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Journal of Access, Retention and Inclusion in Higher Education

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FOREWORD

BY: GLYNIS MULLINS

PRESIDENT, NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

As a lifelong learner and educator, I am always seeking resources that provide new and innovative ways to increase student engagement, active learning, reduce barriers in higher education, and enhance retention and academic success. The Journal of Access, Retention & Inclusion in Higher Education has become one of those essential resources, offering tools to stay abreast of the latest trends and locate research articles that support numerous strategies for promoting student success. This journal features a diverse range of articles focusing on student success through various research topics, offering narratives and guidance for finding better ways to serve all students across different facets of education.

Celebrating and supporting those who impact the lives of others through education is a testament to our identity as lifelong learners, intrigued by new techniques and renewed ideas. There is a clear need for research materials that address every aspect of "the student's" academic journey, from admissions processes to classroom instruction, recreational activities, and social environments leading to graduation. The future of academic and student success likely involves enhancing, relearning, or embracing new approaches to impacting the student experience from all angles, which requires a commitment to promoting the best practices for serving all students—including you and me!

I encourage everyone involved in promoting student success at any level to read this journal and explore new techniques for instruction, advising, student support, financial services, and strategies to create an inclusive environment. This journal offers a wealth of information to help ensure that all students have access to education, regardless of their background, ethnicity, cultural background, socio-economic status, and more.

Collaborative Development of Machine Learning Algorithms for Student Success at John Jay College

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Abstract

Improving graduation rates is a crucial goal in higher education, but understanding who is at risk of dropping out is resource intensive, creating barriers to effective retention interventions. Thus, identifying factors that predict drop out risk is increasingly of interest, yet current approaches often lack transparency and accessibility. To aid in this effort, DataKind collaborated with John Jay College of Criminal Justice (JJC) to co-create a data-assisted student success tool, utilizing machine learning to identify students at risk of drop out and centering the role of advisors in supporting students. The insights from this tool are used by JJC to provide proactive interventions (i.e., increased academic counseling) for the students identified as most in need of support. After implementing the data-assisted student success tool and associated inventions, JJC saw a rise in senior graduation rates, suggesting the value collaborative and human-centered data science tools have in fostering student success.

Key Words: retention, graduation, higher education, student success, algorithms, data science, machine learning

Retention and graduation are vital goals that higher education institutions pursue for a myriad of reasons (e.g., financial sustainability, student success, institutional mission, social impact) (Behr et al., 2020; Kirp, 2019; Raisman, 2013). However, in the U.S., more students are enrolling in college than ever before, but graduation rates have remained relatively steady while the time to complete a degree has lengthened (McDaniel & Van Jura, 2022; Johnson & Stage, 2018). An estimated 40% of students who start a bachelor's degree in the US do not complete it within 6 years (Aulck et al., 2016), and 20% of first-year students do not return for a second year of studies at their starting institution (Hussar et al., 2020). Since graduation rates serve as a critical metric of success carrying economic implications for both students and institutions (Behr et al., 2020; Raisman, 2013), it is no surprise that it has been a topic of research and educational interventions for decades (Millea et al., 2018; Tinto, 2005).

While many different interventions have been developed and proven to help students persist and graduate (Fulcher Dawson, Kearney, & Sullivan, 2020; Hatch & Garcia, 2017; McDaniel & Van Jura, 2018; Reader, 2018; Swanson, 2006), a key problem that remains is identifying which students are most at risk of stalling or dropping out and then providing support to keep students enrolled and pursuing graduation. This problem is important because often interventions are targeted broadly, instead of to specific students, requiring students to self-select into them (Engle & O'Brien, 2007). In addition, the national average ratio of students per advisor is 350:1 (The Center for Michigan, 2014), which can reach up to 1000:1 at some community colleges (Marcus, 2012). Such ratios can result in overburdened

advisors that do not have enough resources to gain the full picture of their students (Weissman, 2022). These challenges mean not all students are getting the support they need (Flaherty, 2023), especially at lower resourced institutions like public universities and community colleges.

Data science, learning analytics, and predictive algorithms have risen in popularity in recent years as tools to understand student performance issues in this space - providing predictions from classroom level performance to GPA (Fahd et al., 2022) - but there remains a gap in using these tools for predicting graduation rates specifically (Larrabee Sønderlund, Hughes, & Smith, 2019). Regardless of the outcome of interest, these tools can be confusing to use, expensive, or focused on constructs that are not relevant to a given institution, making data-driven approaches potentially inaccessible for universities that need them the most. Data science approaches like predictive algorithms in the educational space can also often lack transparency and a collaborative development process, fueling a sense of distrust and even overlooking biases and their influence on outcome interpretation (Barshay & Aslanian, 2019; Slade & Prinsloo, 2013).

In response to the complex challenge of helping institutions foster graduation in a more efficient and accessible way with data-centered approaches, along with the opportunity of emerging predictive analytical techniques, DataKind and John Jay College of Criminal Justice (JJC) collaborated to construct a data-assisted student success support tool, which consists of feature engineering and data preparation support, machine learning models to indicate potential risk of non-graduation and output reporting showing the reasons for that predicted potential risk. It is important here to also clearly define machine learning, as we use that term to describe work done throughout this piece:

> Machine learning is a subset of artificial intelligence that automatically enables a machine or system to learn and improve from experience. Instead of explicit programming, machine learning uses algorithms to analyze large amounts of data, learn from the insights, and then make informed decisions. Machine learning algorithms improve performance over time as they are trained—exposed to more data. Machine learning models are the output, or what the program learns from running an algorithm on training data. The more data used, the better the model will get. (*AI vs. Machine Learning: How Do They Differ?*, n.d.)

Further, this support tool had an intentional focus on ensuring humans would stay at the center of decision making with the information provided by its predictive models. The data-assisted student success support tool was ultimately integrated by the institution into a program with targeted, opt-out interventions to steer students back onto the path of successful graduation. The following case study will explore how such a collaborative approach to developing machine learning tools can foster the use of them in ways that promote sustainability, transparency, and trust, ultimately supporting more proactive action for student success.

A Partnership of Data-Informed Solutions for Inclusion and Success

In the mid-2010s, JJC had noticed their seniors (i.e., students with 90+ credits) were dropping out at noticeably high rates. JJC is a minority-serving institution, and such figures were especially concerning for their mission of inclusion. They wanted to see how they could use their student data to understand what was potentially driving or associated with such rates, so they engaged DataKind in conversation in 2017 to develop a data-driven approach to answer this question.

JJC utilizes historical student data for many predictive analytic projects, and while JJC's student advising program is dedicated to boosting graduation rates, it previously faced challenges identifying students most in need of assistance in addition to advisors experiencing heavy caseloads. Thus the goal of this particular project with DataKind was threefold: 1) to use machine learning to identify students who may face extended graduation timelines or potential dropout risks, 2) to provide that information in a no-code, accessible way to advisors, ensuring data empowered their work and did not replace it, and 3) to work collaboratively to build a tool that can be sustained and useful over time by JJC and eventually other institutions. By working towards these goals, the college intended to integrate machine learning to both make advising more informed and to engage with struggling students with interventions like financial support, academic support and intensive advising to enhance their chances of successfully completing their degrees - in other words, to create an accessible data-aided advising program.

Another vital feature of this approach was the co-creation of machine learning tools with the JJC community itself and between data consumers and data tool users (Bryne, 2023). As mentioned, many

data-driven tools can lack transparency and context, making them either inaccessible or ill-fitted to an institutions' needs. The work in this case study instead focused on the importance of building trust between all data stakeholders before, during, and after building a machine learning tool and using shared goals and institutional context to create the tool. This allows for context-specific insights that provide more actionable outputs from those tools. In the student success space, these types of model building collaborations and insights are especially valuable and, as seen in this case study, can produce truly impactful results.

Model Development Methods - The Importance of Collaboration and Transparency

A core goal for both parties was to build a robust process of machine learning model development to ensure the ultimate tool's success in achieving the aforementioned goals. To accomplish this, the team focused on ameliorating some of the key challenges faced by other predictive and learning analytics approaches, particularly around ethical development. As Selwyn (2019, in Khalil, Slade, & Prinsloo, 2023) summarizes, these issues are:

(1) A reduced understanding of education;
(2) Ignoring the social context of education;
(3) A reduction in student and teacher capacity for informed decision-making;
(4) Learning analytics designed for surveillance rather than support;
(5) Institutions as the main beneficiaries (rather than students); and
(6) Large groups of students being (dis)advantaged

Rather than building a machine learning tool and honing algorithms only to answer the question of what students are at risk of dropping out, the team worked to gather insights from data users like advisors and administrators to ensure that models would be context-driven (i.e., based on specific and updated datasets, not generalized), used specifically to enhance the capacity of advisors and student success programming to make informed decisions (i.e., keep humans as the decision makers, not algorithms), center student needs, and test and address any biases in the model. These goals required a process of consistent communication and regular meetings between DataKind and JJC, transparent data and document sharing agreements, iterative model development with feedback from JJC, and user testing to ensure the final product can be utilized with ease. By focusing on this type of collaborative data science partnership, the machine learning tools were more positioned to be successfully integrated into JJCs programming in a meaningful way.

Ultimately, through these processes and leveraging historical student data, DataKind constructed a set of machine learning models to forecast the likelihood of dropout or delayed graduation among students who have already accumulated 90 or more credits (equivalent to 75% of the required total credits for graduation) (i.e., the Senior Model). The data for the initial project was originally extracted from the Institutional Research Database (IRDB), which is a CUNY-wide system intended to support research and reporting within CUNY at large. The IRDB data includes data on student characteristics such as basic student demographics, academic information for each semester, previous schools and degrees obtained, etc. DataKind's data exploration and analytic efforts culminated in the development and testing of over 20 predictive models, all of which were based on Random Forest Classifiers, a specific type of machine learning model. These models were designed to address the critical issues of non-graduation and delayed graduation among seniors (i.e., students with 90+ credits). The methodology for model selection and validation involved a rigorous evaluation process. Multiple predictive models were developed and subjected to comprehensive accuracy assessment, with a particular emphasis on their ability to identify potential non-graduation cases. The selection criteria prioritized models demonstrating high predictive accuracy for non-graduation outcomes. DataKind employed a systematic approach to identify predictor variables that not only contributed to model accuracy but, based upon consultation with JJC, also offered practical utility for academic advisors in student intervention conversations.

Once the Senior model was established, and showed initial promise in supporting JJC's needs, JJC also identified the challenge of poor graduation rates for transfer students, those transitioning from community colleges to senior (four-year) institutions. Thus, a second model was developed to specifically target transfer students, using data that met their unique needs and educational pathways (i.e., the Transfer

Model). Variables in the Transfer Model included academic items like GPA and credit accumulation rates as well as financial aid and academic program related variables.

When a trained Senior or Transfer Model is run on a new set of student data, it both identifies the top global features that predict risk, as well as an individual risk prediction per student. In the reporting output, it also provides the top features per student. This individual risk prediction score and top features allows JJC to focus on who needs the most support as well as the top issue to explore for solutions when working with those students. For instance, one student may have a high-risk score, and their top feature is total failed credits, which might direct advisors to offer that student an academic tutoring program.

Impact of Machine Learning Models in Academic Advising and Student Success

Once the models were finalized, JJC began utilizing them as part of their intervention strategies. The Senior Model was developed and utilized first, providing JJC's student advising staff with vital information about which senior students were most likely to need support to graduate and what their key risk factors were. This knowledge allowed them to intervene as soon as possible and provide outreach, intensive advising, career support, and even completion grants to ameliorate financial pressures. These interventions culminated in the creation of the Completion for Upper-Division Student Program (CUSP), a data-aided advising and student success program. A similar program, geared to transfer students and using the Transfer Model, is in the early stages of deployment.

CUSP is ultimately built around advisors at JJC that receive the output of the SST models, which helps them prioritize students in their caseloads based on how likely the model predicts they are to drop out. Students are categorized by the model as in "Very high need of support", "High need of support", "Low need for support" or "Very low need for support." Once identified in any tier of support, students are considered to be a part of the CUSP cohort and are all sent an email communication outlining services available to them to assist on their educational journeys. Further, the categorization allows the advisors to reach out to the most critical cases with additional specific interventions such as one-on-one advising to ensure contact with these students and provide more specialized support. Advisors can also use the outputs of the model to understand the key factors that arise as predictors of student drop out and cater their services to those needs (i.e., if academics are a factor, they might focus on tutoring services). CUSP students are tracked and communicated with at multiple points throughout their final semesters at JJC to ensure they are receiving all the support they need to graduate.

Before the introduction of CUSP, 2018 projections painted a disheartening picture, with only 54% of seniors who had completed 75% of their academic credits expected to graduate within two years. However, the CUSP pilot initiative, spanning from 2018 to 2020, defied these projections. For the 2018-2020 graduating classes an impressive 73% of students attained their degrees within a single year, and a remarkable 87% of students proudly held their bachelor's degrees by the close of the second year.

Beyond the promise of these student success indicators, CUSP and its use of the machine learning tools has been a boon to the advising staff at JJC. Not only have they been able to gain the time-saving ability to prioritize which students need the most help, but they have also been empowered to make decisions about what kinds of assistance they should offer based on the insights the models provide. In these ways, this project's collaboration between data tool creators and data users has provided a way for a resource-strapped institution to foster their goals of student success, inclusion, and support for their advising team.

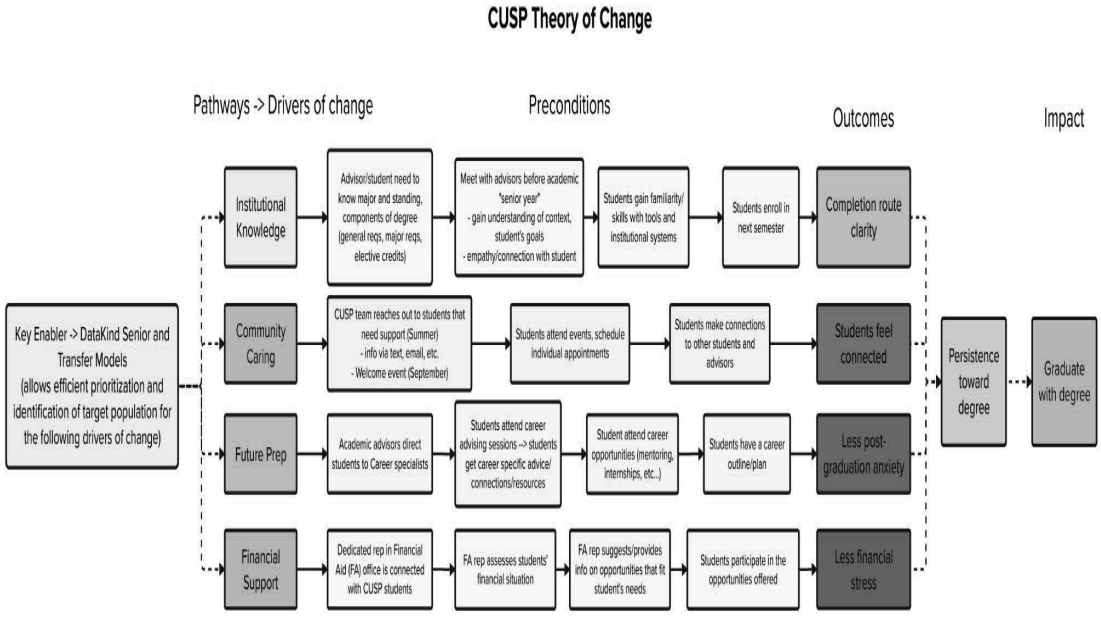
Evaluation and Continued Improvement

With the promise of the Senior and Transfer models serving as enabling inputs to student success programs at JJC, the DataKind and JJC teams embarked on the process of understanding how the specific aspects of CUSP function in order to foster the kinds of graduation rate results seen initially. This understanding is crucial to being able to replicate or scale up data-aided advising approaches like CUSP. It also continues the transparency, trust-building, and collaboration efforts of the data-assisted student

success tool development, applying these elements to enable an understanding of the program that can open such data-driven approaches to other institutions in subsequent years.

The team utilized a program theory approach (Rogers et al., 2000) to diagram the CUSP program theory of change (Fig. 1), which it then leveraged to create a logic model that guided the prioritization of key evaluation questions. Then, the team mapped out the existing CUSP student data landscape, using the gaps and the key evaluation questions to develop a data strategy. This process is important for ensuring the team is synchronized on programmatic goals and evaluation priorities, helping to ensure the likelihood of success for robust impact measurement. Finally, the team is currently working on developing an implementation strategy to collect and analyze the necessary data to answer the initial identified set of evaluation questions about the CUSP program. Once the program modeling and evaluation process has been completed, even more information can be shared about the role, value and function of pairing machine learning tools with robust student support program.

Figure 1



Collaborative DataKind and JJC developed CUSP Theory of Change Diagram

Conclusion

In the landscape of higher education, where nearly half of U.S. college students are at risk of not earning a degree (Aulck et al., 2016), John Jay College of Criminal Justice (JJC) partnered with DataKind to harness the power of existing student data and machine learning techniques. Their mission was to confront the challenges surrounding student graduation rates and develop data-informed tools to guide their students toward success. Through an extensive analysis of over a decade's worth of historical student data, this collaboration produced two useful and applicable predictive models. These tools currently serve as the cornerstone for designing proactive interventions that fit the tailored needs of students most in need of support. They provide data insights advisors would otherwise not be aware of, enabling them to more effectively prioritize struggling students and their needs, and crucially, keeping advisors at the center of decision-making and support, not the algorithms.

While there are many benefits to this approach, one of the most important ones is the use of machine learning tools to lower the barrier of access to intervening with students most in need, empowering institutions to transform data into actionable insights for student success. In particular, transparent, co-developed tools like those in this case study can help resource-strapped institutions effectively identify which students need the most support, as well as customized data on the kinds of support to offer. This alone reduces the burden many advising departments face. In this way, machine learning tools can provide a data-assisted advising opportunity for institutions, to not only get the insight on their student body they need to provide assistance, but also to support their own staff and faculty. There is much more to explore about these tools, but this case study illustrates what is possible when data science works in service of student success.

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Author Biographies

Dr. Harnisher is Director of Education Initiatives at DataKind. His areas of interest and expertise include 20 years of experience as a leader and researcher in the fields of data modeling, analytics, student success and impact assessment.

Dr. Villanueva is Assistant Provost for Academic Engagement at John Jay College of Criminal Justice-CUNY. Her professional interests and expertise focus in the areas of strategic planning, program development and implementation, student engagement and retention, social justice and inclusion, and leadership.

Dana Prieto is Program Manager for the CUSP program within the Academic Advisement Center at John Jay College of Criminal Justice-CUNY. She studied and received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance and a Master in Higher Education. She has worked in the higher education field for over 12 years and within academic advisement for over 10 years.

Ric Anzaldua earned his Statistics MS at U of Vermont and completed coursework for Educational Research PhD, U of North Texas. A classically trained statistician with 29 years of experience in Institutional Research, Ric acknowledges the potential for AI in higher education and enthusiastically seized this opportunity to explore.

Dr. Beem is an evaluation researcher working at the intersections of education, data, and the environment. She received a PhD in Environmental Science and Policy from the University of Miami and currently works as an evaluator at Colorado State University in addition to consulting for various education, legal, and technology companies.

COVID-19 Impacts on College Students' Basic Needs Insecurity

Megan K. Schraedley and Ashlie B. Delshad

Abstract:

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, data clearly documented that college students experience a higher rate of basic needs insecurity, including food insecurity, than the general US population. COVID-19 both expanded the rate of basic needs insecurity and decreased the range of resources students had access to. In this study, we examined the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on college student basic needs insecurity through a qualitative photovoice study. Our research draws upon Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth model and the concepts of navigational and social capital specifically. The findings indicate that students experienced heightened levels of basic needs insecurity during the pandemic. Our analysis also suggests students managed their basic needs during COVID-19 by changing their behavior to adapt to school, business, and other organizational closures and leveraging creative methods to access new and existing resources.

Introduction

Research over the past decade has consistently found that college students are at a substantially higher risk of lacking access to basic needs compared to the overall US population (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018, 2019; Olaniyan et al., 2023). Many factors contribute to college student basic needs insecurity including: intergenerational poverty, the rising cost of higher education, the declining value of grants for low-income college students, eligibility guidelines that limit college students' ability to access basic needs assistance such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the negative stigma associated with requesting assistance, and the complex processes one must navigate to apply for aid. In recent years, colleges and universities have begun providing students with a variety of basic needs resources.

During the COVID-19 pandemic nearly all college campuses closed for significant lengths of time. For college students already experiencing basic needs insecurity, and many others on the fringe, this meant unemployment, an emergent need for new housing off-campus, and a lack of access to basic needs resources including food previously available on the now-shuttered college campuses. Prior research on college student basic needs insecurity has been rooted in quantitative analyses to assess the general scope of the problem and variation among demographic groups. In this project, we use qualitative photovoice methods to examine with greater depth how college students both experienced basic needs insecurity and navigated accessing resources during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Basic Needs Insecurity Among College Students

The Hope Center for College, Community and Justice, "defines students' basic needs as having access to resources for nutritious food, housing, health care, technology, transportation, personal hygiene care and childcare" (The Hope Center, 2021). Food insecurity has been researched more than other forms of basic needs insecurity and will be the focus of our research here as well. A recent systematic review of eight studies (52,085 students) on food insecurity among US college students found that on average almost half (43.5%) of the students surveyed experienced food insecurity (Nazmi et al., 2018). In comparison, in 2020 and 2022 the USDA reported 10.5% and 12.8% of US households respectively were food insecure for at least part of those years (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020; USDA, 2022). Other

researchers have found between 14% - 59% of college students experience food insecurity, with rates being especially high among community college students, students of color, and students from low-income backgrounds (Bruening et al., 2016; Crutchfield and Maguire, 2018; Delshad, et al., 2020; Dubick, Matthews and Cady, 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Monahan-Couch, Gilboy & Delshad, 2017; Morris et al., 2016; Nazmi, et al., 2018; Patton-Lopez, et al., 2014). The latest nationwide data gathered through the #RealCollege Survey during the fall of 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, found that 39% of students at two-year institutions and 29% of students at four-year institutions experienced food insecurity (Hope Center, 2021). Research has also documented that during the COVID-19 pandemic racial disparities around food insecurity and other forms of basic needs significantly widened (Olaniyan et al., 2023).

As previously noted, in the years just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges and universities were increasingly providing their students basic needs resources. Measures to control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic included closures of many businesses and nearly all college campuses. Hence, students already lacking access to basic needs had to identify new sources of support. In this analysis we are especially interested in unpacking how students managed this transition.

Conceptual Framework

Basic needs insecurity is complex and layered particularly because an individual's ability to access resources may compound and change based on shifting circumstances over time. While some students confronted basic needs insecurity for the first time during COVID-19, others faced new challenges (Borerro, Yeh, Cruz, & Collins, 2021) even if they had navigated basic needs insecurity previously. Building off existing research on basic needs insecurity, we turn away from a resource deficit-based perspective (Friedman, 2016; Luczaj, 2023) and focus instead on the ways college students drew upon resources in their communities. Specifically, the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model, put forth by Yosso (2005), helped us investigate and understand how college students experienced navigating access to basic needs, food in particular. The CCW model outlines six subtypes of capital that together explain an individual's wealth, or accumulated assets and resources. The first area is *aspirational capital*, or the ability to maintain hope and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. The second area is *linguistic capital* which includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style. Third, *familial capital* refers to cultural knowledge nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition. Fourth, *resistant capital* refers to the knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality. Fifth, *social capital* can be understood as networks of people and community resources to provide support as one navigates their way through society's institutions. Sixth, *navigational capital* refers to the skills of maneuvering through social institutions, particularly those that have been traditionally organized for the success of White people. We will primarily draw upon the last two concepts in the CCW model: navigational capital and social capital.

Yosso (2005) and other scholars (Doran & Hengesteg, 2020; Wright, Maylor, & Becker, 2016) previously used navigational capital to explain the experiences of Communities of Color and how marginalized groups navigated various social institutions. For example, Vesely, Ewaida, and Kearney (2013) examined how low-income Latina and African immigrant mothers built navigational, human, and social capital using early childhood education programs. In our study, we wanted to better understand how students at a higher educational institution with basic needs insecurity communicatively and behaviorally navigated access to resources during a global pandemic. Like Listman and Dingus-Eason (2018) who argued for extending the model to other marginalized groups such as Deaf people, we extended the model to college students facing basic needs insecurities. We contend that students managing basic needs insecurities are also a marginalized group in society even if their basic needs status changes. Many students with basic needs insecurities also grapple with overlapping or intersectional marginalized identities; for example, students may also come from international communities, Communities of Color and/or low-income backgrounds.

To examine basic needs insecurity more thoroughly using the CCW lens, we posed the following research question:

RQ1: How do college students experience the management of their basic needs during a national crisis (COVID-19)?

Methods

Our findings here come out of a larger study examining how university students experienced basic needs insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. To understand the participants' experiences of navigating how they met – or faced challenges meeting – their basic needs, we determined photovoice as an appropriate method for the participants to tell a visual story about how COVID-19 impacted their lives. In photovoice studies, participants take pictures of various aspects of their lives to show and explain, in their own words, what they are experiencing (Wang & Burris, 1994). The photovoice method allows participants to actively engage in the research process because they can show what they are experiencing in the present (Novak, 2010). Additionally, the participants' photos provided us with another data point in addition to two semi-structured interviews. The photos and subsequent conversations about the photos gave us a detailed look at the layers of need experienced by the participants.

Procedures

We collected data between January and May 2021 which was in the middle of a critical point of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of the study, the university offered classes in a virtual format, meaning that participants were physically located across several states. We followed a two-step semi-structured interview process (Tracy, 2019) where we recruited twelve participants through purposeful sampling methods. This sampling method is useful for qualitative studies involving uneasily identified subjects who have a particular knowledge or experience with a phenomenon of interest (Palinkas, Mendon, & Hamilton, 2019) – in this case, college student basic needs insecurity in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Purposeful sampling involves the recruitment of participants who reflect a set of inclusion criteria allowing researchers to describe, highlight, and illustrate what is typical for those experiencing a given phenomenon (Patton, 2002). This study's inclusion criteria included the following:

- Students who had first-hand experience with basic need insecurity prior to and through the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Students who had, for the first time since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, first-hand experience with basic need insecurity.
- Students who were at least 18 years or older at the time of the study.

Participants were recruited through an email to all who had previously visited the university's Resource Pantry. Additionally, participants received compensation for participating in the study.

In the first interview, we asked the participants open-ended questions about their experiences navigating basic needs (in)security. We then followed up with open-ended questions in areas of basic needs based upon their responses. At the end of the first interview, we asked participants to take photos with their phone over the course of one week. They were prompted to take photos of things or people that told a story of their experience during COVID-19 or which represented various aspects of basic needs insecurity they had discussed in the initial interview (ex., food, housing, required coursework materials, (un)employment, caregiving, and/or mental health). The participants uploaded the photos taken with their smartphones to a password protected page on the university's learning management platform, D2L (Desire2Learn) before the second interview. We encouraged participants to upload approximately 10 photos. A range of 7 to 20 photos per participant were uploaded and shared with us. The second open-ended interview included a guide to elicit stories and responses about the pictures taken. For example, we asked questions like, "Take me through your images one by one and explain why you selected this image," and "What do you think these images mean?" The participants explained the photos without us

having reviewed them ahead of the second interview. The photographs served as the focus for the interview. The interviews ranged from 23 minutes to 88 minutes in length.

Participants

The purposive sample for this study consisted of ten individuals who identified as female and two who identified as male. Of the participants, eight individuals self-identified as White and four self-identified as African American. The participants ranged from 20 years to 53 years of age. The participants' status at the university included eleven students who were attending full-time and one who attended part-time. Additionally, nine of the participants were undergraduates, while three were graduate students at the time of the interviews. We have changed the participants' names to pseudonyms to protect their identity and respect their privacy given that basic needs insecurity is a stigmatized status.

Data Analysis

First, we transcribed the interviews. Then, we began analysis by splitting up interviews between the principal investigators of this study and we each read three interviews, without coding, for a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences managing basic needs insecurity. We used analytical processes following Tracy's (2019) iterative ethnographic methods, meaning we met, conversed, and reflected upon our own "active interests, current literature, and various theories" (p.184) when connecting with the data . We reviewed the data sensitized to the Community Cultural Wealth framework (Yosso, 2005). Tracy (2019) contends that the organizing process of data is an interpretive activity: we organized the data by interviewer, by initial interviews, and then by photovoice interviews.

In the second phase of analysis, we coded the interview data using the assistance of the qualitative analysis software, Dedoose. Tracy (2019) discusses coding in terms of primary-cycle coding and secondary-cycle coding. In the primary-cycle phase, we each read the same interview separately, assigning words or phrases every few sentences to capture the essence of a specific section of data. In secondary-cycle coding, we moved beyond describing what was going on in specific sections of the interviews and created broader codes to explain, theorize, and synthesize the participants' narratives (Tracy, 2019). During analysis, we met to discuss the development of codes, especially as they related to the Community Cultural Wealth framework. The next section provides the findings from our analysis.

Findings

Participants facing basic needs insecurities found diverse ways to manage new challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants juggled completing their virtual coursework on top of jobs, social responsibilities, and personal needs. We utilized Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model to frame how the participants used distinct kinds of cultural wealth capital to manage their basic needs insecurity, particularly food insecurity. The findings add to Yosso's original framework because we identified specific ways participants used "skills of maneuvering through social institutions" while also acknowledging the participants' resilience and "individual agency within institutional constraints" (p. 80). In the following themes, textual and pictorial examples further illustrate how participants shifted their behaviors and leveraged creative methods to access new and existing resources.

Shifting Behavior to Build Navigational Capital

Participants managing basic needs during COVID-19 had to shift, or change, their individual behaviors due to abrupt changes in institutional norms and mandates. Additionally, participants changed how they interacted with familiar and unfamiliar individuals (ex. professors, landlords, job managers) and

organizations or institutions (ex., university, food pantry, banks). As one example, Callie, 28, described how she shifted her behavior by starting to use food banks to address her food insecurity:

> *So cereal is very easy for me to come by and it's a very filling meal for me, but I don't typically drink dairy milk anymore. I try to drink the plant-based milk because I'm lactose intolerant. And also just behind all the cruelty behind animals when it comes to harvesting milk and eggs that I prefer not to drink those things. But because I have to eat and going to different food banks and pantries and things like that, it's really easy for me to come across cereal and regular milk. Not a lot of people have plant-based milk. So, I've had to resort back to drinking and using dairy milk...*

Caption: Switching from plant-based milk to cow's milk from a local pantry.

> *Interviewer: It's not what you would pick maybe if you had a choice of other options, but it's working.*
> *Callie: Yeah…and being able to find [voice trails off] It's definitely something that I never concerned myself about before - food banks and food pantries. I now know at least 10 food banks and food pantries and their schedules in my area… And a year ago, that is something, I had no idea. It was just not a concern that I had to concern myself with.*

Callie shifted her purchasing behavior for food and personal products to manage basic needs insecurity. Pre-pandemic, she did not know of or use food banks. However, during COVID-19 she shifted behavior by researching and utilizing food banks to meet her basic needs. Callie shifted her behavior which expanded her knowledge of her community, allowing her to differently navigate community institutions while building navigational capital.

Another participant, Sarina, described her experience navigating rapid lifestyle changes due to COVID-19. Sarina shifted her behavior to better manage new needs during the height of the pandemic:

> *The Resource Pantry has helped me balance, a lot of kind of basic needs, even if it's one of those weeks, where my paycheck is kind of low, and I can't really afford to go to the grocery store, at least I have a base of like pasta and canned vegetables, canned fruit, and oatmeal for breakfast if I need to eat something before I go into work or something like that so it's a nice resource to have in one of those panic moments of, "Oh my God, I have no food*."

Tiffany, 20, an undergraduate student who lived in a rural community also discussed changing what she ate to avoid going without meals. She shared,

> *I'm definitely using coupons a lot more I turned into a crazy coupon little lady like a solid month…definitely buying like non-perishable foods such as like mac and cheese, and lots of spaghetti*

like in the picture that's just like a cheat meal that will fill you because it's so easy to go without so I mean I would rather go for a non-healthy options that are cheaper and you're able to eat…

Caption: Tiffany displaying the non-perishable food she purchased with coupons. Additionally, Tiffany relied more on freezing venison and fish from hunting and fishing with her father in their rural community.

I went out a lot with my dad this past fall…so it was just like a way of life, and I used to be so against it [hunting] when I was little, …but I like [venison] cheesesteaks way too much to be vegetarian, so I've definitely changed over the years.

Both Sarina and Tiffany adapted during the pandemic by shifting their diets to make sure they had meals and a variety of alternative food options.

In the second theme, we share examples of participants leveraging social capital by accessing resources in creative ways.

Leveraging Social Capital Creatively to Turn Deficits into Resources

To leverage social capital means using networks to move within and across community institutions, often giving what one has learned back to one's communities. In other words, individuals draw upon other sources of cultural capital to navigate organizations and institutions like the university during the pandemic. Students creatively accessed resources to meet their basic needs by drawing upon their personal networks, utilizing contacts made through the student's community or the university.

After moving back home to live with her mother, Monica used her relationships with others in the community to find a way to access water by visiting a local spring.

Free water at the spring! Free clean drinking water at the spring because the tap water tastes like turpentine where I live. So, I have to—these are all the jugs, you know, and free water. I take advantage of free water because I'm so broke and, you know, thank God, COVID hasn't closed the spring…It's a pipe in the side of a hill. And that's where we get clean drinking water. Now, I do this for my mother, too.

Caption: The water jugs and cart Monica uses to collect fresh drinking water from local spring.

In another example of leveraging social capital, Callie describes her experience volunteering with the on-campus garden and using produce from the garden as a creative way to source her food:

> *So because I live on campus right now, right next to the clubhouse, I've been watering the garden, and I've been helping myself to the spoils of the garden. So, there's been kale and peas and collard greens and broccoli. So, I've just been helping myself there so that way I don't have to spend the little bit of money that I do have on groceries.*

Caption: The on-campus garden with collard greens and broccoli.

Callie built individual resilience not only by caring for herself through caring for the garden, but she also created stronger relationships – social capital – with the nutrition professor overseeing the garden. Another participant, Tony, an international graduate student, created stronger networks with his community through food:

> *There was one pantry around here in Camden just a few blocks from where I live. I*

> *started about 2018, that summer. I wasn't kind of actively on the lookout for that kind of thing, but the building where I lived, some people they got me informed about the resource and I said, let me try it and then I started going. So, I thought that it was a useful thing to take advantage of, as it's available for the community, for people who are struggling in a way financially. So I did not take as heavy of use as after the pandemic started, just because of the added influence of isolations, the quarantines. So, the pantry is kind of, this and West Chester [pantry] became my go-to places for food and for basic needs in that regard, especially from last spring [2020].*

Callie and Tony leveraged their networks and knowledge about the university and the social contacts they made helped both navigate new complexities brought on by COVID. Another student, Tiffany, relied upon and gave back to her neighbors during COVID. She described her experience making and bringing meals to neighbors:

> *My closest neighbors [live] like a mile West. I feel like we're not as tight knit of a community as others but we definitely have people over for dinners once in a while, like my boyfriend's family. They live in Indiana right now, and they were visiting so I made them dinner for I think it was four days or so, and then my mom was out of work because her one colleague got really sick with COVID, and her husband did too, and they have two kids. So we, my mom can't cook so it was mainly me making food for them, but then my mom would deliver and dropped [food] on their doorsteps, for a week or so...*

Tiffany creatively leveraged social capital to help her community members by cooking meals for them and receiving meals from her neighbors in turn when her own family experienced hardships exacerbated by COVID. In our Discussion, we summarize the key findings from the study using Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model.

Discussion

In our findings, we showed how participants managed basic needs insecurities during the COVID-19 shutdowns. The students' intersectional identities assisted in developing resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous case studies of navigational capital examined how individuals' capacities to navigate different institutions improved based on various learning programs (Listman & Dingus-Eason, 2018; Montes & Ramos, 2020) or through in-person relational interactions (Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, & Klingsmith, 2014). The participants of this study often discussed how they felt isolated and had to individually navigate COVID-19. Often, they managed their basic needs challenges in a more isolated fashion when compared to pre-COVID.

In our first theme, shifting behaviors to build navigational capital, the student participants had to navigate their communities and institutions differently by shifting behaviors and changing their habitual patterns to manage food insecurity. Students researched and found out where food pantries and banks were located - both on and off-campus - to access necessities like milk, vegetables, and dried and frozen foods. They shifted behaviors and instead engaged in activities like hunting to avoid going to big box stores and groceries where they might be more likely to encounter long lines and thereby, exposure to COVID.

In the second theme, leveraging social capital creatively to turn deficits into resources, participants used their local networks and connections to creatively manage their food insecurity. Students reached out to their professors, volunteered in on-campus gardens where they could take produce as needed; others communicated with family and neighbors to find out about resources like freshwater springs and food pantries in the community; and students cooked and delivered meals to neighbors who contracted COVID, lost their jobs or struggled in other ways during COVID.

Conclusion

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model provided a useful framework for interpreting and understanding the in-depth interviews and photovoice pictures taken by the participants. By analyzing the interviews through a lens of resilience and resources, we showed how students at a large public institution managed new and ongoing basic needs insecurities at the height of a national pandemic. The photos allow readers to experience a more intimate and material connection to the participants' experiences. Research has shown that more individuals were affected by basic needs insecurities during COVID, therefore, it is important to show how students are drawing upon different types of capital in times of precarity. Additionally, the CCW model allowed us to examine how participants navigated the struggles of the pandemic at the intersection of marginalized identities. Future scholars examining students' experience with basic needs insecurity should consider incorporating a third interview to determine how participants navigate the transition from crisis to post-crisis. Lastly, future researchers should examine how post-COVID state and institutional administrative policies (i.e., FAFSA) and economic conditions are impacting students with basic needs insecurities.

Since the reopening of campuses following the COVID era shutdowns, we have seen a consistent increase in the need for resources to help students navigate basic needs amid extreme precarity (ex., inflation of food costs, costs of tuition, gas prices, working hours, etc.). While the issue of food insecurity among college students is tied to deeper systemic issues of social and economic inequity, the community of educators and administrators at institutions of higher education can also play an important role in helping students build and expand their social and navigational capital on campus and in their communities. Practical actions that could be most useful include: educating the entire campus community about the prevalence of food insecurity among college students to help destigmatize the topic and increase awareness about how and where to access resources on campus; investing in staff and supplies for on-campus food pantries so students can easily obtain food items that meet their needs; provide direct assistance to students in navigating the complex process of applying for public programs such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also referred to as food stamps); and helping students locate where to obtain resources close to their residences when they are not on campus. Furthermore, researchers and administrators should implement listening sessions at least once per year with students managing basic needs insecurities to gain insight into the myriad difficulties they are experiencing. These insights should directly guide ongoing efforts to help our students navigating basic needs insecurities.

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Counseling Center Collaboration to Bridge the Gap for College students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Stephanie Sibley, PsyD & Kristen Mehr, PhD

Abstract

As more individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) enter college, increased efforts should be made by university counseling centers to provide support and help ensure the success of these students. This article reviews the unique needs of college students with ASD and highlights the benefits of proactive, collaborative, and individualized mental health support. An existing outreach relationship between a university counseling center and that university's Autism support program is described, and recommendations for how other counseling centers can develop similar programming are discussed. It is believed that efforts to effectively address the mental health needs of college students with ASD will increase their ability to remain successfully enrolled at their institutions of higher education.

Key Words: *Autism Spectrum Disorder, ASD, mental health, outreach, collaboration*

College Students with ASD

The diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) includes difficulties in social communication and the presence of repetitive and restrictive behaviors and interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The prevalence rate of ASD is estimated to be 1 in 54 (Maenner et al., 2020). Young adults with ASD are increasingly entering college, and effective strategies are necessary for institutions to support these students. According to the College Autism Spectrum Website, 81 universities in the United States have created ASD support programs on their campuses (Hillier et al., 2018). Individuals with ASD may experience executive functioning impairment and often rely on their social network to act as their executive functioning (Brown, 2021). Upon entering college and losing access to some supports, executive functioning deficits can lead to stress and frustration, including "sensory overload, emotional outbursts, and other difficult behaviors" (p. 32), which may be misinterpreted as symptoms of a mental health disorder (Brown et al., 2016).

College students with ASD have voiced challenges with novel situations and unforeseen changes as well as with misunderstanding social cues (Van Hees et al., 2015). Given these challenges, it is not surprising that students with ASD report experiencing social isolation and rejection, as well as housing and roommate issues (Gelbar et al., 2014). While individuals without ASD can often easily ascertain social cues and alter their communication style, individuals with ASD may struggle with this and engage in behaviors such as standing too closely, following peers around the residence hall, or asking invasive questions trying to befriend peers (Miele et al., 2018). This can be perceived as behavioral misconduct, making students with ASD potentially more susceptible to disciplinary action (Miele et al., 2018). In a study of parents of emerging adults with ASD, all parents said their children struggled with independent living skills and interpersonal connection, but parents of those enrolled in college also named difficulties with emotional regulation, self-advocacy, and managing adaptive skills (Elias & White, 2018).

ASD and Mental Health

While ASD itself is not a mental health disorder, many students with ASD also experience mental health issues, which often result from the communication difficulties of ASD (Brown et al., 2016). In a meta-analysis of 35 studies published between 2000 – 2017 that focused on adults with ASD, the estimates of current and lifetime prevalence for any anxiety disorder were 27% and 42% and for depressive disorder were 23% and 37% (Hollocks et al. 2019). In a more recent study, college students with ASD endorsed poorer mental health and more symptoms of depression and anxiety than neurotypical

peers, even when controlling for other disabilities (McLeod et al., 2020). Anxiety, loneliness, and depression were endorsed as common experiences for college students with ASD (Gelbar et al., 2014), as well as feeling overwhelmed and fatigued (Van Hees et al., 2015).

Entering college can be stressful and overwhelming for any student. However, for students with ASD, this transition is often marked by unique barriers related to social and communication deficits, executive functioning and self-advocacy difficulties, mental health concerns, and decreases in direct, individualized supports, all which can make the postsecondary experience more challenging (Paskins, 2018). As more students with ASD enter college with unique challenges and needs, it is important for faculty and staff to understand what these students need, to help ensure postsecondary success and enjoyment (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Cox et al., 2017).

More Effective Support

While students with ASD face a variety of academic support needs, academic support and accommodations alone are not sufficient (Van Hees et al., 2015). Students with ASD also need support with their transition to college, daily living, and any mental health issues they face (Van Hees et al., 2015). College students with ASD are likely to benefit from non-academic support services, which are most effective when they are individualized to meet their unique needs (Kuder & Accardo, 2018). Students with ASD want a personalized approach to support services that allow their voices and preferences to be heard (Van Hees et al., 2015). Further, adequate psychosocial support and time for rest and leisure to manage stress are highlighted as important by students (Van Hees et al., 2015). Students with ASD also want support services that allow them to build relationships with faculty/staff (Accardo et al., 2019). Moreover, it is recommended that mental health programming focus on issues like daily living skills, transition to careers, and positive identity development, and for these programs and professionals to work collaboratively to provide systemic support (Accardo et al., 2019). Universities should expand and refine their support services to better meet the needs of students with ASD and services focused on positive identity development, self-advocacy, and connecting with supportive faculty members should be a top priority (Accardo et al., 2019). The current brief article details a collaborative relationship between our university's counseling center and ASD support program to enhance support for students, particularly around mental health.

An Autism Support Program

An Autism Support program called D-CAP was developed at our university to provide support to students who have a diagnosis of ASD. The program's staff have expertise in special education, ASD, behavior analysis and management, and social skills training. The program offers various structured support services to its members, including individualized skill development sessions (e.g., executive functioning, social skills, self-care, self-advocacy), study sessions, group sessions, and socialization. D-CAP's mission centers on cultivating an inclusive campus community that more effectively supports and fosters the success of students with ASD. Students choose their level of participation ranging from 4 hours per month to up to 5 hours of engagement per week. Group sessions are structured as a support group in which students can discuss issues such as organization and time management, social skills and communication, independent living, relationships, career, and college life. Group sessions can also involve an educational component and include guest presenters (e.g., our counseling center) from the campus community to disseminate available resources and related expertise.

Counseling Center Workshop Series for D-CAP

For the past 6 years, our counseling center has provided monthly interactive workshops during D-CAP's group sessions on topics related to mental well-being. The choice of monthly topic is based on consultation with D-CAP staff, who use feedback from students and their own observations to suggest relevant topics. This collaborative relationship is consistent with existing literature that highlights the

benefits of campus offices coordinating their support efforts for students with ASD, which can reduce overlap and provide more comprehensive support (Brown et al., 2016). On campuses without a designated ASD support program, collaboration with other offices that serve students with ASD is appropriate (e.g., career centers, tutoring/academic coaching, disability services). This is consistent with recommendations that counseling center staff and other campus professionals work together to create systematic support systems for college students with ASD (Accardo et al., 2019).

As of the end of fall semester 2023, the counseling center has provided 41 workshops at D-CAP's regularly scheduled group sessions. Brown et al. (2016) found that proactive forms of support are most effective for students with ASD, which aligns with our approach. Given that mental health concerns and the need for coping skills are a prevalent factor for students with ASD (Van Hees et al., 2015; Brown et al., 2016), workshops provided by our counseling center have addressed topics such as stress management, anxiety, negative self-talk, resiliency, finding structure and motivation, building friendships, perfectionism, and dealing with disappointment. Live workshops of ten or fewer students promote personal and informal discussion, but each workshop is also recorded to share with students who could not attend. Counselors prepare a PowerPoint with content, as well as discussion questions and interactive activities to promote student engagement. Students are invited to ask questions and share their own reactions.

These workshops help to support students with ASD effectively in a variety of ways. Educating students with ASD about topics such as stress in concrete ways is important (Brown et al., 2016). Further, while traditional counseling services are a necessary support to offer to students with ASD with mental health concerns, these students sometimes need interventions other than what is provided in standard talk therapy (Brown, et al., 2016). Thus, addressing mental health in a proactive, educational way provides a diversified way of offering support. Additionally, Accardo et al. (2019) found that a key element to supporting students with ASD is familiarity and positive interpersonal connections, which is provided by our office's frequent collaboration with D-CAP.

Active engagement from the students during the workshops contributes to the counselor's ability to tailor the discussion to the expressed needs of the students as the workshop unfolds. This personalized aspect of the workshops aligns with research highlighting the need for an individualized approach that allows for students' unique needs to be heard and addressed (Van Hees et al., 2015; Kuder & Accardo, 2018). Additionally, in the workshop planning stages, the counseling center consults with D-CAP staff to identify topics most apt to benefit their students. After workshops, the counseling center assesses effectiveness to gain insight into ways to improve the quality of the workshops. Examples of feedback received were to include more interactive components and visual aids along with the presentation/discussion. Barriers to implementation have included low attendance, reduced attention span, and finding the most appropriate time and location. To address these barriers, we learned to keep the time and location consistent and to limit the length of workshops to 30 – 45 minutes. Ongoing collaboration and eliciting feedback both are integral ways of providing tailored support and education around mental health topics for students with ASD.

Counselors reported that while preparing content is helpful, it is equally important to be prepared to engage in discussions and to pivot to students' needs. The small audience of students allows space for students to share personal experiences and to ask specific questions related to the topic. D-CAP staff have consistently expressed the value and usefulness of these workshops for their students. We have heard staff say on numerous occasions that although they may have shared similar information previously with their students, the students tend to view it as more credible hearing it again from a different source. Staff have also shared that without our presence and interaction via workshops at D-CAP, many of their students would not feel comfortable seeking counseling center services. Thus, it seems that for students on the spectrum at WCU, our outreach efforts are bridging a gap between their possible interest in counseling, and their willingness to actually pursue it.

Recommendations for Universities

An effective approach to supporting college students with ASD is one that is proactive, collaborative, and individualized. Counseling center professionals and other student affairs offices should play an integral role in this process by building relationships with and providing outreach programming to offices on their campuses who regularly interact with students with ASD. Currently, 82 universities are listed on the College Autism Spectrum Website as universities that have a designated Autism support program on campus for students with ASD (Brown, 2021). We recommend that counselors and their student affairs colleagues at these universities connect with these programs as a way of reaching students with ASD. For universities without designated Autism support programs, we recommend that the counseling center collaborates with other support offices (e.g., disability services, tutoring or academic coaching services, career centers, residence life) to build positive and supportive relationships with students with ASD. In outreach programming, presenters should seek input from students and staff before and after programs to ensure an approach that effectively meets the unique needs of these students. Presenters should give special consideration to unique factors related to ASD such as sensory needs, learning and communication styles, and areas of strength.

We recognize that there are some students with ASD who may choose not to self-identify or provide documentation of their diagnosis to their institution of higher education. Researchers suggest that there can be a tendency for some students to be somewhat guarded with faculty about their diagnosis and to only share as much as is necessary for specific accommodations or support, while others may choose not to disclose at all (Cox et al., 2017). While this may create some challenging barriers for faculty and staff who are seeking to support their students, training on patterns of behavior, styles of communication, and de-escalation strategies can help them to feel more confident in supporting students. Specific suggestions for faculty and staff in their own communication with students with ASD are to be direct and concrete, avoid vague and abstract language, offer opportunities for self-advocacy, and consider ways to adapt policies and procedures. Faculty and staff can create a more inclusive climate by recognizing that neurodiversity will always exist in any classroom or group of students and provide campus-based support resources to all students both verbally and via the syllabus. Additionally, it is important to ask students their preferred way of being identified (e.g. student with ASD; Autistic student). Faculty and staff can also share their observations and consult with counseling centers, autism support programs, and disability offices to receive advice on navigating situations.

It is important for faculty and staff to be comfortable with and willing to have supportive conversations about mental well-being, including asking direct follow-up questions and asking with which services they are already connected. Faculty and staff should not feel obligated to address the mental health issues of these students, but they should know where to direct students for the appropriate support. Given that self-advocacy can be challenging for these students, willingness to facilitate the hand-off to other resources can be crucial. To evaluate the success of current offerings, it is best to ask the students themselves. Students with ASD need to have their voices heard, and since each individual with ASD is unique, their experiences can vary greatly. Expending time and effort to understand this subset of the campus population enhances these students' sense of being understood and prioritized. This supports their mental health, since feeling a sense of connectedness is a key factor to bolstering the resilience and mental health of students in general (APA, 2011).

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Through Their Eyes

Austin R. Dixon & Ty-le J. Fuller

Abstract

This qualitative case study explored the perceptions of success and experiences of nine minority male participants in a men-of-color-themed first-year learning community (MCLC) at a Hispanic-Serving Institution. Focus groups and individual interviews revealed four major themes: the importance of strong instructor relationships, the subjective nature of success, the value of affinity spaces, and the positive impact of the learning community on development and motivation. Participants emphasized the role of instructor rapport, defined success through the lens of personal empowerment, and highlighted the significance of culturally relevant peer connections. The findings indicate that MCLCs can foster a sense of community, identity development, and achievement for minority male students. Implications for higher education practitioners and researchers are discussed, emphasizing the need for targeted support programs that prioritize relationship-building, diverse success definitions, and inclusive environments.

Introduction

Across postsecondary institutions, Black, Latino, and other minoritized males are being retained and graduating at lower rates than their White counterparts (Brooms, 2020; Brooms et al., 2018a; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Farmer & Hope, 2015; Patrón & Garcia, 2016; Ponjuán & Hernández, 2021; Strayhorn, 2017). This population's academic performance also lags when compared to female college students (Brooms et al., 2018b; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014). As it relates to other male populations, such as Native American/American Indian and Asian American/Pacific-Islander, research on academic outcomes is limited, signaling a need to focus on their experiences rather than omission (Huerta et al., 2018). Conceptualizing the many factors that impact their academic trajectories can bring awareness to the potential barriers that higher education institutions can proactively combat. It is through becoming knowledgeable of these gaps in achievement that postsecondary researchers and practitioners can ensure the success of all students, notably, underserved Black and Latino male college students (Patrón & Garcia, 2016).

Various factors directly impact the academic success of minority males in higher education, including socioeconomic disparities, school climate, relationships with educators, and access to college preparation - issues that can be traced back to their K-12 education (Huerta et al., 2018). These challenges can significantly hinder their ability to fully engage in their academics and manifest throughout their collegiate career. While there is extensive research that considers the academic disparities of minority men as well as their academic success in collegiate spaces regarding retention and academic achievement it is just as critical to examine collegiate minority males' self-perception of success (Brooms et al., 2018; Sáenz et al., 2015; Sinanan, 2016). Understanding the academic disparities and achievements of collegiate minority males may provide valuable insight into the barriers they face; however, it is essential to analyze their self-perception of success to gain a better understanding of their experiences.

Men-of-color-themed learning communities and the student experience within them, however, have not been frequently studied or explored. Whereas some studies have examined the collective voices of BIPOC male students, this research uniquely focuses on the experiences of Black and Latino males in a themed learning community, addressing a critical gap in the literature. This study aimed to utilize qualitative research to analyze the perspectives of collegiate minority males regarding their perception of success, particularly within the context of higher education. Qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, and content analysis of open-ended comments can provide valuable insights into students' perceptions, attitudes, feelings of community, and academic needs, allowing their voices and stories to be

heard (Hansen & Pettitt, 2016). This study is unique in its focus on the experiences of Black and Latino males through asset-based thinking, an approach that is applied considerably less in previous research. In exploring the lived experiences of minority males, this research strived to shed light on the complex dynamics at play within educational settings and offer insights into how targeted support systems such as themed learning communities may contribute to the development and achievement of minority male students in college settings. The guiding questions for this study were:

1. How do participants perceive success before completing a men-of-color-themed learning community?
2. How did participants' perceptions of success shift, if at all, after completing a men-of color-themed learning community?
3. How do participants describe the role of the men-of-color-themed learning community, as well as their out-of-class experiences, in contributing to their success?

Literature Review

Given the lower retention and graduation rates of collegiate minority men (Brooms, 2018), they are noted to trail academically behind their peers at alarming rates (Sáenz et al., 2015; Sinanan, 2016). Complicating matters, higher education institutions often face challenges quantifying the barriers this population faces (Sáenz et al., 2018) or lack the knowledge and effective strategies to address their retention and intersectional needs (Huerta et al., 2021). Among the strategies found to support this population, spaces for the development of a sense of belonging and collaborative masculinity (Di Bianca et al., 2023) and notably, learning communities, have been pinpointed as strategies to support and retain male college students through their first year and beyond (Cintron et al., 2020; Taffe, 2022).

Societal and Institutional Influences on Minority Male Student Outcomes

Socioeconomic factors, such as financial constraints, limited access to and knowledge of resources, and familial obligations, play a significant role in shaping educational opportunities and outcomes for minority males (Huerta et al., 2018; Sáenz et al., 2018). Low-income minority males often face heightened economic pressures, limiting their ability to fully engage in the college experience and pursue academic goals. These pressures are often furthered by familial responsibilities, as many minority males in higher education may be expected to contribute to the care of children, spouses, parents, or siblings (Strayhorn, 2012; Howard et al., 2019b). Even when not directly responsible for caregiving, these students may feel obligated to serve as role models for their siblings or bear the responsibility of upholding their family's reputation and aspirations (Brooms et al., 2018b; Huerta et al., 2018). This hidden pressure manifests and lingers as they pursue their studies. The layered role of student, caregiver, and trailblazer can further strain their time, resources, and energy, potentially impacting their academic performance and persistence.

Social interactions and feelings of connection also affect minority men's decision to stay enrolled in higher education. Minority men at predominantly White institutions often perceive these institutions as hostile and unwelcoming, experiencing alienation, and unsupportive staff (Brooms et al., 2018b). Despite actively seeking communication and social interaction, many report dissatisfaction with social integration. Positive interactions with faculty and staff are associated with persistence, while negative interactions invalidation contribute to discontent and decisions not to re-enroll (Palacios, 2014). Colleges and universities may consider structuring opportunities for students to connect with peers across their undergraduate trajectory to foster a sense of belonging. As suggested by numerous researchers, these opportunities promote academic engagement and encourage involvement on campus (Brooms, 2020; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Brooms et al., 2018a; Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Pérez & Sáenz, 2017; Ponjuán & Hernández, 2021; Strayhorn, 2017).

Discriminatory practices and perceptions of minority males in the higher education setting also have a bearing on their success. Beginning even in their early years of K-12, students of color may face

exclusionary discipline (Skiba & Losen, 2016). For instance, Black males are overrepresented in expulsion and out-of-school suspension in particular, receiving suspensions at rates three times higher than their White counterparts (Erickson & Pearson, 2022; Morgan & Wright, 2018). These discrepancies between minority males and their peers stemming from their K-12 years are likely to result in lower self-esteem, which may translate to their tenure in higher education and contribute to low retention and graduation rates. Implementing training programs for faculty and staff may be an opportunity for creating a positive experience and supporting Black and Latino males in the college setting (Pérez & Sáenz, 2017; Ponjuán & Hernández, 2021; Strayhorn, 2017).

As minority male students navigate the four-year institutional setting, they also encounter barriers rooted in various structural factors. Institutional policies and practices, particularly financial aid allocation, often emerge as substantial obstacles (Elliot & Parks, 2018), with increases in financial aid positively impacting persistence and success (Sáenz et al., 2018). This is crucial given the financial constraints often placed on this population. Beyond financial concerns, they face additional challenges such as stereotype threat, which can significantly impact academic performance and engagement (Camacho et al., 2023). This issue is compounded by limited access to mentors, often due to a lack of representation of minority men in faculty and staff positions (Emetu, 2022; Camacho et al., 2023). Such underrepresentation not only limits potential mentorship opportunities but also contributes to feelings of isolation and alienation on campus. Furthermore, the legacy of discrimination in higher education continues to shape the experiences of this population (Huerta & Fishman, 2019), leading to systemic inequalities that persist in various forms, affecting everything from admissions and readmissions practices to campus climate.

The Impact of Learning Communities on Minority Male Success

Learning communities have emerged as a promising high-impact practice for supporting the success of diverse student populations, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). By fostering cultural congruity, peer connections, and integration, learning communities create an environment conducive to academic achievement and persistence (Parmegiani, 2016; Zobac et al., 2016). Kuh and O'Donnell (2013) highlight several key dimensions that characterize high-quality learning communities, including high expectations, significant time and effort investment, frequent interactions with faculty and peers, experiences with diversity, timely feedback, periodic reflection opportunities, relevance through real-world applications, and public demonstrations of competence.

Research has shown that participation in learning communities is associated with higher grades, retention rates, and levels of academic and social integration compared to non-participants (Zobac et al., 2016; Parmegiani, 2016). The power of learning communities is amplified when combined with other high-impact practices like first-year seminars, resulting in the highest levels of peer connections, academic and social integration, grade point averages, and retention (Finley & Kuh, 2016; Zobac et al., 2016). Structurally aligned reinforcing contexts that proactively validate students' capabilities is key to the success of comprehensive programs like learning communities (Kezar & Kitchen, 2020). Learning communities with a multicultural perspective can have a decisive impact on how and to what extent students learn (Nieto, 2015). By challenging societal inequities, confronting unjust institutional policies and practices, building on students' strengths, engaging in personal transformation, and collaborating with colleagues, educators in learning communities can create environments of hope and affirmation for all students.

Culturally Relevant Programs and Initiatives for Minority Males

Research and literature on collegiate minority males pinpoint campus-based infrastructures and support as valuable resources the population needs access to (Huerta, 2022). Specifically, culturally relevant programs and initiatives meet the needs of minority male students and have proven effective in

supporting their success and persistence in higher education (Brooms, 2021; Cintron et al., 2020; Hill & Boes, 2013; Taffe, 2022). Interestingly, learning communities provide holistic support, foster a sense of belonging, create spaces for meaningful conversations and identity development, and offer mentoring opportunities (Brooms, 2020; Huerta et al., 2021; McCray, 2022; Nieto, 2015). By dismantling social inequities and institutional roadblocks, these learning communities can serve as incubators of empowerment for minority males (Nieto, 2015; Taffe, 2022). Educators in these spaces have an opportunity to help structure the paths for a population of students who experience a sometimes harsh academic environment.

Research has shown that culturally relevant learning communities positively influence the experience, success, and persistence of male students of color attending predominantly White institutions by providing academic and social support, a safe space to share experiences and challenges, and a place of respite from microaggressions and negative stereotypes encountered on campus (Brooms, 2021; Taffe, 2022). Several successful programs have been shown to support Black, Latino, and other male students of color in higher education. The African American Male Initiative Learning Community at the University System of Georgia found that participants reported positive relationships with peers, faculty and staff, and credited the program with keeping them motivated academically. At a large public university in California, Abrica et al. (2022) studied the Engineering Retention Program, which fostered a strong sense of belonging through components like a summer bridge program, placing students in the same introductory courses, and intensive academic counseling. Lu (2015) found that developing a creative identity and finding a science-based learning community played important roles in Latino males' successful first semester in STEM courses at a Texas university.

California State University, Sacramento's Full Circle Project: College-to-Career Pathways program provides another promising model. This learning community for transfer students includes linked upper-division courses, peer mentoring, and a curriculum focused on culture, classroom experiences, campus engagement, and community involvement (Sumi, 2020). In its first year, students took more units on average, had higher retention rates, and were more likely to be full-time students compared to other transfer students. These programs illustrate how well-designed support systems can significantly impact minority male students' college experiences. By combining peer mentorship, academic support, cultural affirmation, and career guidance, they create environments where students feel valued and empowered. These initiatives not only boost academic performance, but also foster a sense of community and personal growth, setting the stage for long-term success.

Male-centered programming and initiatives within these learning communities may create an environment that honors minority male's experiences and intentionally centers the intersections of race and gender and their impact on the academic journey (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Huerta, 2022; Pérez & Sáenz, 2017). These learning communities have been associated with higher retention rates, grade point averages, and lower dropout rates compared to control groups (Cintron et al., 2020; Hill & Boes, 2013). Lott et al., (2022) discovered that institutions with men of color programs had higher graduation rates for this population, especially in the case of predominantly White institutions. Formal and informal mentoring opportunities that connect participants to upper-class students, faculty, and staff further support the success of minority males in higher education (Huerta et al., 2021; Sinanan, 2016). Providing spaces for brotherhood and cooperative masculinity development also allows minority males to engage authentically in meaning-making conversations on their identities and experiences (Barker & Avery, 2012; Brooms, 2020; Huerta et al., 2021; McCray, 2022). As they engage in these conversations, minority male students develop a stronger academic identity and break past belief gaps imposed due to their race and ethnicity.

Framework

Community Cultural wealth is based on the work of Tara Yosso (2005) who developed a framework for understanding the various types of capital people of color utilize and centers the focus on their experiences without deficit thinking. Studies have defined cultural capital as an asset-based

framework pulling from communities of color's abilities, skills, and knowledge to understand their experiences (Pérez & Taylor, 2016; Yosso, 2005). This framework pinpoints six forms of capital that communities of color possess and utilize to navigate social systems, including education. Aspirational capital refers to "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Familial capital refers to those cultural knowledges fostered within one's family yet "engages a commitment to community wellbeing and expands the concept of family to include a more broad understanding of kinship" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Social capital can be understood as "networks of people and community resources" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Navigational capital refers to "skills of maneuvering through social institutions" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Resistant capital is "the knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Linguistic capital includes "the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" (Yosso, 2005, p. 78).

In the higher educational setting, the forms of cultural wealth may be exhibited as a student of color's "toolkit" developed from their family, communities, experiences, and other aspects of culture, that they bring into a college or university. Given the pervasiveness in deficit thinking in institutional policy and practice, minority males' unique forms of capital and pathways to success may go overlooked and misunderstood (Howard et al., 2019a, 2019b). This deficit thinking may consequently lead to a narrow understanding of achievement, ignoring the unique strengths and contributions that minority males bring to the academic environment. By utilizing this framework, the researchers understood better how participants' perceptions of success are shaped by their cultural wealth, and how the MCLC supports and enhances these forms of capital.

Methodology

The researchers employed a qualitative case study approach at one university during the 2022-2023 academic year in this study. This method was chosen to capture the perceptions and center the experience of minority male students. A case study design is appropriate for this research because it reflects the similarities in what a group encounters in a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach allowed the researchers to capture the lived experience of participants and study their world as it is immediately experienced.

The Institution and Learning Community Context

The university where the present study was implemented is a Hispanic-Serving, public 4-year university with approximately 22,000 students. The university, located in Southeast Texas, is also a First-Generation-Friendly institution with more than 53% of the students at the university of first-generation status. Collectively, students of color at this university are the majority of the student population (Office of Institutional Research, 2024). Notably, Hispanic and Black students represent the largest racial demographics across all non-White student populations. The university's commitment to supporting the success of its diverse student population is exemplified by initiatives such as two comprehensive academic support programs for underrepresented and transfer students. However, these programs have limited capacity and do not provide a focused academic space akin to a classroom experience.

The first-year success course, University (UNIV) 101 is offered to students who have 60 credit hours or less. In UNIV 101, students explore the science of learning, cognition, and motivation to develop and apply self-directed learning skills to their own academic programs and career development. The course is taught by a combination of tenure-track and non-tenure track faculty (e.g., lecturers and university staff). In the Fall academic terms when first-year student enrollment is higher, various course sections are offered as learning communities, providing students an opportunity to learn alongside students within the same academic college, with similar majors, scholar programs, or experience (e.g., transfer status, first-generation status, etc.).

The mission of this pilot program UNIV 101: Men of Color Learning Community (MCLC) was to use the lens and student experience of minoritized males to aid in developing and applying self-directed learning skills to their own academic programs and career development. Course activities are adapted from the traditional curriculum of UNIV 101, including lecture topics focused on social identity development and impostor syndrome, as well as in-class activities such as a minority male staff scavenger hunt, group journaling, and a high-impact practice exposure group project. Participants also had opportunities to connect and build community outside of the classroom, with frequent meetups and peer meals in the campus dining halls. In the pilot semester of MCLC, the course facilitator model varied as well. Building onto the traditional one instructor and one peer mentor model, MCLC included two staff mentors and a peer mentor from the university's minority male initiative (See Table 1).

Table 1

List and Description of MCLC Facilitators

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Campus Role
Instructor	African American	Staff
Staff Mentor 1	Latino	Staff
Staff Mentor 2	African American	Staff & Athletic Coach
Peer Mentor 1	African American	Student Staff
Peer Mentor 2	Latino	Student Staff

Data Collection and Analysis

The present project received institutional review board approval during the summer of 2022. Participants were recruited to the MCLC during summer orientation sessions and the freshman registration process. All participants in this study were traditional college students that matriculated into the university directly from high school. Since this study spanned across the participants' transition after completing MCLC, there were multiple stages of data collection. Stage one involved a focus group and stage two consisted of individual semi-structured interviews. This study included nine participants from MCLC, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

List and Description of MCLC Participants

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	First-Generation Status	Interview Phase
Huey	African American	First-Generation	Focus Group
Robert	African American	Continuing Generation	Both Phases
Parsons	Latino	First-Generation	Both Phases
Jose	Latino	First-Generation	Both Phases
Alaric	Multi-Racial	First-Generation	Both Phases
Quantavious	Multi-Racial	Continuing Generation	Both Phases
Thomas	African American	Continuing Generation	Focus Group
Ezekiel	Latino	First-Generation	Both Phases
M'Baku	African American	Continuing Generation	Focus Group

Data were collected in two phases. In the first phase, a focus group was conducted when participants were currently enrolled and participating in MCLC. Then, in the second phase, individual interviews were conducted during the participants' second semester of their freshman year. Toward the end of their semester in BCMC, the staff mentors recruited participants to participate in an approximately one-hour focus group. The class was informed that the instructor and the staff mentors would facilitate the focus group and interview and that there were no negative or positive impacts to their grades if they chose

to participate. With the participants' permission, the focus group and interviews were audio-recorded. The recordings were transcribed by the Otter meeting assistant platform and later reviewed for accuracy by the staff mentors and a graduate research assistant, who was unaware of the participants' identities.

The researchers employed a thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in the interview transcripts. Initial coding was conducted independently by two team members, who then met to discuss and reconcile any discrepancies in their coding schemes. Emergent themes were then refined through an iterative process of reviewing and discussing the coded data, with particular attention paid to how participants' experiences aligned with or diverged from forms of cultural wealth. When analyzing data, the researchers looked for specific instances of participants utilizing various forms of capital, mentions of unique challenges faced in academic settings, and examples of how the MCLC program supported their success.

Although there was instructor bias, it helped in the focus group and interview process because of the existing rapport with the course participants. The researchers employed several strategies to ensure the validity of the findings and minimize the impact of potential biases. They employed triangulation by collecting data from various sources, including focus groups, interviews, and course materials (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Throughout the data collection process, the researchers took detailed notes and actively listened to and re-read interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives. Additionally, peer debriefing was conducted to provide an external check on the research process and to help identify any areas where bias may have influenced the interpretation of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Findings

The researchers identified four major themes related to the perceptions of success and contributions to the success of MCLC participants: (1) Instructor relationship, (2) Subjective nature of success, (3) Affinity space, and (4) Learning community impact. Notably, participants' perceptions of success remained generally consistent across both the focus group and individual interviews, suggesting a shared understanding of what success means within the context of the MCLC.

Instructor Relationship

The instructor relationship emerged as a critical theme in the study, highlighting the value MCLC participants found in having a developed rapport with the instructor and staff mentors. This theme aligns with Yosso's concept of social capital, as it emphasizes the networks of people and community resources that support students in navigating educational institutions. Participants emphasized the close connections and understanding between instructors and students. Ezekiel noted:

"We engage with the instructors pretty close. I mean, I feel like we understand us. I feel like they've been in our shoes before and I feel that like that's better knowing that they've been in our shoes before."

This sentiment reflects the importance of instructors who can relate and understand the unique experiences of minority males in higher education. Similarly, Parsons highlighted the personable nature of the instructors:

"Instead of like talking about what we were talking about (class content), you would just ask us how we are and how we're doing in college and our grades looking, and all that. Like other professors, not really."

These sentiments were echoed by Robert, who mentioned:

> "The instructors of this program, I could ask a blunt question straight out the bat and if I didn't know how to phrase it, I could be like, well, shit, I don't know how to say this. And then they would just like help me along."

Fostering close connections between instructors and minority male students emerges as a crucial factor in creating a supportive learning environment. MCLC instructors' shared experiences and personalized attention exemplify Yosso's concept of social capital, demonstrating how institutional agents become valuable resources for students navigating higher education. Addressing the third research question, this theme illuminates how MCLC contributes to participants' success by facilitating meaningful relationships with instructors who understand and validate their racialized and gendered experiences.

Subjective Nature of Success

All participants perceived success as a concept that is highly individualistic. They described success as something dependent on the person, shaped by unique experiences, goals, and values. The most common self-description of success was *reaching one's goal*. For instance, Robert commented:

> "It's different for everybody, you know? Sometimes it's reaching that goal, but knowing that that goal wasn't the end goal, you know what I'm saying? It's not that one goal. It's just the journey as far as you are growing at the end of the day."

Many participants viewed success as being tied to empowerment for themselves and their families. They saw their pursuit of higher education as a way to honor their parents' sacrifices and create new opportunities for future generations. Participants also highlighted resilience and personal determination as part of the process of achieving successful outcomes.

Other participants, like M'Baku mentioned comfort with grades and Alaric emphasized that success is not about achieving perfection as he shared that "It's not really about getting perfect grades. It's just like, understanding the concepts and what you are doing for your classes." Thomas shared how in his math course he was comfortable getting the grade minimum necessary to pass. Some participants also highlighted resilience and personal determination as part of the process of achieving successful outcomes, while Alaric and Robert understood that there is a level of responsibility and mindset that comes with achieving success. Robert commented:

> "I consider myself successful...I get up every day whether I like it or not. I've gone through many different things that will knock a person down and they wouldn't to get back up, but I got up at the end and kept pushing."

The experiences highlighted by the participants show that success is a deeply personal and multifaceted concept, shaped by unique experiences, goals, and values. Diverse perspectives on success revealed by participants underscore the multifaceted and deeply personal nature of achievement for minority male students. Emphasis on personal growth, family empowerment, and resilience aligns with Yosso's concepts of aspirational and familial capital. Primarily addressing the first and second research questions, this theme uncovers how participants' cultural backgrounds and experiences shape their perceptions of success, and how these perceptions may evolve through MCLC participation.

Affinity Space

The significance of affinity space was evident in the focus group and several interviews. Quantavious expressed that he would miss the class and the connections formed, a sentiment echoed by

other participants. He emphasized how the shared identity as minority males created a strong sense of community within the learning environment. In his statement he shared:

> "We like, bonded over like, being men of color. So just being in a class with just men of color that like, really, like set us apart from just like everyone else and had a different mindset for all of us."

These feelings reflect the safe space created by MCLC. On multiple occasions, participants compared their in-class experiences to their out-of-class experiences, where they sometimes had trouble finding community attachment among their non-minority peers. Parsons shared:

> "Cause I've been there pretty much my whole life and it's just been Black and Hispanics and I'm more comfortable with those guys then just other people. I'm not saying that they're bad or anything but kind of scared, talk to them...I'm more comfortable with a group of people that I have been around pretty much my whole life."

Ezekiel shared a similar perspective, citing instances of racial profiling, following with: "But, I feel like...if this class like, if it still keeps on going, I feel like we...we'll all learn to...you know, love each other and everything and support each other." As illustrated in these experiences and sentiments, MCLC allowed the space for a powerful sense of connection and shared identity among participants that they wanted to maintain throughout future academic terms. Vital to participants' experiences, affinity spaces in MCLC highlight the role of navigational and resistant capital in Yosso's framework. Safe environments for minority males to bond, share experiences, and support each other help participants develop strategies to navigate the broader campus environment and resist negative stereotypes. Addressing the third research question, this theme demonstrates how the learning community contributes to participants' success by cultivating a sense of community connection for the group.

Learning Community Impact

The focus group and interviews with the MCLC participants shed light on the impact of the learning community, particularly in terms of student development and fostered motivation. Jose's experience spoke on how MCLC helped with his academic skills:

> "This course actually helped me a lot. It actually opened my eyes, opened my mind more. Learning new things that would help me throughout the semester, throughout my whole four years of college. Uh, the instructors, made it more clear than, how I see it when I learned it from high school."

In a reflection from Ezekiel about MCLC:

> "...it benefited me a lot because, not only do I learned a lot about, a lot about myself, I learned a lot of other people and perspectives in life...You won't have like social anxiety or anything like that if you just like, take the time to reach other people, and this is probably my favorite class this semester."

He later discussed how learning about social identity in class made him more open minded. M'Baku agreed with Ezekiel and discussed how MCLC connected him to opportunities and cultivated his campus network. Other participants found MCLC to heavily motivate them. Quantavious's responded:

> "You guys check up on our grades, which makes us want to help get our grades get better because other teachers don't do that, like this class does. So it was a good thing to do that for us. Because

> no one else is here. Our parents aren't here to check our grades for us, so at least y'all are here to do that for us. And I appreciate that."

Parsons stated:

> "It actually made me want to try in school. you know. Just coming to your class every single day, well not every day, but Monday and Wednesday. You know I was always excited. It was one of my favorite classes other than Band to come to, just to chat with the other guys to see what they're up to, and how they're doing in their schoolwork."

Alaric and Thomas agreed. Alaric added that even when he lacked motivation, being told by instructors to work on his tasks made him realize the importance of taking responsibility for his own progress. Comprehensive impact of MCLC on participants' academic skills, personal development, and motivation emerges clearly from their shared experiences. Multiple forms of capital, including social, navigational, and aspirational capital, align with these outcomes. Directly address the second and third research questions, this theme reveals how participants' perceptions of success shifted through their MCLC experience and how the program contributed to their overall college success by providing academic support, fostering accountability, and cultivating a supportive peer network.

Discussion and Implications

This study findings shed light on how the MCLC program activated various forms of capital within Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, in addressing our three research questions. Our analysis revealed the following four major themes: instructor relationships, subjective nature of success, affinity spaces, and learning community impact. These themes shed light on the experiences and perceptions of participants regarding success before, during, and after engagement with the MCLC program.

Concerning our first research question on how participants perceived success before taking up the MCLC, the theme of the subjective nature of success reveals some interesting findings. The views that participants held about their initial perception of success were majorly influenced by the accumulation of what we termed familial and aspirational capital. Many of them considered success to be related to empowering themselves and their families, which is a clear reflection of familial capital. As Robert noted, success is "different for everybody" and involves personal growth: illustrating how aspirational capital informed participants' pre-MCLC views of success. This aligns with Brooms' (2018b) observation that "when students feel they are interconnected through community, they can work together to support their mutual and collective goals" (p. 120).

Our second research question asked whether or not participants' perception of success would change after going through MCLC, and this is treated in the theme of learning community impact. In MCLC, participants developed social and navigational capital; as a result, they came to include this expanded definition of success. This shift is further demonstrated by Jose, who wrote about how MCLC had the power to "open your eyes" to new perspectives. The third research question, examining how participants describe the role of MCLC in contributing to their success, is illuminated by the themes of instructor relationships and affinity spaces MCLC developed social capital through very good instructor-student relationships, as Ezekiel cited that instructors knew what they had gone through. The affinity space MCLC provided helped in developing navigational and resistant capital so that the participants could come up with ways of navigating through the wider campus environment and resisting negative stereotypes. Quantavious's statement on the ability to bond over shared identities as minority males provides a clear example of how MCLC nurtured belonging among participants, hence eventual success.

Throughout these themes, we observed the activation of various forms of capital. Familial capital was evident in how participants described their success and their motivations for pursuing higher education, often citing family aspirations and support. Social capital was fostered through the strong

relationships built with instructors and peers within the MCLC, creating a network of support crucial for navigating the college environment. Navigational capital was enhanced as participants learned to maneuver through institutional structures and academic expectations with the guidance of mentors and instructors. Aspirational capital was nurtured through the program's emphasis on diverse definitions of success and personal growth. Resistant capital emerges as participants found strength in their shared experiences and learned to challenge negative stereotypes. Linguistic capital, while not explicitly discussed, was implicitly supported through the creation of a space where participants could express themselves authentically.

Understanding the factors contributing to the success of minority male students and the impact of targeted support programs is crucial for addressing disparities in retention and graduation rates (Brooms, 2018b; Sáenz et al., 2015; Sinanan, 2016). MCLC supported participants as they navigated factors such as academic rigor, institutional bureaucracy, financial pressures, and social integration challenges. The MCLC space provided a counter-environment to the often-isolating experience of being a minority student at a historically white institution. The presence of peer mentors also proved to be a valuable component of MCLC participants' network. Echoing Bianca et al.'s (2023) findings, the continuous engagement with older and more experienced collegiate males in MCLC allowed space for expressing vulnerability and learning healthier ways of interacting, also contributing to success. Supportive environments and attentive instructors provided clarity in learning and fostered a sense of accountability and self-motivation. This active involvement from the instructors contributed to a heightened sense of purpose and enthusiasm for their studies, promoting a more successful and fulfilling college experience.

Educators should prioritize building strong instructor-student relationships, recognizing diverse definitions of success, and creating affinity spaces that foster community and cohesion (Brooms, 2020; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Strayhorn, 2017). They should be approachable, supportive, and validate students' unique experiences and goals (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Huerta et al., 2021; Pérez & Sáenz, 2017; Ponjuán & Hernández, 2021). Researchers should continue to explore the role of affinity spaces, identity development, and motivation in promoting the success of minority males and investigate the long-term impact of programs like MCLC (Brooms, 2020; Huerta et al., 2021; McCray, 2022). Future studies should also consider the intersections of race, gender, and other social identities in shaping students' experiences and outcomes (Brooms, 2021; Huerta et al., 2021; McCray, 2022).

This case study was limited by its single-institution focus, small sample size, lack of a comparison group, and short-term perspective. Despite these limitations, the findings suggest that programs aimed at supporting minority male students should prioritize building strong instructor-student relationships, recognizing diverse definitions of success, fostering community and social integration, and promoting identity development and motivation. By prioritizing strong instructor-student relationships, recognizing diverse definitions of success, creating affinity spaces, and promoting identity development and motivation, institutions can create more supportive and inclusive environments for minority male students. Implementing these strategies within targeted programs like MCLC has the potential to significantly improve retention and graduation rates, ultimately contributing to the long-term success and well-being of minority males in higher education.

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