substantial disciplinary knowledge is a prerequisite for meaningful research engagement. Their work suggests that appropriately scaffolded research experiences can benefit students at various academic levels, including those in their initial college years. Miao and Li (2021) specifically addressed the "sophomore slump" through a summer research and enrichment program, recognizing the critical importance of engaging students during this transitional period when retention risks are elevated. Their approach demonstrated that targeted research opportunities could help sustain academic momentum and prevent attrition during the challenging second year of college.

Underrepresentation in Research Programs

In addition to the overall shortage of undergraduate research opportunities for students in their early years of college, participation rates highlight significant disparities, with students from racial and ethnic minority groups, first-generation college students, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds markedly underrepresented in these programs. (Pierszalowski et al., 2021; Haeger et al., 2024). These disparities have prompted focused efforts to increase research participation among underrepresented groups. Erickson-Ludwig and Clyne (2014) demonstrated that a summer diversity program enhanced the academic performance and retention of female and underrepresented minority students in engineering. Lisberg and Woods (2018) found that an integrative approach combining mentorship, mindset development, and learning strategies increased retention of underrepresented minority students in STEM undergraduate programs. Recently, Knox et al. (2024)

examined effective mentoring strategies to support underrepresented minority students in biological sciences research, highlighting the importance of culturally responsive mentoring. These studies collectively underscore the value of intentionally designed research programs for addressing persistent inequities in STEM fields.

Barriers to Participation

Multiple barriers limit undergraduate research participation, particularly for students from underrepresented backgrounds. Financial constraints represent a significant obstacle, as many students cannot afford to forego summer employment to pursue unpaid or low-paid research experiences (Hu & Borden, 2025). For commuter students, geographical limitations and transportation issues create additional complications, while first-generation students often lack the cultural capital and mentoring networks that facilitate research engagement (Pearson et al., 2022). Institutional barriers also exist, including limited availability of research positions, competitive selection processes that may disadvantage students with less academic preparation, and constraints on faculty mentoring capacity (Hu & Borden, 2025; Pierszalowski et al., 2021). These challenges are compounded for underrepresented students who may face additional hurdles related to stereotype threat, imposter syndrome, and a limited sense of belonging in academic environments (Anneke & Brett, 2018). Hanzel-Sello et al. (2010) and Smith & Williamson (2024) examined how summer bridge programs could enhance college preparation for students from historically underrepresented backgrounds by addressing some of these barriers through structured interventions. However, traditional in-person programs often remain inaccessible to students with substantial work or family obligations, underscoring the need for more flexible, accessible models.

Virtual/Remote Undergraduate Research Programs

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the development and implementation of virtual undergraduate research programs, creating new opportunities to expand access to research. Johnson and Knox (2022) documented the National Summer Undergraduate Research Project (NSURP), a virtual research experience designed to deliver retention, equity, access, and life-changing outcomes for underrepresented students in STEM. Their findings indicated that virtual models could effectively engage students who might otherwise be excluded from traditional research opportunities. The virtual format offers several potential advantages, including reduced geographical constraints, flexible scheduling options, and elimination of relocation costs (Knox et al., 2024).

Artificial Intelligence Literacy and Undergraduate Research Preparation

Finally, recent scholarship suggests that AI literacy is becoming an important component of undergraduate research preparation. Rather than simply learning how to use generative AI tools, students must develop the ability to critically evaluate AI-generated information and apply these technologies responsibly within the research process (Hazari, 2024). As AI becomes increasingly integrated into academic inquiry, AI literacy can strengthen students' capacity to engage with research more effectively while fostering the critical judgment needed to navigate the limitations and ethical implications of AI-assisted work (Hazari, 2024). Emerging evidence further suggests that thoughtfully integrating AI into higher education can support the development of research-related competencies and better prepare students for contemporary academic and professional environments (Daniel et al., 2025; Anwar, 2025).

Research Gap

Despite growing interest in both early undergraduate research experiences and virtual research models, the literature remains limited on virtual research experiences specifically designed for underrepresented students in their first and second years of college. Most existing studies on undergraduate research focus either on in-person experiences or on upperclassmen participants (Smith & Williamson, 2024). Similarly, emerging research on virtual undergraduate research (Johnson & Knox, 2022; Knox et al., 2024) has not specifically addressed the unique needs and outcomes of first- and second-year students, including the development of emerging competencies such as AI literacy. For institutions seeking to enhance diversity in research pathways and improve retention of underrepresented students, virtual early research experiences represent a promising but understudied intervention strategy.

The Current Study

This pilot study aims to implement and assess the effectiveness of a Virtual Summer Undergraduate Research Program (V-SURP) specifically designed for underrepresented students in their first and second years of college. By focusing on underrepresented first- and second-year college students, the V-SURP addresses a critical gap in current undergraduate research programming. The study examines how this virtual research experience affects participants' research skills, academic preparedness, and institutional retention, with particular attention to the virtual format's impact on accessibility and engagement. Through this investigation, the study seeks to provide exploratory evidence on effective models for early undergraduate

research engagement and inform efforts to expand research opportunities for diverse student populations. These findings are especially relevant in today's higher education landscape, where issues of equity, student retention, and digital learning have become increasingly important. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Is the V-SURP effective in developing students' knowledge and skills in research among underrepresented students in their first and second years of college?

RQ2: Is the V-SURP effective in motivating them to learn and actively participate in subsequent courses?

RQ3: Is the V-SURP effective in retaining underrepresented students in their first and second years of college?

Methods

Study Design

This study implemented a four-week Virtual Summer Undergraduate Research Program (V-SURP) designed to introduce first- and second-year underrepresented students in a Christian university to the research process. The program served as an academic alternative to traditional summer employment and included instruction in scientific writing, the use of AI in research, responsible research conduct, survey development, and Institutional Review Board (IRB) application procedures. The PI (author) served as the research mentor throughout the program and conducted a pre- and post-program assessment (survey) to evaluate its effectiveness. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative assessments (surveys) and open-ended qualitative questions to gather comprehensive feedback from participants.

Participants

The study prioritized recruiting five underrepresented students in their early college years, defined as those who had completed only their first or second year of major coursework. Eligible participants included first-generation college students, commuters, and individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds who were enrolled at the institution. To promote interdisciplinary perspectives, the PI sought to include students from diverse academic disciplines. The PI interviewed interested students to assess eligibility, research experienc-

es, and commitment to the program. Five students who met the program criteria were selected to participate. Given the pilot nature of the program, the sample size was intentionally small and designed to provide initial insights into the feasibility and potential impact of a virtual undergraduate research experience for early-career students.

Procedures

Upon IRB approval, participants were recruited through class visits, posters, and social media outreach during the spring semester of 2024. The V-SURP was conducted in May 2024. Participants committed to a minimum of 15 hours per week, including daily two-hour virtual meetings with the PI via Zoom and approximately one hour of independent work on assignments. The program was structured into weekly modules (Table 1), which introduced students to key components of the research process, including scientific writing, responsible conduct of research, AI-assisted research practices, survey development, and Institutional Review Board (IRB) procedures. Students completed an anonymous pre-survey before the program and an anonymous post-survey immediately following program completion. In addition, participants responded to three open-ended questions designed to gather qualitative feedback on their program experiences. Participants received a $960 stipend upon successful completion of the program. Retention was monitored through follow-up emails at 6- and 12-month post-program.

Table 1

V-SURP Weekly Modules

Week	Content
Week 1	Research topic selection and writing a literature review
	Integrating AI into research workflows
Week 2	Selecting appropriate measurement scales
	Designing surveys
Week 3	Completing CITI training
	Preparing IRB applications
Week 4	Conducting peer reviews
	Delivering final presentations and administering post-program surveys

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before participant recruitment and data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before completion of the pre-survey and participation in program activities. To ensure participant anonymity, pre- and post-surveys were completed without collecting identifying information and were not linked to participants' identities. Data were stored on password-protected university systems accessible only to the PI to protect confidentiality. Participation in the study's research component was voluntary, and participants were informed that survey responses would not affect their stipend eligibility, program standing, academic evaluation, or future mentoring opportunities.

Because the PI served as both program mentor and researcher, steps were taken to minimize potential bias. Participants were encouraged to provide honest feedback regarding both positive and negative aspects of their experiences, and surveys were completed anonymously to reduce social desirability bias and perceived pressure to provide favorable responses.

Finally, given the program's emphasis on AI-assisted research, ethical use of artificial intelligence was incorporated throughout the curriculum. Students received instruction on responsible AI use, including the importance of verifying AI-generated information, maintaining academic integrity, appropriately citing sources, and recognizing the limitations of AI tools in scholarly research.

Measures

In the pre-survey, motivation and expectations, and demographics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, GPA, school year, & living situation) were collected. The following are measurements used in the post-survey.

- Undergraduate Research Student Self-Assessment (URSSA; Weston & Laursen, 2015) measured research knowledge and skills. 31 items rated on a 5-point scale (*1 = no gain to 5 = great gain*). Cronbach's alpha on the scale was .83. Cronbach's alpha on the subscales ranged from .82 to .95.
- Academic Preparedness (2 items) assessed perceived readiness for future coursework and research (*1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree*).
- Mentorship Quality: 2 items measured interaction with the mentor (*1 = poor to 4 = excellent*).
- Program Feedback: Three open-ended questions on beneficial aspects, challenges, and suggestions.

- Retention: Follow-up checks for 6 months (November 2024) and 12 months (May 2025).

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze quantitative survey responses. Perceived benefits were evaluated by calculating the proportion of responses rated above 3.00. Retention was assessed by dividing the number of students still enrolled in the institution at each follow-up by the total number of participants. Program acceptability was evaluated through qualitative analysis of open-ended feedback. Responses to open-ended questions were analyzed using an inductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given the small sample size ($N = 5$), coding was conducted manually, with responses reviewed multiple times to identify preliminary themes and patterns that may guide future research and program development.

Results

Participant Characteristics

Five undergraduate students participated in the Virtual Summer Undergraduate Research Program (V-SURP). Table 2 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of participants.

Table 2

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

Baseline Characteristic	*n*	*%*
Age		
18-19	4	80
20-21	1	20
Gender		
Female	5	100
Race		
Hispanic	5	100
The school year		
First Year	2	40
Second Year	3	60
First-generation		
Yes	4	80
No	1	20
Living Situation		
Commuters	5	100
Majors		

Biomedical Sciences	1	20
Psychology	1	20
Fine Arts	1	20
Health Science	1	20
Environmental Science	1	20

Note. N = 5

The majority of participants (80%) were aged 18-19, with the remaining 20% aged 20-21. All participants (100%) identified as female and Hispanic. Regarding academic standing, 40% of participants were in their first year, while 60% were in their second year. Most participants (80%) were first-generation college students, and all participants (100%) were commuter students. Participants in the program represented a diverse range of disciplines, including Biomedical sciences, Psychology, Fine arts, Health science, and Environmental science.

Perceived Benefits of the Program

Participants reported positive perceived benefits across all measured domains, with all mean scores exceeding the 3.00 threshold indicating positive ratings (Table 3).

Table 3

Perceived Benefits of the Program

Measures	Mean	SD	Scale Type	Response Type
URSSA Four Core Factors (31 items)			5-Point Likert	No gains – Great gain
Thinking and Working like a Scientist	4.27	.44		
Personal Gain	4.24	.32		
Skills	4.18	.44		
Attitude and Behaviors	4.05	.44		
Academic Preparedness (2 items)	4.90	.22	5-Point Likert	Strongly disagree - Strongly agree
Relationship with Mentors (2 items)	3.90	.62	4-Point Likert	Poor - Excellent

The URSSA Four Core Factors, measured across 31 items on a 5-point Likert scale, yielded scores of 4.00 or higher in each subscale, indicating substantial perceived gains in research-related competencies.

Specifically, the factor "Thinking and Working like a Scientist" received the highest rating (M = 4.27, SD = 0.44), followed by "Personal Gain" (M = 4.24, SD = 0.32) and "Skills development" (M = 4.18, SD = 0.44). "Attitude and Behaviors" toward research received a mean score of 4.05 (SD = 0.44). "Academic Preparedness" demonstrated the highest mean score (M = 4.90, SD = 0.22), suggesting participants felt significantly more prepared for academic pursuits following program completion. Participants also reported positive "Relationships with their Mentors", with a mean score of 3.90 (SD = 0.62) on a 4-point Likert scale, indicating relationships that approached the excellent range.

Retention Rates

Preliminary findings suggested positive retention outcomes among V-SURP participants. At the 6-month follow-up period, the retention rate was 100% (5/5 participants). At the 12-month follow-up, the retention rate remained high at 80% (4/5 participants), with four participants continuing their enrollment in the college.

Program Acceptability

The qualitative feedback was analyzed thematically to understand participants' perspectives on program strengths, challenges, and areas for improvement. Exploratory findings from the open-ended responses suggested that the V-SURP was well received, with participants describing multiple beneficial and meaningful aspects of the experience.

Beneficial and Meaningful Aspects

Participants highlighted several key benefits from their V-SURP experience. Skills development emerged as a primary theme, with participants particularly valuing learning to use AI such as ChatGPT as a research tool and Zotero for reference management. Literature review writing skills were frequently mentioned as a valuable outcome. Participants recognized the transferable nature of these skills, with one stating, "Some aspects that I feel would be very helpful later in my academics would be the Literature Review, as I will need this throughout my GE's." Professional development through CITI (Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative) certification was found to be meaningful, with participants appreciating the formal recognition of their research ethics training. The peer learning component was also valued, with one participant commenting:

> The most beneficial aspect of the program was being able to engage with peers and learn more about their interests based on their research topics. I enjoyed learning more about literature reviews and how to create a research survey.

The structured feedback process received positive recognition, with participants appreciating the opportunity to review assignments and learn from mistakes.

Challenging Aspects

Despite the overall positive reception, participants identified several challenges with the program. Time management emerged as a significant challenge, particularly for students balancing the research program with other summer commitments. One participant noted, "The most challenging part of the program was balancing the assignments and my summer courses."

The intensity and complexity of certain program components, particularly the CITI certification, were identified as challenging by some participants. As one participant explained, "While the CITI training was beneficial, it was very challenging and took me the whole day to complete, although I am sure it is much shorter for others." The volume and time-intensive nature of some assignments were noted as challenging. Same-day assignment deadlines also created pressure for participants.

Recommendations for Program Improvement

Participants provided constructive suggestions for enhancing future iterations of the V-SURP. The most frequently mentioned recommendation was to provide clearer assignment instructions. Participants also suggested increasing individualized attention, with one recommending "more one-on-one time with the professor". The communication methods used in the program received positive feedback, with participants recommending maintaining the email-based assignment distribution system. Overall, participants summarized the program positively, stating, "Overall, I think the program was set up very nicely." Preliminary findings suggest that the V-SURP shows promise in enhancing research skills and supporting retention among underrepresented college students in their early college years, while maintaining high levels of program acceptability and participant satisfaction.

Discussion

Summary of Key Findings

This pilot study implemented and evaluated a Virtual Summer Undergraduate Research Program (V-SURP) designed specifically for underrepresented students in their first and second years of college. The program targeted a critical gap in undergraduate research opportunities by serving first- and second-year students who are typically excluded from traditional research experiences. Five participants, all Hispanic females, with 80% being first-generation college students, completed the virtual program. The study met its three primary aims, providing initial evidence of potential benefits, positive retention outcomes, and high acceptability of the program. Participants reported notable gains across all measured domains on the URSSA instrument, with mean scores ranging from 4.05 to 4.27 on a 5-point scale. The program achieved a 100% retention rate at six months and 80% at twelve months post-completion. Qualitative feedback revealed high program satisfaction, with participants particularly valuing research skill development, incorporating AI into the research process, literature review writing capabilities, and peer learning opportunities.

Interpretation of Findings and Program Effectiveness

The quantitative findings provide encouraging evidence of V-SURP's effectiveness in developing research competencies among first- and second-year underrepresented students. The high Academic Preparedness scores ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 0.22$) suggest that participants reported feeling better equipped for academic success following program completion. This finding is particularly noteworthy given that these students were in their first or second year of college and had limited prior exposure to research. This aligns with Stanford et al. (2015), who found that early undergraduate research experiences led to similar learning gains for students across disciplines, challenging assumptions about prerequisite knowledge requirements. Participants' positive ratings across all URSSA domains suggest that the program may have supported multiple dimensions of development, including research skills, personal growth, and professional identity formation.

The retention outcomes also provide promising evidence: 100% of participants remained enrolled six months post-program, and 80% continued at twelve months. While the small sample size limits generalizability, these rates are positive compared to typical retention benchmarks for underrepresented students and align with foundational research on the benefits of undergraduate research. Lisberg and Woods (2018) demonstrated that undergraduate research partnerships significantly improved retention rates, particularly

for underrepresented minority students, and our findings extend this body of evidence to virtual research contexts and earlier stages of students' academic careers. The results provide favorable support for the potential of early research engagement to promote academic persistence among underrepresented students.

The virtual format appears to have effectively addressed traditional barriers to research participation. This encouraging outcome supports the findings of Pearson et al. (2022), who identified financial constraints, geographical limitations, and competing obligations as primary barriers to research participation among low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented STEM students. Our findings suggest that the virtual model may help address these challenges by eliminating relocation costs, providing financial support, and offering scheduling flexibility that accommodates participants' diverse obligations.

A particularly innovative aspect of V-SURP was the integration of artificial intelligence tools into the research process, preparing students with essential skills for the modern research environment. Participants' appreciation for learning research tools like ChatGPT and Zotero demonstrates the program's feasibility in providing practical, transferable skills that extend beyond the immediate research experience. The incorporation of AI-assisted literature searching represents a forward-thinking approach to research training, as artificial intelligence becomes increasingly central to academic inquiry across disciplines. Teaching students to use AI tools effectively and ethically in research processes equips them with a competitive advantage in their academic careers and prepares them for research environments where AI literacy is becoming increasingly fundamental. This technological integration positions participants at the forefront of evolving research methodologies and demonstrates the program's commitment to preparing students for contemporary and future research practices.

Qualitative feedback provides deeper insights into how the virtual format enhanced accessibility and engagement. The emphasis participants placed on literature review writing skills reflects recognition of competencies that will benefit their broader academic careers. Notably, the peer learning component emerged as unexpectedly valuable in the virtual environment, with participants appreciating opportunities to engage with diverse research interests despite physical separation. The positive ratings for mentor relationships ($M = 3.90$) suggest successful adaptation of mentoring approaches to virtual environments, consistent with Knox et al. (2024), who examined effective virtual mentoring strategies for underrepresented minority students in biological sciences.

Recommendations for Program Enhancement

Based on participant feedback and study findings, several recommendations emerge for strengthening virtual research programs serving underrepresented students in their first and second years of college. Communication clarity is the most consistently identified area for improvement by participants. Future iterations should include detailed assignment instructions embedded within email communications, structured assignment templates, and clear rubrics that help novice researchers understand expectations. Developing a program handbook or an online resource portal could provide consistent reference materials throughout the experience. The balance between group and individual mentoring requires careful attention in virtual environments. While peer learning proved valuable, participants also requested more opportunities for individualized feedback. Future programs might incorporate a hybrid approach combining group sessions for peer interaction with scheduled individual consultations for personalized guidance. This could address participants' concerns about asking questions in group settings while maintaining the collaborative benefits they valued. Assignment pacing and workload management emerged as significant challenges, particularly for students balancing research participation with summer coursework. Future programs should consider implementing staged assignment releases, flexible deadlines, and workload monitoring to prevent students from becoming overwhelmed. The integration of time management and academic planning components could help participants develop skills for balancing multiple commitments throughout their academic careers. For students in their early college years, scaffolding strategies should be enhanced to support novice researchers. This could include more extensive research methodology orientation, step-by-step skill-building modules, and peer mentoring by advanced students who have completed similar programs.

Strengths and Limitations

This study presents several notable strengths that enhance its contribution to undergraduate research literature. The focus on first -and second-year underrepresented students addresses a significant gap in existing research, which has predominantly examined upperclassmen or general populations. The virtual program model offers a promising solution to accessibility barriers while maintaining the quality of research experience, providing a scalable approach for institutions seeking to expand research opportunities. The mixed-methods evaluation approach provides a comprehensive assessment of both quantitative outcomes and qualitative participant experiences, offering rich insights into program effectiveness. The high partic-

ipant retention and engagement throughout the study period suggest the program's appeal and relevance to the target population. The integration of contemporary research tools, including AI-assisted literature searching and reference management software, reflects current academic practices and prepares participants for modern research environments. The positive outcomes observed among commuter students suggest that virtual research programs may be a favorable option for this population.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. The small sample size ($N = 5$) limits generalizability and statistical power for quantitative analyses. While appropriate for a pilot study, larger-scale implementation research is needed to confirm these promising initial findings. The homogeneous participant demographics, with all participants identifying as Hispanic female students, restrict the diversity of perspectives and experiences captured in the evaluation. The relatively short follow-up period for retention assessment (12 months) provides limited insight into long-term academic outcomes and career trajectories.

Interpretation and Transferability of Findings

Beyond these limitations, it is important to consider the scope of conclusions that can be drawn from this pilot study and the institutional context in which the program was implemented. As a pilot study, the findings primarily provide evidence of program feasibility, participant engagement, and perceived benefits rather than definitive evidence of effectiveness. The positive outcomes reported by participants suggest that the V-SURP model shows promise as an approach to supporting early-career underrepresented students in research; however, conclusions regarding causal program impacts should be interpreted with caution. Future research should build on these preliminary findings by examining outcomes across larger and more diverse student populations and institutional settings.

The Christian university context may also have influenced participants' experiences and the implementation of the program. Consistent with the institution's emphasis on community, mentorship, and holistic student development, the program was designed to foster close faculty-student interaction and individualized support. These institutional values may have contributed to the strong mentoring relationships and high levels of participant engagement observed during the program. While many components of the V-SURP model may be adaptable to other settings, transferability should be considered in light of differences in institutional mission, culture, and available student support structures.

Conclusion

The Virtual Summer Undergraduate Research Program represents a promising innovation in undergraduate research education, demonstrating particular effectiveness for underrepresented students in their first and second years of college who traditionally face barriers to research participation. The positive retention rates, notable perceived benefits, and high program acceptability in this pilot study indicate that virtual research experiences have the potential to serve as effective interventions to support student success and academic persistence. The findings have significant implications for institutional practice, suggesting that virtual research models offer scalable ways to expand undergraduate research access for diverse student populations. The program's effectiveness with commuter students, first-generation college students, and ethnic minorities provides evidence for its potential as an equity-focused intervention in higher education. While preliminary, the V-SURP model suggests that with thoughtful design and implementation, virtual undergraduate research programs may effectively support the academic success and career development of underrepresented students, contributing to broader goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education and research careers.

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Graduate Student Experiences in an Era of Political Backlash and Uncertainty

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Abstract

Due to the current socio-political climate and terraforming of higher education, a critical examination of students' experiences, specifically, how graduate programs prepare students to engage with social equity, has become increasingly important. This study investigates how public administration graduate programs incorporate social equity into their curriculum and how such integration impacts student experiences, inclusion/belonging, and persistence. Using a mixed-methods design, the study analyzes survey responses collected between August 2023 and March 2024 from students enrolled in NASPAA-affiliated public affairs programs. Phenomenological qualitative analysis and ordered logistic regression were used to analyze responses. Results suggest programs integrating critical theoretical frameworks are associated with stronger peer community, improved program satisfaction, and student success. The study advances a "praxis of equity" framework to guide programs in fostering supportive, inclusive environments that strengthen student well-being, belonging, persistence/retention, and academic success. Such an approach may fulfil students' Maslovian needs, helping them overcome challenges and succeed.

Keywords: DEIJ, graduate student experiences, graduate curriculum, public administration education, social equity

Graduate Student Experiences in an Era of Political Backlash and Uncertainty

The field of public administration (PA) collectively asserted social equity as one of its guiding pillars (Frederickson, 1971) in response to the Civil Rights movement that followed centuries of racial oppression by the U.S. administrative state toward minoritized individuals (Frederickson, 1992). Since then, scholars have emphasized the need to center social equity in research, theory, practice, and pedagogy to train administrators to find ways to reduce the harms experienced by marginalized groups (McCandless & Gooden, 2024; Berry-James *et al.*, 2021). The current socio-political environment is not conducive for embedding social equity as evidenced by attacks on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and ongoing attempts to ban and defund diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) programs (Rubin et al., 2024), thereby further marginalizing already disadvantaged groups (Conyers, 2025; Riccucci, 2025). This directly impacts colleges/universities (Roberts, 2020) and calls for a critical examination of graduate students' experiences.

This study explores the DEIJ-related[1] experiences of MPA and PhD students in PA programs to investigate whether programs have integrated social equity into the curriculum, and whether this integration (or lack thereof) is associated with differential student experiences. This mixed methods analysis offers a *praxis of equity* as a framework for integrating social equity into PA graduate programs and curricula while examining how such an approach can address students' Maslovian needs. We define "praxis of equity" following Lumb & Burke (2025) understanding of equity as acknowledgement that "we are all socially situated - we cannot move outside of relations of power - but these are dynamic and multidimensional relations" (p. 5). Further, this praxis means that equity is a "movement, feeling and practice" as we all have "capacity to be moved e-motion-ally in dialogue with Others" (p. 6). Thus, a praxis of equity is more than just a checklist to add to a curriculum or syllabus, but a way of relating with one another, acknowledging the socially situated nature of all our experiences, and our abilities to learn with one another both about and across our differences.

1 From this point forward, DEIJ is referred to as *social equity*.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Given the purpose of this study, the following research questions (RQs) and hypotheses were developed to guide it:

- RQ #1[2]: How do PA graduate students describe their experiences of social equity integration, program support, community, and belonging?
- RQ #2: Is curricular integration of critical theory associated with graduate students' sense of peer community, mental health toll, and program satisfaction?
    - H2: *Curricular integration of critical theories may be associated with graduate students being able to view themselves in the curriculum and bring lived experiences into the classroom in a constructive manner. This may lead to overall greater feelings of belonging, which may also be associated with a greater ability to find community, improved program satisfaction and experiencing a lesser mental health toll.*
- RQ #3: Do these associations vary by racial identity?
    - H3: *Experiences with social equity in curriculum and graduate program experiences may vary by racial identity, due to racialized differences in social and academic interactions. Thus, Black and brown students may experience associations with larger magnitudes compared to white students.*

Literature Review

Social Equity and Public Administration

The roots of social equity in PA trace back to the 1960s, serving as a direct response to the era's evolving societal needs (Svara & Brunet, 2005; Frederickson, 1990). It was posited as one of the field's core pillars to acknowledge the socio-political and economic conditions affecting citizens' differential experiences with governance. Social equity became a guiding ethic for public administrators, but as the tides shift, scholars are increasingly recognizing it as fundamental to a healthy democracy, as a moral imperative, and as a public value (Gooden, 2025; Guy & Williams, 2023).

2 RQ #1 is descriptive and qualitative and thus does not test a hypothesis.

Unlike other fields, PA is intertwined with the public systems and values it studies - it observes and analyzes institutional dynamics but also actively shapes them (Guy, 2025; Kettl, 2023). This duality is significant in the context of social equity as scholars work in tandem on the tasks of identifying and measuring disparities as well as proposing and implementing solutions for rectifying them. Accordingly, scholars have urged for field and program leadership to support social equity in graduate instruction and public servant recruitment/retention (e.g., Carboni et al. 2019; McCandless & Gooden, 2024). Building on this scholarship, this study examines how integrating a praxis of equity into graduate PA programs may influence student experiences, satisfy their needs, and ultimately increase persistence and success.

A Praxis of Equity in PA Graduate Programs

Classroom discourse and teaching practices reflect broader hegemonic ideologies (Brookfield, 2007; Lumb & Burke, 2025). "Rewarding certain styles of learning, thinking and behaving, while failing non-conformists ensures the continued dominance of the norms, while disguising this discrimination as a measure of generic ability" (Ritter 2007, 577). It is this domination that serves as the mechanism of exclusion and marginalization of Others in society, on-campus, and in classrooms. Educators are the powerbrokers of classrooms (Lumb & Burke 2025; Ritter, 2007) and the dialogue within is central to any praxis of equity and to the wellbeing and persistence of students as they navigate their graduate programs, particularly for graduate courses in public administration. Critical frameworks are also central to this praxis of equity in the higher education classroom, not as an indicator of what is *the truth*, but rather as a point of action and reflection (Lumb & Burke, 2025).

A primary goal of PA programs is to educate and train future administrators to recognize, address, and combat social inequities (NASPAA, 2023). However, sustained training in this area is often lacking (Blessett et al., 2019), leading to many calls for the field to better center social equity in their programs (e.g., Wooldridge & Gooden, 2009; Lopez-Littleton, Blessett, & Burr, 2018; Berry-James *et al.*, 2021;). The resurgence of academic and social exclusion in many universities undermines these calls and any progress that has been made. Importantly, a praxis of equity necessitates open discussion of public values and PA programs are in a prime position to take these discourses head-on as values are central to the creation and evaluation of policies (Bardach & Patashnik, 2023).

Graduate Student Persistence and Success

For a praxis of equity to be effective and implemented, an understanding of the factors at play that impact graduate student persistence and success must occur first. The broader literature surrounding graduate education seems to confirm that student persistence and success are primarily influenced by a combination of certain institutional and environmental factors as explicitly outlined in Tinto's theory of student departure (Tinto 1975; 1993; Zhai & Carney, 2024). This means persistence is not solely dependent upon a student's academic ability and/or motivation(s). Previous research identified several challenges, namely financial constraints (Gururaj et al. 2010), mental health challenges, online learning isolation and limited social interactions with classmates (Lew et al. 2020), and work-life balance issues (Holmes et al. 2025), graduate students experience in U.S. higher education that impact their academic experiences, success, and ultimately, their ability to persist.

While mental health challenges were identified previously, recent research by Zhai and Carney (2024) delved further into the nuanced effect of COVID-19's impact on the mental health of graduate students, specifically on their persistence and retention in graduate school. Their research filled a notable gap in the literature, highlighting the detrimental long-term effects of educational environments lacking physical and psychological safety as well as inadequate support structures, on persistence and success.

To overcome these challenges and be retained, many often leaned on social support from friends, family, and/or faculty (Johnson, 2023; Lew et al. 2020) and this is especially true for students who identify as minoritized or possess an underrepresented background (Estrada et al. 2019). This enabled them to integrate more effectively into the academic and social environments of their program, aiding in their success and persistence in graduate school. Therefore, it is clear that students and in particular, graduate students' needs are nuanced and interconnected to the academic and social facets of the collegiate environment. Thus, these students require meaningful relationships that provide social support (Lew et al. 2020), perceptions of support particularly from faculty/staff, psychological safety (Zhai and Carney, 2024), and more.

While the aforementioned factors are applicable to graduate students as a whole, the impact of these factors may be amplified for minoritized students and adversely affect them disproportionately compared to their non-minoritized counterparts (Johnson, 2023; Johnson, 2024). This paper explores the impact of anti-DEIJ climates on this population's retention and graduate experiences. Doing so may yield insight into

how curricular and programmatic environments influence the experiences and persistence of minoritized graduate students while properly situating a praxis of equity that can be used to satiate their needs and predict outcomes.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Student Outcomes

A praxis of equity is central to fulfilling the basic needs of graduate students and in particular, students in PA graduate programs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides a useful framework for understanding graduate student wellbeing while ascertaining retention and success inclination. There are five levels in Maslow's hierarchy of needs: physiological, safety or security, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization or personal accomplishment (Mason et al. 2025; McLeod, 2025; Pichère & Cadiat, 2015).

Physiological needs (tier 1) are basic to one's survival (food, shelter, water, etc.). Safety and security needs (tier 2) are related to protection from physical or psychological violence and violation of one's person. Love and belonging needs (tier 3) are reflective of affection and social relations. The need for esteem (tier 4) is related to status, employment, and how we are defined within society. Finally, tier 5, the need for personal accomplishment or self-actualization reflects one's needs determined by one's personality and individual goals (ibid). Graduate students' academic and social needs are couched within this hierarchy (Mason et al, 2025). Within the context of this study, a praxis of equity is leveraged to explore how it may satisfy the middle three tiers of security, belonging, and esteem needs (Appendix A).

While other scholars such as Spady (1970), Tinto (1975 and 1993), and Bean (1980) have posited important retention theories to explain student integration, retention, and success (Johnson, 2023), relying on certain retention predictors such as grade performance or financial constraints, allows for only a partial understanding about student potential (Jama et al. 2009). Further, the crux of these theories contends that dropout occurs because students fail to integrate into the (academic and social) environment (Jama et al. 2009; Tinto, 1975; 1993). This presents a skewed picture for minoritized graduate students who may require particular resources, interactions, support, and protections (e.g., psychological safety), and may be impacted differently than their non-minoritized counterparts by existing interventions (Johnson, 2023).

While the extant retention theories were novel for their time and are still useful, they need to be updated as education and society evolve. To update knowledge regarding retention and the experiences of minoritized graduate students, this study focuses on three specific Maslow tiers namely, security,

belonging, and esteem, which center key academic and social dimensions of graduate student experiences (discussed in more detail in the next section) (Pichère & Cadiat, 2015). These three dimensions of Maslow's framework align with the outcomes of interest within this study: mental health toll serves as an indicator of students' security; community of peers serves as indicator of belonging; and program satisfaction serves as an indicator of esteem. Maslow's framework has been widely applied to education and specifically graduate student experiences (Education Library, 2021; Mason et al. 2025). Finally, Maslow encompasses newer, critical elements students need to be successful such as psychological safety (i.e., mental health), which were excluded in the original theories (e.g., Spady, Tinto, and Bean).

A Praxis of Equity and Student Needs

Integrating a praxis of equity into classrooms and graduate programs may have important implications for satisfying students' needs. The ability to discuss one's lived experiences, have them reflected in course readings and discourse, or acknowledged by program personnel and peers may have significant implications for graduate students' wellbeing. Student's physical or psychological safety has been found to directly impact their mental health, which can diminish their academic progress and overall achievements, undermining their self-actualization (Mason et al. 2025). Therefore, integrating critical frameworks, and identifying problematic discourse may help protect the psychological and ultimately physical safety of students. This can be achieved by creating brave spaces in classrooms where individuals are empowered to speak on difficult topics (Lopez-Littleton et al. 2018).

Moreover, security can be obtained through communities that provide support to navigate challenges, which also helps create a sense of belonging, and improved esteem with their peers and program faculty (Johnson, 2024; McDermott et al. 2021). Creating a graduate environment where equity is a relational praxis of reflexivity and understanding of one another and our differences may make it more likely for students across diversity indicators to find communities of support to experience security, belonging, and esteem. Such an environment may also be associated with greater overall program satisfaction and persistence due to meeting their needs of security, belonging, and esteem.

Methodology

Data Collection & Analysis

There were several sampling strategies used to distribute the online survey via Qualtrics, specifically convenience and purposive. The survey was disseminated between August 2023 and March 2024 to a listserv of Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) accredited graduate programs, covering 44 U.S. states, 128 institutions, and 12,316 students, constituting convenience sampling. The targeted population was graduate students based on the study's purpose as well as their knowledge and experience with the phenomenon being explored (Palinkas et al. 2016), denoting purposive sampling. The study was then distributed via email to program chairs on the listserv and disseminated through professional networks. To aid in participant recruitment, reminder emails were sent monthly to program chairs and the researchers periodically shared the recruitment ad on social media and within their professional networks.

Since survey recruitment relied heavily on the program chairs and professional networks, the researchers were unable to determine the total number of graduate students who received and/or reviewed the survey invitation. Consequently, the denominator and corresponding survey response rate could not be reasonably calculated. Despite these efforts, the survey only received 150 responses, which was limited, in part, due to the program chairs distribution method and their potential aversion to topics contained within (Bryant, 2023), and because of the voluntary nature of research (Johnson, 2023). IP address mapping, and gender and race variation in the dataset reflect the variation in the student population, providing confidence in the dataset despite the small sample. This mixed methods design was used to yield a more comprehensive understanding of graduate student experiences, and to help overcome the limitations of a smaller sample. Survey completion time was approximately 10-15 minutes, including the time needed to read the consent form.

The survey included questions about students' demographic(s), personal well-being, professional aspirations, research agendas, degree program type, and full-/part-time status. Respondents' and institution names were not collected to minimize identification risks. Respondents were asked a variety of questions using a 5-point Likert scale that is detailed below to explore the level of connection students feel with others, formal opportunities to engage beyond the university, and theories and methods of personal interest. It should be noted that the survey items were developed by the researchers for the purposes of this study and

were not adapted from previously validated scales, underscoring the exploratory nature of the research.

Qualitative

A phenomenological approach was used to explore the experiences of PA graduate students regarding their demographic identities and their program's level of social equity integration. This was accomplished by analyzing the open-ended survey prompt, "Please share any additional comments concerning your experiences as a graduate student.", to which 50 participants answered. Using NVivo, the data was coded line-by-line to identify emergent themes. Prior to the analysis, preconceived notions were bracketed for researcher bias. Next, units of meaning were delineated in two steps. First, key statements that spoke to the participants' experiences with/in their graduate program were identified. Second, the bank of themes were reviewed to eliminate redundant codes. Codes were then clustered to formulate themes based on participants' experiences. Four themes were formulated encompassing both positive and negative comments (Table 2). A hybrid triangulation method was implemented to enhance the validity, credibility, and reliability of the findings (Johnson et al., 2024).

Quantitative

Variables. The three dependent variables of interest for the quantitative analysis were community of peers, mental health, and satisfaction. Using an ordinal 5-point scale of "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree," respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agree to/with the following statements:

- "I have found a community of peers or scholars at my institution."
- "My experience as a graduate student has taken a toll on my mental health."
- "On a scale of 1 (least satisfied) to 10 (most satisfied), how would you rate your satisfaction[3] thus far with your master's or doctoral training experience, overall?"

The main independent variable of interest was the degree of curricular integration of critical theory *(crit)*. Using the same 5-point Likert scale, participants were asked their level of agreement with the following statement: "*My program integrates critical theory into the curriculum."* Critical theory includes, but is not limited to CRT, and may also reflect feminist theory, queer theory, and many others. An interaction term was used in some models to evaluate the association of critical theory integration across groups of different

3 Satisfaction was determined by a 10-point scale.

racial identities. The *race* variable is a multinomial variable, White (1), Black (2), and other non-White (3). The other non-White group is composed of individuals who self-identify as Asian, Middle Eastern/North African, Native American/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and/or Hispanic. The survey allowed participants to self-identify their specific race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and other indicators. Due to the low sample size of the individual identities, they were clustered into broader categories to reduce participant identification.

Statistical Methods

Ordered logistic regression models were used to explore the relationship between crit and our three dependent variables: community of peers, mental health, and program satisfaction. The second model, written below, investigates heterogeneity of crit effects across racial groups. We estimate robust standard errors to account for heteroskedasticity in the models.

$$Pr(Y) = \boldsymbol{\alpha} + \boldsymbol{\beta}_1(Crit) + \boldsymbol{\beta}_2(controls) + Ɛ$$

$$Pr(Y) = \boldsymbol{\alpha} + \boldsymbol{\beta}_1(Crit) + \boldsymbol{\beta}_2(Race) + \boldsymbol{\beta}_3(Crit*Race) + \boldsymbol{\beta}_4(controls) + Ɛ$$

Several controls to reduce exogenous variation that would bias the relationship of interest were included. Demographic characteristics as there may be variation in experiences due to differences in racial identity, gender identity (0, male, 1 female/gender diverse), sexual orientation (0, hetero, 1, LGBTQIA), and religion (0, Christian, 1, non-Christian). Identity indicators were collapsed to reflect widely perceived power differentials in mainstream social and political discourse (White-non-White, cis male-non-cis male, Christian-non-Christian, etc.). Institutional Carnegie classification (1-4: R1, R2, R3, unsure) and NASPAA accreditation status (1-3: no, yes, unsure) were included as controls as this may lead students to experience differences in program priorities. Due to low statistical power, both master's and doctoral level respondents were included in the full analysis, thereby controlling for graduate program type.

Validation Process

A hybrid triangulation method was implemented to enhance the validity, credibility, and reliability of the findings. Results were triangulated using the online survey results, multiple researchers to explore the phenomenon, and multiple methods to validate the data (Johnson et al. 2024). The four final themes are elaborated upon holistically within the discussion section (summation), allowing the participants' responses

to be transformed from words in a survey into digestible experiences for readers (Groenewald, 2004).

Ethical Considerations

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from each researcher's respective institution prior to the commencement of data collection. Informed consent was obtained through an explicit consent statement presented to prospective participants at the beginning of the online survey. Participants were required to review and acknowledge the consent information before proceeding with the survey; therefore, no signed consent forms were collected. Participation was voluntary and participants could exit the survey at any time with no adverse ramifications to them personally, academically, and/or professionally.

To protect participant confidentiality and minimize risks of identification that could compromise individuals' willingness to participate, respondents' names and the names of their institutions were not collected. All study data were securely stored on password-protected platforms, including Qualtrics, and encrypted storage devices, with access restricted to authorized members of the research team. Collectively, these procedures were implemented to protect participant privacy, maintain data confidentiality, and minimize potential risks associated with participation in the study.

Findings

Of the 150 respondents that completed the survey, half indicated they were enrolled in a Master of Public Policy or public affairs program; the other half indicated enrollment in a doctoral (Ph.D. or DPA) program. Two-thirds of respondents indicated their racial identity as White; the other third identified as either Black or other non-White race. Two-thirds of the respondents identified as female or gender diverse, the other third as male. The race and gender distribution of the sample reflects the population distribution providing some confidence in the sample. Two-thirds of respondents identify as heterosexual, and the remainder identify as LGBTQIA. Finally, almost two-thirds of respondents identify as non-Christian (e.g., agnostic, atheist, Jewish, etc.), with the remainder identifying as Christian.

The simple t-tests shown on our descriptive table indicate meaningful variation in our data. The descriptive statistics do not reveal statistically significant differences in enrollment across institutional research type, degree level, or accreditation status, nor is there a difference across groups regarding exposure to critical theories. There are statistically significant differences relative to their reference group for other non-

White students, LGBTQIA, and non-Christian students regarding worse mental health. Black and female/gender diverse students are less likely to feel supported; other non-White students are more likely to experience financial stress; and female/gender diverse students are less likely to indicate overall wellness (Table 1).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	Full sample	White	Other non-white	Black	Male	Diverse and female	Hetero	LGBTQIA	Christian	Not Christian
Community of Peers	3.68	3.73	3.56	3.63	3.67	3.69	3.69	3.66	3.76	3.63
Mental Health	3.22	3.08	3.66**	3.16	2.98	3.33	3.07	3.53*	2.96	3.37*
Program Satisfaction	7.23	7.46	6.78	6.84	7.38	7.16	7.35	6.98	7.25	7.23
Critical Theory	0.65	0.70	0.56	0.53	0.58	0.68	0.64	0.66	0.57	0.69
Race	2.52	3.00	2.00	1.00	2.69	2.44*	2.47	2.64	2.35	2.62***
Gender	0.67	0.62	0.78*	0.79	0.00	1.00	0.64	0.75	0.59	0.72
Sexual Orientation	0.32	0.31	0.53**	0.00***	0.25	0.35	0.00	1.00	0.17	0.41***
Religion	0.63	0.67	0.72	0.32***	0.54	0.68	0.55	0.81***	0.00	1.00
Carnegie	0.88	0.97	0.78	0.63	0.90	0.88	0.90	0.85	1.04	0.80
NASPAA	1.25	1.25	1.34	1.11	1.17	1.29	1.28	1.19	1.28	1.24
Program (MPA/Doc)	1.48	1.51	1.44	1.37	1.40	1.52	1.43	1.57	1.39	1.53
Supported	1.20	1.25	1.28	0.79**	1.36	1.12*	1.21	1.17	1.19	1.21
Financial stress	3.10	2.84	3.69**	3.42	2.79	3.25	2.94	3.45	2.93	3.20
Wellness	3.21	3.31	3.00	3.05	3.48	3.08*	3.38	2.85	3.37	3.12
N	150	100	30	20	50	100	100	50	50	90
Standard errors in parentheses										
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1										

Note: Statistical significance indicators are in reference to t-test with the following reference categories: race - White, gender - male, sexuality - hetero, and religion - Christian. All numbers are rounded to the nearest whole number, and decimals to the nearest 100ths place to protect against the reidentification of survey participants.

Table 2

Qualitative Results: Student Voices

Theme	Description	Example
Differential Experiences and Needs	Participants acknowledge the nuance within and across cohorts regarding academic and social experiences, academic freedom, the needs of diverse students, and the presence or absence of support.	"While my experience in my program has been primarily a positive one, I have heard from colleagues in other cohorts that their experiences have been vastly different, and unfortunately, far more negative than mine…it's difficult for me to determine the reasons for this difference in experiences…"
Program Faculty, Quality, and Leadership	Participants reflect on program quality, training needs, academic politics, and program leadership.	"I personally commend the quality of our faculty. Their focus on academic excellence and the support they are providing to me to achieve such a goal."
Community	Participants expressed both positive and negative experiences with community building, which depended largely on opportunities for socialization and networking.	"It was very intimidating initially, but the residency aspect allows the students to interact and form bonds. Considering the cohort is from across the country, we have a relatively close-knit group that supports each other that makes this experience much easier. We are not alone in our quest." "There's a disconnect with students. I didn't feel it my first year but am feeling it now. The Whites stay with the Whites and sometimes don't interact with certain Whites, and the Blacks just look out for each other as they don't have the upper hand/support."
Support	Participants had varied perspectives regarding support in their program encompassing navigating the academy, program funding, workload, and academic nepotism.	"RA/TA stipends are insufficient to live off of. Financial insecurity among graduate students at my university is a major concern."

This table outlines the four qualitative themes that emerged, complete with descriptions and example quotes.

Differential Experiences and Needs[4]

Several respondents acknowledged the nuance in academic and social experiences within and across cohorts in their programs. One stated: "While my experience in my program has been primarily a positive one, I have heard from colleagues in other cohorts that their experiences have been vastly different, and unfortunately, far more negative than mine."

Some understood their positive experiences within their program to be outside of the norm due to the reality of racial/ethnic, gendered, and other biases. However, others understood differences in experiences to reflect a lack of discursive freedom, and stymieing of White, male, and conservative voices.

Program faculty are a primary source of support for many respondents. Participants recognized some

4 It should be noted that the qualitative and quantitative results are associational, not causal, hence the inclusion of language such as "positively associated with" rather than impacted or influenced.

faculty/staff are well-intentioned in wanting to support all students, but were unable to do so effectively because they did not necessarily know how to "show up" for the underrepresented students in the same ways they do for White and/or male students. Moreover, some respondents lamented the program's use of "cookie-cutter" (Raben and Bond, 2011) methods not tailored to meet the reality of student needs reflecting inauthentic inclusion, negatively shaping participants' experiences. Two participants shared their programs actively create anti-DEIJ climates by restricting dialogue regarding politics and touting an apolitical approach to program facilitation. They asserted that such an approach serves to marginalize the racial/ethnic and gendered Others.

Program Faculty, Quality, and Leadership

Participants shared positive sentiments about program faculty with one sharing, "I personally commend the quality of our faculty. Their focus on academic excellence and the support they are providing to me to achieve such a goal." Participants also spoke highly of their programs as a whole and indicated they are provided with the tools necessary to be effective public administrators. Although some participants shared deep concern regarding a need to improve their training due to a lack of social equity content within their graduate programs. One participant stated, "PA programs need to embed comprehensive training related to social equity/justice as core segments of their curriculum."

Community

Opportunities to find and build *community* depend on socialization and networking pathways made available to participants through their programs. Like other themes, there is a diversity of experiences. Some positive sentiments stemmed from the geographic location of the graduate program. "[My university] being located in [a large] city provides the doors to networking." There was also mention of how genuine camaraderie exhibited by cohort members positively associated with participants' graduate experiences. The ability to lean on a community of support forged by bonds made within the cohort was positively associated with participants' graduate experience(s) because it made them feel more connected to one another and the program, rather than isolated.

These positive experiences within cohorts due to connectedness were not shared by all respondents. Several participants expressed negative sentiments about their graduate experience largely because they felt

a lack of inclusion within their cohort and/or program. There was a stark difference in the social experiences of individuals belonging to different identity groups, highlighting a lack of relational learning about and across identities, further marginalizing those that are already vulnerable. One participant stated:

> There's a disconnect with students. I didn't feel it my first year but am feeling it now. The Whites stay with the Whites and sometimes don't interact with certain Whites, and the Blacks just look out for each other as they don't have the upper hand/support.

Support

This is a multi-dimensional theme covering topics regarding funding, workload, and academic nepotism. Several responses shared by participants regarded institutional funding or financial support, conveying deep concern. One respondent said, "[There is] not enough support (financial or otherwise) for graduate students in this economy." Another shared, "Financial insecurity among graduate students at my university is a major concern". This was stated as true for international students as well as domestic students.

Participants reflecting on workload management were very candid and critical about the impact of balancing full-time work and school had on their overall experience. One participant reminisced, "I took too much on during my graduate experience. Working a full-time job, internship and full-time classes, in hindsight, really negatively impacted my mental health."

Quantitative Results: Critical Theory

The associations found in this study are descriptive and generalizability is limited due to the sample, however there is still sufficient power to test hypotheses (Woodridge, 2016). Results indicate that there is a statistically significant association between students engaging with critical theory in their course work and their program experiences (see Table 2; models 1, 3, and 5). Students whose programs integrated critical theory (including and beyond CRT) were more than twice as likely to indicate they found a community of peers and were satisfied with their programs compared to students in programs without critical theory. These students were also around half as likely to indicate they experienced an outsized mental health toll compared to those in programs without critical theory. These associations hold true in the interaction models (2, 4, and 6) across racial groups. Students in programs that integrate critical theories across racial groups are not

statistically different from one another in their increased likelihood to find a community of peers, and their decreased likelihood of experiencing a mental health toll compared to their counterparts in programs without critical theory.

Program satisfaction varied across identity groups. Having critical theories integrated into course content was particularly impactful for Black students as they were far more likely to be satisfied with their programs compared to Black students in programs without critical theory. White students continue to indicate higher program satisfaction in programs with critical theory compared to White students in programs without critical theory. The other non-White grouping of diverse students differs significantly from these findings; it indicates that students in programs with increasing critical theory integration were less likely to be satisfied with their program, however this group is diverse and better data are needed to explore these associations. All models were run controlling for a variety of confounders. Master's and doctoral degree programs resulted in no significant differences between the two programs across models. Although there do not seem to be gender, religion, or sexual orientation differences across models, there were differences in associations according to accreditation status and research ranking. NASPAA accredited programs have students who were more likely to experience greater mental health tolls compared to those at unaccredited programs. Students at R3 institutions were more likely to have a community of peers and less likely to indicate experiencing a mental health toll compared to students at other research institution types. The different associations found across NASPAA accreditation and research status may indicate there are tradeoffs regarding research and accreditation requirements and integration of a praxis of equity.

Table 3

Ordered Logistic Regression Results, Odds Ratios[5]

	Community of Peers		Mental Health Toll		Program Satisfaction	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Crit integration	3.35***	3.51***	0.52**	0.48*	2.46**	2.77**
	(1.21)	(1.47)	(0.17)	(0.19)	(0.92)	(1.37)
Black x Crit		1.70		0.830		9.96*
		(1.85)		(0.87)		(13.41)
Other nonwhite x Crit		0.55		1.56		0.23*
		(0.57)		(1.14)		(0.18)
Black respondents	1.37	1.01	0.84	0.93	1.08	0.25
	(0.66)	(0.92)	(0.41)	(0.87)	(0.70)	(0.31)
Other nonwhite respondents	1.11	1.56	1.39	1.07	0.69	1.56
	(0.53)	(1.31)	(0.56)	(0.62)	(0.26)	(1.04)
Gender (female and diverse)	0.97	1.01	1.53	1.53	0.72	0.80
	(0.31)	(0.34)	(0.58)	(0.60)	(0.24)	(0.28)
Orientation (LGBTQIA)	1.03	1.08	1.34	1.31	0.87	0.96
	(0.36)	(0.40)	(0.48)	(0.47)	(0.28)	(0.32)
Religion (non-Christian)	1.02	0.93	1.27	1.32	0.95	0.71
	(0.35)	(0.34)	(0.46)	(0.53)	(0.37)	(0.29)
Carnegie ranking						
Unsure, N/A	0.61	0.63	1.19	1.18	0.89	0.88
	(0.33)	(0.33)	(0.68)	(0.66)	(0.45)	(0.44)
R1	0.76	0.76	1.53	1.55	0.61	0.59
	(0.41)	(0.41)	(0.88)	(0.89)	(0.38)	(0.37)
R3	3.96*	4.07*	0.19**	0.19**	1.78	1.84
	(3.01)	(3.09)	(0.15)	(0.15)	(1.34)	(1.43)
NASPAA						
Accredited	1.35	1.34	0.22***	0.22***	0.48	0.48
	(0.87)	(0.88)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.35)	(0.36)
Unsure/NA	0.67	0.66	1.14	1.14	0.83	0.80
	(0.27)	(0.27)	(0.43)	(0.44)	(0.36)	(0.34)

5 Odds ratios (ORs) were used to describe the strength and direction of associations between variables. An OR greater than 1 indicates higher odds of an outcome occurring, whereas an OR less than 1 indicates lower odds of an outcome occurring. An OR equal to 1 indicates no association between the variables. For example, an OR of 2.00 indicates that the odds of an outcome occurring are twice as high for one group compared to the reference group, whereas an OR of 0.50 indicates that the odds are 50% lower.

Program (doctoral)	0.75	0.78	0.62	0.61	0.85	0.97
	(0.28)	(0.32)	(0.25)	(0.25)	(0.37)	(0.42)
/cut1	0.07***	0.08***	0.17**	0.16**	0.025***	0.02***
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.13)	(0.12)	(0.03)	(0.02)
/cut2	0.24**	0.25**	0.54	0.52	0.07***	0.06***
	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.41)	(0.39)	(0.07)	(0.06)
/cut3	0.50	0.52	1.21	1.16	0.13**	0.12**
	(0.33)	(0.34)	(0.90)	(0.86)	(0.12)	(0.11)
/cut4	4.68**	4.91**	4.51**	4.34**	0.19*	0.18*
	(3.28)	(3.32)	(3.34)	(3.21)	(0.17)	(0.17)
/cut5					0.32	0.31
					(0.28)	(0.28)
/cut6					0.67	0.68
					(0.58)	(0.60)
/cut7					1.88	2.00
					(1.61)	(1.74)
/cut8					6.02**	6.69**
					(5.31)	(5.95)
Observations	150	150	150	150	150	150

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note: All numbers are rounded to the nearest whole number, and decimals to the nearest 100ths place to protect against the reidentification of survey participants.

Discussion

This exploratory study aimed to understand how graduate students perceive their PA training experiences, and whether social equity is incorporated in their programs. It was determined there is nuance in the student experiences regarding a praxis of equity. Several respondents indicated that more could be done to support students in their program, especially during challenging times, which potentially impacts their ability to persist. These supports reflect Maslovian needs and are practices central to program leadership that should be provided by them to fulfill the diverse needs of students (Appendix A). Leadership creates the conditions for an environment where social relations can be built and sets the framework for programs to provide the curriculum necessary to help students meet their goals and overcome challenges (particularly those from marginalized communities).

Moreover, systematic community building supports that are tailored to enrolled students further provide esteem and belonging, and also psychological and physical security for enrolled students. Finally,

physiological needs of students need to be met in order for students to reach Maslovian self-actualization. Students indicated this need could be fulfilled through better funding support, which may also increase their retention and graduation rates, thereby improving student success as the financial burden on students can be quite heavy to bear mentally/emotionally.

Statistical models indicate students participating in a program that incorporated a praxis of equity through critical theories is associated with reduced student mental health tolls, increased program satisfaction, and a greater likelihood of finding a community of peers, which has been linked to increased academic experiences, success, and programmatic retention (Johnson, 2023). These were found regardless of racial/ethnic identity. This may indicate a praxis of equity could help to create a classroom and program environment that satisfies the Maslovian needs of safety (mental health), belonging (community of peers), and esteem (program satisfaction) of students. During this time of governmental upheaval and the targeting of already marginalized groups (Trainor, 2025), incorporating a praxis of equity into program courses and environments is particularly urgent. The findings from this study may indicate potential benefits of programs that integrate a praxis of equity into the curriculum (critical theory) and program environments (relational understanding and reflexivity).

Despite political censorship, the majority of Americans have been found to support DEIJ initiatives (Minkin, 2023). Universities cannot exist without students, and the increasingly high prevalence of mental health challenges across many institutions may indicate a deficiency in physiological, security, belonging, and esteem needs (Abrams, 2022). Thus, a praxis of equity is important for institutional leadership to consider embedding into their programs and curricula to help meet the basic needs of their students and improve persistence rates.

The fields of public administration, public policy, public affairs, and higher education more broadly, require professionals better trained on issues of social equity. The findings indicate that graduate students may benefit from such training regardless of racial/ethnic identity grouping. Failure to address and prioritize topics regarding social equity during these times especially, undermines the ability of future researchers and administrators to identify problems, and formulate appropriate policies and services (Blessett et al., 2019).

Implications for Practice – Graduate Programs

- To embed a praxis of equity in the culture, trainings centering cultural humility and sensitivity

should be incentivized and offered as professional development for institutional personnel (e.g., faculty/staff) to improve their ability to support students. This should emphasize the normalization of difference and the need to learn about and with one another across our differences.

- Program faculty should view critical theory as necessary for intellectual pluralism and student well-being, and in doing so, incorporate it into their curricula and course materials (e.g., syllabi). Program leadership should embed discussions about the utility of critical theory in leadership training and address the reluctance of faculty to engage in DEIJ-centric conversations as a means to rectify the programmatic gaps that stem from the absence of DEIJ.
- Program leadership, in conjunction with faculty, should revise graduate student curricula to include DEIJ-related topics and facilitate critical conversations surrounding concepts such as equity and access, so graduate students develop the knowledge, critical awareness, and practical skills necessary to recognize and address systemic inequities within their academic, professional, and broader societal contexts.
- Program leadership should conduct yearly program climate assessments with questions reflecting Maslow's hierarchy of needs and students' experiences with indicators of a praxis of equity. Findings from these assessments should be used to inform programmatic decision-making, enhance student support structures, address identified needs and concerns, and shape program policies and practices that foster an equitable and supportive educational environment.
- Program leadership, in conjunction with faculty, should develop and implement cohort-building exercises for graduate students (to occur at least once/semester) to provide opportunities for networking, the creation of peer support structures, the development of meaningful interpersonal relationships, and a stronger sense of belonging and connection to the academic program.
- Institutional leadership should coordinate with the graduate school and other relevant units to identify and implement strategies for providing financial support to graduate students as a means of reducing financial barriers that may hinder their persistence, academic success, and degree completion.

Conclusion

This exploratory study's findings are descriptive and meant to spur further critical discussion and research on the role of social equity in PA training programs and its influence on student wellbeing, particularly around the impact on student retention/persistence and success amongst underrepresented graduate students. There are two limitations to this study: 1. The findings are not causal, and generalizability may be limited as the survey was not randomly distributed and 2. The sample was limited due to the distribution of the survey through program chairs as they may have been less inclined to share the survey due to an aversion to controversial topics (Bryant, 2023). However, given the demographic and geographic representativeness, critical theory exposure variation within the sample, and coupled with the qualitative responses used to dive deeper into respondents' experiences, we maintain that the results are meaningful and instructive, despite these limitations.

PA graduate students are the future of the public sector, shaping both the ways in which public services and resources are distributed and the strategies that structure those processes. Their ability to fulfill that calling depends on PA programs' commitment to the core pillars and their willingness to expose students to social equity as not just curriculum but as a praxis. This is essential for the effective training of public administrators and policy analysts committed to the public good for all. However, PA programs are under increasing pressure to distance themselves from any proximity to social equity topics. As the findings suggest, avoidance may be detrimental to students as omitting social equity from PA education jeopardizes the fairness, legitimacy, and effectiveness of our institutions, and may imperil the wellbeing of *all* students.

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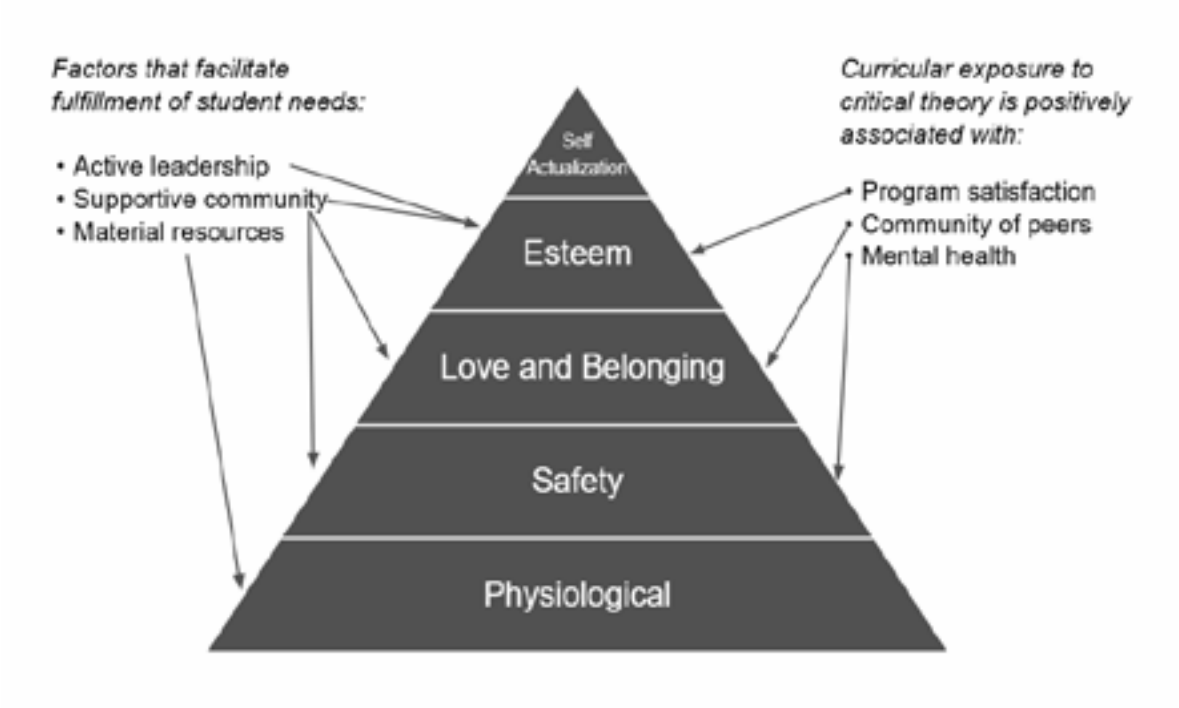
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Appendix A

Equity as Praxis and Maslovian Need Fulfillment of Graduate Students



Note: This figure provides a depiction of how the study's findings regarding equity as a praxis in program environments and curricula, meet the Maslovian needs of PA graduate students

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Toward Transparent and Culturally Responsive Gatekeeping: A Supervisory Framework for Counselor Education

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Abstract

Gatekeeping is an educational responsibility that supports students' growth and professional preparation. In counselor education, Gatekeeping is a foundational responsibility that ensures students demonstrate the academic, clinical, and dispositional competencies required for ethical professional practice. While essential for protecting client welfare and maintaining professional standards, gatekeeping is often inconsistently applied and shaped by subjective interpretations of competence, professionalism, and "fit." Research highlights ongoing challenges, including unclear evaluation criteria, limited collaboration between faculty and field supervisors, and the influence of implicit norms that may introduce bias. These issues are particularly evident in practicum and internship settings, where applied skills and professional identity converge. Ethical and legal frameworks require counselor educators to prioritize client welfare over personal beliefs while maintaining fairness in increasingly diverse training contexts. This paper proposes the Transparent, Cultural, and Personal (TCP) Supervisory Guide, a framework designed to support clear, equitable, and culturally responsive gatekeeping practices.

Keywords: gatekeeping, professional training, supervision

Toward Transparent and Culturally Responsive Gatekeeping: A Supervisory Framework for Counselor Education

Gatekeeping is a foundational responsibility in counselor education and other graduate professional programs, playing a critical role in preparing students for their professional journey. Counselor educators and clinical supervisors serve as gatekeepers who evaluate students' academic performance, clinical skill, and professional dispositions to determine readiness for entry into the counseling profession (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2015). This gatekeeping process helps ensure that only competent and ethical practitioners enter the counseling profession.

The American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) defines gatekeeping as the "initial and ongoing academic, skill, and dispositional assessment of students' competency for professional practice, including remediation and termination as appropriate" (p. 20). Similarly, gatekeeping has been conceptualized as a structured, evaluative process designed to determine a student's suitability for professional practice (Brear et al., 2008, as cited in Glance et al., 2012). Together, these definitions highlight the importance of maintaining professional standards and protecting client welfare.

Historically, gatekeeping has been framed as a mechanism for quality control, protecting clients, safeguarding the integrity of the profession, and ensuring ethical practice (Foster & McAdams, 2009). Ethical codes and accreditation standards (e.g., ACA, 2014; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2024) mandate that counselor educators assess and remediate deficiencies to prevent harm to clients. As such, gatekeeping serves as a critical safeguard that upholds both professional accountability and client well-being. However, despite its ethical necessity, gatekeeping is often described as subjective, inconsistently applied, and difficult to operationalize (Glance et al., 2012). These challenges become particularly salient when gatekeeping decisions intersect with students' personal values and professional ethical expectations.

Hancock (2014) emphasizes that helping professions are defined by service to client welfare, adherence to ethical codes, and reliance on systematic knowledge. When students' personal beliefs conflict with professional standards, programs are ethically obligated to prioritize client welfare over individual ideology (Hancock, 2014). More recent counseling literature continues to affirm that gatekeeping decisions must balance ethical mandates, professional identity development, and fairness within increasingly diverse train-

ing contexts (Chang & Rubel, 2025; DeCino et al., 2024). Thus, gatekeeping must be conceptualized not as punishment, but as a developmental, ethical, and culturally responsive high-impact practice, particularly during practicum and internship, where professional identity and applied competence converge. Transparent and culturally responsive gatekeeping practices may support student success by promoting equitable evaluation, reducing bias, and providing clear developmental pathways that enhance retention and professional readiness, particularly for students from underrepresented backgrounds.

Literature Review

Problematic Professional Competence in Counselor Training

Concerns regarding problematic professional competence are not rare in counselor education. Problematic professional competence (PPC) refers to patterns of behavior, skill deficits, or dispositional concerns that interfere with a trainee's ability to provide ethical and effective counseling services (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2015). These concerns may emerge across academic, clinical, and interpersonal domains and often become most visible during applied training experiences. "Gateslipping," or allowing students with competence concerns to graduate, remains a documented issue (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2015). Freeman et al. (2016) further illuminate the field dimension of this issue, finding that 11.9% of counselors-in-training in a sample of 103 field site supervisors were identified as unsuitable for professional practice due to concerns including interpersonal skill deficits, difficulty integrating professional standards, stress intolerance, and unethical behavior.

The most common remediation strategies included direct discussion with the supervisee and consultation with other professionals; however, only 35% of field supervisors reported communicating concerns to counselor education faculty (Freeman et al., 2016). This gap reveals a structural weakness in practicum and internship gatekeeping processes, namely, insufficient collaboration between academic and field settings. These findings suggest that problematic competence is most clearly identified during applied training, with practicum and internship representing critical, high-impact contexts where theoretical competence must translate into ethical, relational, and culturally responsive practice. Furthermore, counselor educators and supervisors may hesitate to enact gatekeeping due to concerns about subjectivity, legal risk, and relational strain. This pattern underscores the need for structured, transparent approaches to evaluation and communication across academic and field settings. Such gaps highlight the importance of a supervisory framework

that integrates clarity, collaboration, and cultural responsiveness.

The Hidden Curriculum and Professional Norms

The literature reflects ambiguity in defining problematic professional competence (PPC) and inconsistency in evaluation processes across programs (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2015). When evaluation criteria are vague or culturally unexamined, gatekeeping may shift from developmental accountability to exclusionary filtering. More recent research continues to highlight the complexity and variability of gatekeeping practices, with counselor educators describing the process as uncertain, and influenced by interpersonal and systemic factors (Chang & Rubel, 2025; DeCino et al., 2024). This tension underscores the need for clearer, more equitable, and contextually responsive gatekeeping frameworks within counselor education.

These challenges are particularly evident in how professionalism and dispositional competence are evaluated. Gatekeeping extends beyond technical skill to include dispositional competence, interpersonal functioning, and ethical competence (Glance et al., 2012). However, evaluating professionalism and "fit" is inherently subjective. Homrich (2009, as cited in Glance, et al., 2012) emphasized that difficulties arise when faculty lack consensus about performance standards or fail to clearly communicate expectations. Freeman et al. (2016) found that while most supervisors verbally communicated expectations, only about one-third documented their gatekeeping role in writing. Without written documentation and explicit standards, supervision may rely on implicit norms, increasing the risk of bias and inconsistency.

Research on counselor educator responses to *Ward v. Wilbanks* highlights inconsistency in professional messaging. Burkholder et al. (2014) found divergent views among counselor educators regarding values-based referrals, gatekeeping, and the separation of personal values from professional competence. Such inconsistency may create student confusion about ethical standards, particularly related to referral, nondiscrimination, and value management, potentially leading to uneven gatekeeping and weakened culturally responsive evaluation. Hancock (2014) emphasized that professional education is intended to prepare practitioners to uphold ethical standards, not to affirm personal beliefs; client welfare supersedes personal ideology. When these expectations are not made explicit, students may interpret evaluative feedback as ideological disagreement rather than competence-based assessment. Therefore, culturally responsive gatekeeping requires explicit articulation of professional standards, transparent evaluation criteria, and consistent documentation practices.

Ethical Responsibilities

Professions are characterized by systematic knowledge, commitment to community interest, and adherence to ethical codes (Hancock, 2014). Counselor education programs, therefore, have both ethical and societal obligations to ensure that students can competently serve diverse clients. Gatekeeping authority is grounded in ethical codes and reinforced through case law. Legal cases such as *Keeton v. Anderson-Wiley* and *Ward v. Polite* have addressed situations in which counseling students refused to work with LGBTQ+ clients due to religious beliefs, with courts generally upholding programs' authority to enforce ethical standards when those standards are clearly articulated and consistently applied (Hancock, 2014). These rulings emphasize that while freedom of belief is protected, professional conduct remains subject to regulation when client welfare is at stake. Thus, gatekeeping focuses on professional behavior in service contexts rather than regulating personal belief systems.

Recent literature further underscores that counselor educators must navigate these ethical and legal expectations within increasingly complex and diverse training environments, where consistent application of standards remains a persistent challenge (Chang & Rubel, 2025; DeCino et al., 2024). In practicum and internship settings, where client vulnerability is heightened, failure to address competence concerns may increase the risk of ethical violations and legal liability. Accordingly, effective gatekeeping is essential to ensuring that competent and ethical practitioners enter the profession, thereby maintaining public trust (Wilder et al., 2022).

Cultural Considerations and Multicultural Competence

Cultural humility and multicultural competence are central to ethical counselor training. Counselor educators are expected to demonstrate cultural sensitivity and to evaluate students' ethical ability to serve diverse populations. Hipolito-Delgado et al. (2016) emphasized that culturally responsive practice requires understanding clients' worldviews and engaging in advocacy-oriented counseling. Hancock (2014) notes that multicultural competence involves examining one's values and preventing bias from impairing professional functioning. Students must learn to separate personal beliefs from professional responsibilities when those beliefs conflict with client welfare (Hutchens et al., 2013). Recent scholarship further emphasizes that counselor educators face ongoing challenges in consistently and equitably applying gatekeeping practices, with processes often shaped by contextual, interpersonal, and systemic factors (DeCino et al., 2024; Chang

& Rubel, 2025). At the same time, Freeman et al. (2016) highlighted that field supervisors often struggle to balance empowerment and evaluation. This tension may lead to reluctance to fully enact gatekeeping responsibilities.

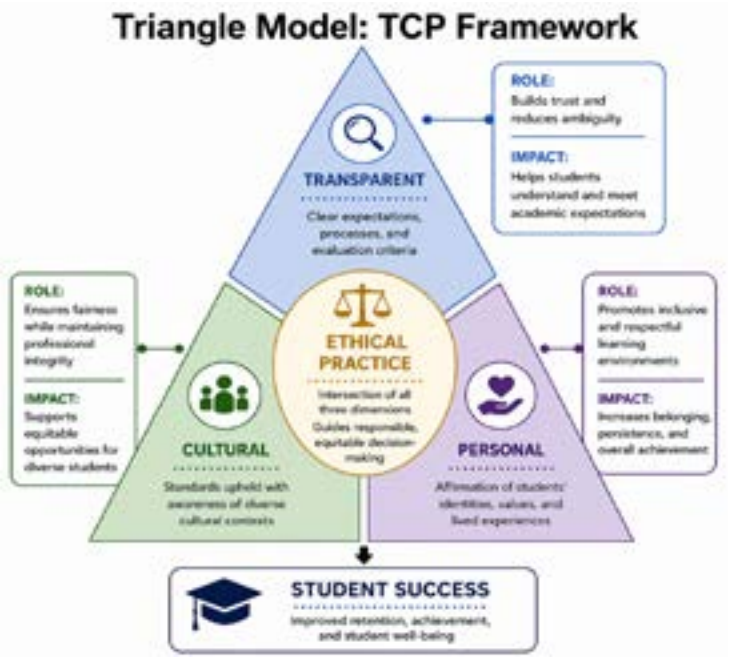
The literature on gatekeeping in counselor education consistently highlights professional performance, ethical responsibility, and cultural considerations. While ethical codes and accreditation standards emphasize the responsibility to assess competence and protect client welfare, gatekeeping may be inconsistent across programs and supervisory contexts. These challenges are particularly pronounced in practicum and internship settings, where evaluation intersects with relational dynamics, cultural differences, and developmental expectations. To support the supervisory relationship in field experience courses, this paper proposes the Transparent, Cultural, and Personal (TCP) Supervisory Guide, a framework to operationalize culturally responsive gatekeeping through clear, equitable, and developmentally grounded supervisory practices.

A Culturally Responsive Gatekeeping Guide

Educators and professionals in higher education have an ethical responsibility to protect clients, maintain academic integrity, and uphold professional standards as part of their gatekeeper roles (ACA, 2014; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2024; Dossaji et al., 2025). When educational expectations are inconsistently applied, some students may have an advantage (McGee, 2020). While gatekeepers have an ethical responsibility, research shows that culturally uninformed evaluation can contribute to disproportionate attrition among first-generation and historically marginalized students (Posselt, 2016). These inequities highlight a critical tension between maintaining professional standards and ensuring fair, inclusive evaluation practices.

Addressing these disparities requires greater clarity, consistency, and cultural responsiveness in evaluation practices. Research on student persistence demonstrates that clear expectations and structured feedback enhance academic self-efficacy and institutional trust (Tinto, 2017; Kuh et al., 2015). When students understand what is required and how performance is assessed, they are better positioned to self-correct, seek support, and remain engaged. The supervision literature further reflects a lack of consistent, empirically grounded definitions, with practices often shaped by subjective interpretations rather than standardized frameworks (Schuster & Castillo, 2025). A culturally responsive gatekeeping framework strengthens rigor

by increasing transparency, contextual awareness, and developmental precision rather than lowering standards (Hook et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Consequently, gatekeepers can translate these principles through transparent evaluation, cultural broaching in feedback, and personalized evaluation as core components of the Transparent, Cultural, and Personal (TCP) Supervisory Guide. The model is conceptualized as a triadic framework in which transparent, cultural, and personal domains function as distinct yet interdependent components (Figure 1).



Principle 1: Transparent Evaluation

Transparency is foundational to equitable evaluation. Explicit expectations can help students to understand professional expectations, course requirements, and performance parameters. In higher education, a hidden curriculum that has unspoken norms, behavioral expectations, and structural signals may not be clear for all students (Laiduc & Covarrubias, 2022). The hidden curriculum includes implicit narratives, behavioral expectations, and even physical spaces (Baykut et al., 2022) as well as institutional patterns (Oron Semper and Blasco, 2018). Similarly, institutional spaces can communicate expectations that may be unclear to students unfamiliar with the dominant culture (Jandric & Loretto, 2021). When equality, diversity, and inclusion are omitted from overt curricula, these hidden elements can reinforce exclusionary norms. By making evaluative criteria explicit and transparent, institutions can counteract these hidden influences and promote more equitable assessment practices.

In addition to clear expectations and explanations of a hidden curriculum in higher education, gatekeepers can use behaviorally anchored criteria. In evaluation, behavioral anchors can describe both knowledge and skill competencies that help students understand professional expectations in practice (Ogbeide et al, 2022). Clear behavioral anchors can reduce confusion among students and enhance familiarity with professional behaviors in professional settings. Supervisors can provide specific feedback to students focusing on issues on behaviors that students can address in evaluative spaces. For example, a supervisor can describe the problematic behavior such as "required documentation was submitted after the established deadline the last three weeks" instead of stating that the student has "poor time management skills" By providing a detailed explanation of the behavior, supervisors can replace generalized views of students' professional expectations.

Lastly, evaluators can also provide a clear distinction between negotiable and non-negotiable standards in the profession. Evaluators can identify non-negotiable standards, including ethical expectations, client safety, academic integrity, and required competency (Sejuit et al., 2025). Equally, evaluators can define negotiable elements as professional standards that may vary according to personal preferences, cultural patterns, and social dynamics. For instance, evaluators can discuss with students their communication styles, assertiveness, emotional range, or leadership styles. By providing a distinction in standards, evaluators can reduce the misinterpretation of cultural behavioral differences as professional dispositions issues or deficits.

Principle 2: Cultural Broaching in Feedback

By incorporating transparency into evaluations, cultural broaching can strengthen feedback practices. Cultural broaching involves an intentional invitation to discuss the influence of culture and identity on experience to diminish reliance on assumptions and mitigate misinterpretation (Day-Vines et al., 2007; Day-Vines et al., 2018). Gatekeepers need to recognize relational dynamics and power roles in supervisory relationships. Evaluation is inherently shaped by relational dynamics and power. Cultural humility scholarship emphasizes the importance of acknowledging identity, positionality, and systemic context within professional relationships (Zhu et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2023). Integrating cultural broaching with an awareness of power, positionality, and relational dynamics allows gatekeeping to function as a more equitable, reflective, and developmentally supportive evaluative process.

When broaching absent without intentional conversations about culture, identity, and context, student

behaviors may be interpreted through culturally narrow lenses leading to potential misinterpretation in evaluative contexts. For example, assertiveness may be labeled as defensiveness, while deference may be interpreted as disengagement. Research on bias in professional and academic evaluation demonstrates that subjective assessments involving professionalism, disposition, and fit can be influenced by cultural distortion and implicit bias (Posselt, 2016; Hauer et al., 2023). More recent counseling and evaluation scholarship further emphasizes that implicit bias operates unconsciously within training and assessment processes, shaping how behaviors are interpreted across cultural contexts (Castro-Atwater, 2020; Toure-Pegnougo et al., 2025). Broaching disrupts these automatic interpretations by inviting shared meaning-making and creating space for dialogue about cultural context and identity (Day-Vines et al., 2007; Day-Vines et al., 2018). Importantly, broaching strengthens rather than weakens standards; clear performance expectations remain intact, but feedback conversations are grounded in relational transparency and cultural awareness. When students perceive evaluative processes as identity-aware and procedurally fair, institutional trust increases (Tinto, 2017; Kuh et al., 2015). Trust, in turn, is strongly associated with student engagement, persistence, and overall success in graduate education.

In evaluation interactions, gatekeepers can use cultural broaching to invite dialogue and understanding of diverse perspectives, expectations, and behaviors. Supervisors can create opportunities to explore cultural views on authority, communication and even feedback to enhance clarification and support in the developmental process. Students can have a strong sense of cultural respect for their experiences while increasing their understanding of the cultural values of others including supervisors, peers, and clients. This reciprocal process fosters more accurate evaluation, strengthens the supervisory alliance, and supports culturally responsive professional development.

Principle 3: Personalized Evaluation

Together, transparency, cultural broaching and developmental-contextual evaluation reposition gatekeeping as an ethical and equity-informed process. Rather than functioning as a reactive mechanism of exclusion, culturally responsive gatekeeping clarifies standards, contextualizes performance, and strengthens relational trust which are factors strongly associated with student retention, engagement, and institutional belonging (Tinto, 2017; Kuh et al., 2015; Posselt, 2016). Within the TCP guide, personalized evaluation involves developmental and contextualized lenses that assess student competence in ways that are responsive to individual growth, training context, and sociocultural factors influencing performance. Furthermore, developmental

and contextualized evaluation recognizes the supervisee's stage of professional development, ongoing growth, and the contexts in which performance occurs, positioning evaluation as an individualized and ongoing process rather than a static judgment. By integrating developmental and contextual considerations, supervisors can more accurately distinguish between emerging competence, skill deficits, and situational influences on performance (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019; DeCino et al., 2024).

Developmental evaluation requires supervisors to recognize and embrace supervisee's level of training and professional growth. Supervisors understand that competence evolves through structured learning and supervised practice. In general, early trainees often need more directive support and feedback, while advanced trainees demonstrate greater autonomy and integration of skills (Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010; Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). When supervisors disregard developmental stages, they may misinterpret normative learning challenges as deficiencies, potentially leading to inequitable gatekeeping practices (Stoltenberg & McNeill, 2010; Chang & Rubel, 2025). A developmental lens, therefore, promotes fairness and respect by centering growth as a core indicator of professional competence.

Contextualized evaluation acknowledges that environmental, relational, and sociocultural forces can influence performances in training settings. Practicum and internship environments vary in client populations, site resources, and supervisory relationships, which can influence how students develop and demonstrate competence. Additionally, students' cultural identities and lived experiences shape communication styles, responses to feedback, and help-seeking behaviors, which may be misinterpreted when taken out of context (Zhu et al., 2023; Hook et al., 2017). Attending these factors allows supervisors to make more accurate, equitable, and culturally responsive evaluations of student competence.

Implementation of the TCP Supervisory Guide

The TCP Supervisory Guide is intended to support counselor education programs in implementing transparent and culturally responsive gatekeeping practices. Programs can begin by clearly communicating expectations through course syllabi, practicum and internship handbooks, and evaluation tools that include behavioral anchors and timely, specific feedback. Consistent communication between counselor education faculty and field supervisors can further strengthen gatekeeping by promoting shared expectations and coordinated support for students throughout their professional development. Table 1 illustrates examples of how the three TCP principles can be translated into supervisory practices and documented during evaluation.

Table 1

Implementing the TCP Supervisory Guide

TCP Principle	Supervisor Practices	Documentation
Transparent Evaluation	Communicate expectations, use behavioral anchors, and provide timely feedback.	Written evaluations, documented feedback, orientation materials.
Cultural Broaching	Invite discussion of culture, identity, and context during supervision while maintaining professional standards.	Supervision notes, reflective discussions, consultation records.
Personalized Evaluation	Consider developmental level and training context when evaluating competence and developing remediation plans.	Learning plans, progress reviews, and remediation documentation.

Implementing the TCP Supervisory Guide may require faculty preparation, collaboration with field supervisors, and ongoing communication across training sites. Programs may also encounter differences in supervisory practices and time demands associated with documentation and feedback. Addressing these challenges through shared expectations, supervisor training, and regular consultation can promote greater consistency, fairness, and cultural responsiveness in gatekeeping practices.

Implications

Gatekeeping represents a great opportunity for educators to support students' success in higher education, serving as an intentional intervention that promotes professional and personal growth for students. Evaluators need to apply transparent and consistent documentation that reduces ambiguity and bias in supervision. In addition, faculty and supervisors should practice cultural broaching in evaluative practices to avoid misinterpretation of behaviors. Finally, they can also clearly align expectations with training level and content to understand each supervisee's learning and development. Provide clear, structured feedback and support plans rather than vague concerns, emphasize shared responsibility by engaging supervisors and students collaboratively in the growth process, and incorporate consultation with colleagues to reduce subjectivity and increase accountability. Their integration of the TCP guide becomes a central process of culturally responsive gatekeeping which contributes to outcomes such as student success, retention, and ethical practice.

Training programs can also create curricula and evaluations that are consistent and aligned with clear gatekeeping expectations and processes. Programs can implement standardized evaluation tools grounded in behavioral anchors with appropriate definitions for the profession. In addition, programs can ensure clear

communication of expectations across course work, practicum and internship. Faculty and field supervisors should also work closely together to address any professional concerns and avoid any misunderstandings. Programs can also offer training in culturally responsive supervision and gatekeeping that create coherent and transparent practices. Lastly, programs need to implement formal documentation processes and structured remediation options for students as part of their gatekeeping practices that support adequate professional development of students.

Furthermore, higher education institutions must position gatekeeping as a legally defensible, documented, and consistently embraced systemic practice. Institutions must protect clients' welfare while also ensuring that student evaluations are conducted in a fair and transparent manner. Administrators play a critical role in identifying and implementing mechanisms that mitigate bias and reduce disproportionate attrition among marginalized students. In doing so, gatekeeping should be framed not as an individual or program-specific responsibility, but as a shared institutional commitment. Additionally, administrators should support program and university policies that advance equity without compromising professional standards. Establishing clear, accessible gatekeeping language and procedures grounded in fairness can enhance students' trust in evaluative processes, thereby fostering greater engagement and supporting improved academic and professional performance.

Limitations and Future Research

The TCP Supervisory Guide is a conceptual framework that has not yet been empirically tested across counselor education programs. Although it is grounded in the literature on gatekeeping, supervision, multicultural competence, and student success, future research is needed to examine its implementation and effectiveness in diverse educational settings.

Future studies may explore how the TCP Supervisory Guide influences supervisor practices, student perceptions of gatekeeping, remediation outcomes, and consistency in evaluation across counselor education programs. Research examining implementation in practicum and internship settings may also help determine the framework's contribution to equitable, transparent, and culturally responsive gatekeeping.

Conclusion

Gatekeeping in counselor education is not merely a regulatory function; it is a developmental, eth-

ical, and culturally grounded responsibility. Practicum and internship serve as high-impact environments where professional competence, multicultural responsiveness, and ethical integrity are most visible. Given the complexities, subjectivity, and ethical tensions outlined in the literature, there is a clear need for more structured and culturally responsive approaches to gatekeeping practice. Culturally responsive gatekeeping must therefore be transparent, documented, developmentally grounded, and legally defensible. When enacted intentionally, gatekeeping advances counselor competence, protects vulnerable clients, and strengthens the integrity of the profession.

The Transparent, Cultural, and Personal (TCP) Supervisory Guide provides one approach to operationalizing these principles through supervisory practices that promote clarity, equity, and developmental support. By integrating transparent evaluation, cultural broaching, and personalized evaluation, the TCP framework positions gatekeeping as a proactive process that supports ethical practice, student success, and client welfare. Future research examining the implementation and effectiveness of the TCP framework will further inform its role in strengthening transparent and culturally responsive gatekeeping across counselor education programs.

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